

REFORMING READERS: AGENCY AND ACTIVISM  
IN THE LONG PROGRESSIVE ERA

Benjamin Sammons

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Approved by:

Linda Wagner-Martin

Jane Thrailkill

Rebecka Rutledge Fisher

John McGowan

Robert Cantwell

## **ABSTRACT**

BENJAMIN SAMMONS: Reforming Readers: Agency and Activism  
In the Long Progressive Era  
(Under the direction of Linda Wagner-Martin)

This dissertation argues that between 1860 and 1945, a period that I call the Long Progressive Era, American fiction about poverty dramatizes a crisis of agency besetting the middle and upper classes. A pervasive unease about human volition arose among the affluent as the growing anonymity of urban life, the rationalization of many forms of labor, and the articulation of a thoroughly Darwinian worldview challenged liberal doctrines of autonomous selfhood. The activity of reading poverty fiction focused these bourgeois doubts because, first, it confronted the affluent with the disturbing spectacle of a stereotypically disempowered underclass and, second, it registered the increasing professionalization of both poverty relief and literary reading, two fields of labor to which the affluent citizen's access was newly mediated by a class of proprietary specialists. Thus, the reading of poverty fiction became an exemplary negotiation of broadly philosophical and historically specific challenges to bourgeois agency.

Unlike the post-World War II period, when similar anxieties about impersonal political and social institutions habitually devolved into paranoia, the interwar period I study retained a measure of balance in its agency crisis. Contrary to narratives of decline that characterize the Long Progressive Era in terms of a linear diminution of the individual's capacities, I argue that this period produced staunch defenders (and

practitioners) of agency as well as thinkers who, in the face of advancing modernity, abdicated once-assumed powers of human volition. In studies of poverty fiction by Rebecca Harding Davis, William Dean Howells, Edith Wharton, and John Steinbeck, I examine the figure of the reader as one whose activist or quietist responses to fictional and real-life poverty model the diverse responses of bourgeois Americans to the philosophical specter of determinism. I conclude by reflecting on the continuing legacy, in the similar but more paranoid contemporary American landscape, of reading imagined as a site of agency's erasure or assertion.

To my church

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart's stay in a boarding house prompts her to reflect on the social heights from which she has fallen: amid the "small aggravations of the boarding-house world," from "the intimate domestic noises of the house" to "the cries and rumblings of the street," Lily "yearn[s] for that other luxurious world, whose machinery is so carefully concealed that one scene flows into another without perceptible agency" (319). The design of *Reforming Readers* is inferior to that of Lily's aristocratic world, but my project has a way, nonetheless, of concealing the many agents who have helped bring it into existence. It is my privilege to name them here and express my gratitude.

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## **Agency, Reform, and Reading in Late Modern America**

In the title of this study, *Reforming Readers*, the subject is indeterminate.

“Readers” may be the subjects or objects of “reforming” activity, either enacting reform on, say, a set of social conditions or a particular demographic, or undergoing reform by, perhaps, a moralizing discourse or an activist literature. The title presents a problem of agency and subjectivity: who or what is acting? And, further, who or what *can* act? Can literature, for example, properly be considered an agent? How much agency can be ascribed to a reader of fiction? Such questions motivate this entire study—just as, I argue, they motivated Americans who lived between the Civil War and World War II, a period that, for reasons I explain below, I call the Long Progressive Era. In this period, fiction about the poor dramatized a crisis of agency among the affluent, not only in the stories it told but especially in the relations it constructed with readers. The problematic role of the reader in this fiction paralleled the problematic role of the well-to-do citizen troubled by poverty. A few examples illustrate the point.

In Rebecca Harding Davis’s *Life in the Iron-Mills* (1861) the narrator charges the reader to “come right down with [her]” into the squalid urban underworld she depicts. In Edith Wharton’s introduction to *The Book of the Homeless* (1916), a multi-author collection she edited to raise funds for her World War I charities, she imagines the text as a building in which she plays the hostess: “So I efface myself from the threshold and ask you to walk in.” In John Steinbeck’s *Tortilla Flat* (1935), however, the narrator bars the

reader (and himself) from a room where his impoverished characters are grieving the loss of a friend: “The door was, and is, closed,” he says. In each of these texts, an image of a threshold signals the author’s concern for the reader’s role in the text; and, as these are texts about poverty, that literary concern is also a social concern about the reader’s relation to the poor. In what ways, these authors are all keen to determine, does entrance into a fictional world influence readers’ lives in the real world? More specifically, when a fictional world is rife with social problems, like poverty, how does readers’ engagement with that world mediate their relationship to the historical, embodied work of social reform? These questions are common to poverty fiction across this era, but these three authors’ distinctive constructions of the threshold between fiction and social reality, and their different manners of policing that border, reflect competing ideas about poverty and social reform, textuality and reading, and human subjectivity and agency.<sup>1</sup>

In the past, however, literary critics have not pursued extended inquiries on human agency through this period’s fiction about poverty. I do for multiple reasons. First, the Long Progressive Era itself *has* often been studied in terms of agency—more

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “poverty fiction” to refer to a subset of the genre that Amanda Claybaugh calls “the novel of purpose,” the offspring of a marriage of social reform writing and literary realism that she deems “the predominant nineteenth-century genre in both Great Britain and the United States” (9). Novelists of purpose considered their fictions “performative” in the same way that the nonfictional writings of social reform were; they “thought of novels not as self-contained aesthetic objects but rather as active interventions into social and political life” (36). However, while Claybaugh’s term encompasses “nonreformist novels” that nonetheless “took [their] conception of purposefulness from reform,” my term designates only fiction that thematizes reform. It also embraces a wider historical period than the “novel of purpose,” whose lifespan Claybaugh limits to the second half of the nineteenth century.

I take poverty relief as a representative field of social reform. While choosing this single expression of reform limits the scope of my argument somewhat, and while choosing another project (e.g., temperance, women’s suffrage, civil rights, crime, sanitation, mental illness) would not yield an identical narrative, poverty relief was an extraordinarily inclusive work, encompassing or overlapping every one of the reform projects listed above. Therefore, to study poverty relief is, in some important respects, to study them all.

specifically, in terms of a tension between, on the one hand, the reformist zeal that deployed new organizational methods and bureaucratic structures to renovate social and political relations and, on the other hand, the feeling of personal diminution, of spiritual impoverishment, that such rationalizing campaigns bequeathed even to the reformers.<sup>2</sup> This tension between feelings of empowerment and disempowerment is a broad cultural phenomenon that I examine at greater length and that forms a backdrop for this entire study.

Second, and more specifically, fiction reading *per se* changed dramatically in the Long Progressive Era. Like so many forms of labor, it underwent professionalization;

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<sup>2</sup> *Reforming Readers* dubs the period between the Civil War and World War II the Long Progressive Era. I prefer this nomenclature to a term like “late modernity,” which is nearly as serviceable, because it emphasizes the reformist spirit that is often associated with the traditionally defined Progressive Era but that, I argue, suffuses the entire inter-war period. Even Richard Hofstadter’s classic study, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (1955), which makes distinctions between the Populist movement, the Progressive movement, and the New Deal, finds unity in the “age” that encompasses all three movements. Admittedly, my inclusion of Rebecca Harding Davis’s work from the 1860s gives *Reforming Readers* an earlier starting point than most comparable studies; but in *Life in the Iron-Mills* (1861), Davis anticipates tectonic shifts in both poverty relief and literary culture that would shape the landscape in which William Dean Howells found himself in the 1880s.

Seminal historical studies of the (traditionally defined) Progressive Era include Hofstadter’s *Age of Reform* and Robert Wiebe’s *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (1967). While these writers’ claims have been disputed and revised *ad infinitum*, they set a precedent of analyzing Progressivism as a movement largely about middle-class power—for Hofstadter, a recovery of social and political power that an established middle class lost to industrial titans after the Civil War and, for Wiebe, a pursuit of social and political power that a new middle class saw available to them in modern bureaucratic structures. For recent historical studies of poverty relief in the period, see Alan Dawley’s *Struggles for Justice: Social Responsibility and the Liberal State* (1991); James Patterson’s *America’s Struggle Against Poverty in the Twentieth Century* (2000), esp. “The Gospel of Prevention, Progressive Style,” pp. 19-37; and Alice O’Connor’s *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (2001), esp. “Origins: Poverty and Social Science in the Era of Progressive Reform,” pp. 25-54.

Like many recent scholars of this period, I highlight the ambivalence of late-modern reform, which often carried the seeds of its own defeat and constrained human freedom even as it liberated. Paul Boyer located this ambivalence, for example, in the “familiar urban moral-control cycle, from initial enthusiasm to baffled discouragement” (155). While I steer clear of “social control” theses, which seem to me reductive and somewhat unfertile, I do read Progressives’ reform efforts in constant dialogue with their anxieties about agency, anxieties that fed on reform’s capacity to impoverish spiritually even while it enriched materially.

book-of-the-month clubs and a new class of literary scholars made aesthetic taste a matter of technical expertise, undermining the genteel generalist's claim to untrained aesthetic authority. What to read and how to do so became questions for specialists to answer. Third, and perhaps more fundamentally, affluent Americans in this period found their own agency challenged by the conspicuous weakness (real or perceived) of the poor. This challenge was multivalent: it depended partially on imagining the poor as the affluent classes' abject Other, disturbing embodiments of economic, social, and moral impotence.<sup>3</sup> The challenge also proceeded from a close association of the poor with a broad culture of reform. Overwhelmingly, writers in this period understood cultures of poverty as degraded imitations of bourgeois culture; only in the mid-twentieth century would Americans begin to see the former as independent systems of positive value and practice. Therefore, to write or read about the poor between the wars was to assume the need for reform, and, for reasons I discuss below, the contemporary culture of reform was a primary—perhaps, *the* primary—locus of bourgeois anxieties about agency. Thus, when affluent authors represented the poor, and when affluent readers read about them, they inevitably confronted a culture of reform that evoked troubling questions about their own moral efficacy.

Finally, this study excludes the post-war period because writers in that era, more often than those in the Long Progressive Era, embraced historiographies that define modernity in terms of a continuous diminution of individual agency—stories that Jennifer Fleissner calls “narrative[s] of decline” (15). In these accounts, an emerging culture of

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<sup>3</sup> In this respect *Reforming Readers* is a distant relation of Karen Sánchez-Eppler's project in *Dependent States: The Child's Part in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (2005), where rather than the poor, children provide the figure of dependency and minimal agency through which a more obviously empowered population conceptualizes its own capacities for action.

professionalism, to borrow Burton Bledstein's term, and an expanding governmental bureaucracy transform American life according to a rationalizing ethos that, if it renders many forms of labor more efficient, also diminishes individuals' sense of creativity, originality, and uniqueness. Extending Frederick Winslow Taylor's principles of scientific management to every sphere of life results, unexpectedly, in a loss of individual freedom and agency. Far from apotheosizing the human being, then, modernity lays unprecedented constraints on the individual will. Scientific management turns selves into automata, making human relations more efficient at the cost of spiritual vitality, moral force, and psychological coherence. This pessimistic narrative culminates in what literary critics have alternately called the "culture of paranoia" and the "culture of conspiracy," which, in post-World War II America, pits the beleaguered individual against sinister, impersonal institutions that govern his movements without his consent.<sup>4</sup>

Scholarship on the Long Progressive Era has often deployed such narratives of decline, interpreting the period's diverse reform movements as a fundamentally unified expression of Taylorist impulses. Alongside the work of poverty relief, movements concerning temperance, woman suffrage, sanitation, low-income housing, care of the mentally ill, education, domestic management, and industrial engineering comprised a culture of reform aiming to root out vice and waste from every sphere of human activity.

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<sup>4</sup> See Timothy Melley's diagnosis of a postwar "agency panic" in *The Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* (2000) (10). The postwar generation's "all-or-nothing conception of agency" renders it prone to panic and, crucially, distinguishes that generation from Americans of the Long Progressive Era, who responded not only to romantic conceptions of agency in the work of William Dean Howells and John Steinbeck but also to the nuanced accounts of freedom and constraint promulgated by Rebecca Harding Davis and Edith Wharton. For more on postwar paranoia, see Peter Knight's edited volume, *Conspiracy Nation: The Politics of Paranoia in Postwar America* (2002) and his earlier monograph, *Conspiracy Culture: From the Kennedy Assassination to the X-Files* (2000).

Thus, one might expect the Long Progressive Era's poverty fiction, so bound up with that culture of reform, to appropriate and enact the narrative of decline. In fact, some of this fiction does. However, the poverty fiction I study maintains a critical relationship with that pessimistic narrative lamenting a modern loss of agency. If some of the authors I study succumb to modernity's more enervating influences, as I argue William Dean Howells and John Steinbeck do, their loss of faith in the will comes as a surprise because they so convincingly tell stories of human dignity untrammelled by adverse circumstances. On the other hand, despite painting one of the bleakest images of industrial working conditions in the American canon, Rebecca Harding Davis staunchly defends the individual power of choice; and Edith Wharton, sensibly labeled a naturalist by many literary critics, imagines human beings' compromises with fate or circumstance as genuine, even invigorating, acts of will. Imagined as a coherent literary tradition, shaped by a set of shared social conditions and moral concerns, the poverty fiction of this period displays a tension between confidence and doubt in human agency—a conflict that, sometimes productive and sometimes paralyzing, need not have resolved itself into the next generation's pervasive fear.

Post-World War II fiction about agency, tending toward paranoia about depersonalizing institutions, does not flow inevitably from American poverty fiction between 1860 and 1945. In that earlier period, William Dean Howells and John Steinbeck found themselves trapped in a modern (i.e., Cartesian) binary that suggested, to simplify only slightly, human beings were either autonomous and volitional, or they were radically contingent—shaped and moved by environmental, biological, and/or metaphysical forces—and thus incapable of choice. Such a construction of human being indeed lends

itself to the pessimism and fear of post-World War II fiction. Challenging Howells's and Steinbeck's vision, though, was Rebecca Harding Davis's and Edith Wharton's, which understood the contingency of the self as a necessary condition of agency. These women drew on a premodern concept that Charles Taylor calls the "porous" self, which lived in an enchanted cosmos and was subject to penetration and possession by spirits—and was no less a willful subject for all that (*A Secular Age* 38). I do not mean to cast Davis or Wharton as believers in sprites and fairies (although both wrote stories of the preternatural), but I do claim that the idea of a self permeated by external forces did not threaten Davis and Wharton in the way it did Howells and Steinbeck. Indeed, as I show in Chapters 2 and 4, Davis's and Wharton's characters often appear most decisive and empowered in moments when they are least isolated and most conspicuously related to an Other or to the environment.

These two authors produce a sense of agency that does not presume the self's independence or sovereignty but assumes the self's relationality and boundedness—boundedness not in the sense of discreteness but of limitation. The self is formed by its environment and its own biology, and it expresses its powers only under those limiting conditions. Contrary to modern suggestions that the individual exerts his will in acts of conquest, triumphing over environment and biology, Davis and Wharton imply that the individual is most powerful when she creatively and strategically inhabits the limitations of environment, body, and relationship.

### **Scholarly Contexts**

Any study of agency so defined must be attentive to its own contexts and conditions of plausibility. Therefore, I want briefly to suspend the main argument to



describe the literary critical situation of *Reforming Readers* and to draw the historical setting of the fiction I study in some greater detail. The last decade has produced a wealth of literary criticism and theory engaging the topic of agency.<sup>5</sup> Some of the attention to this topic has been implicit, as in the manifold expressions of the “cognitive turn” in literary studies, which, in pursuing materialist accounts of consciousness, calls for a dramatic rethinking of the category of agency. Alternately, the strain of literary scholarship concerned with the ethics of reading generally assumes the existence of human agents, without whom ethics would have to be radically reconceived or abandoned. Other scholarship has more explicitly addressed matters of agency, including literary applications of systems theory and posthumanist theory, which redefine agency in extending it to nonhuman entities or networks.<sup>6</sup> Still other studies, like Paisley Livingston’s *Literature and Rationality: Ideas of Agency in Theory and Fiction* (1991) and Meili Steele’s *Theorizing Textual Subjects* (1997), aim directly at a theory of human agency that can steer between deconstructionist and liberal accounts of subjectivity, the one positing a self entirely formed by discourse and the other asserting an autonomous, rational self.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In May 2012, searching the MLA Bibliography for books with “agency” as a keyword yields 179 results since 2000, with 140 of those titles appearing in 2005 or later.

<sup>6</sup> Indispensable texts in systems theory include Bruno Latour’s *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (2005) and Niklas Luhmann’s *Social Systems* (1995). In posthumanist theory, Donna Haraway’s *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (1991) and Cary Wolfe’s *What Is Posthumanism?* (2010) are helpful introductions to the field.

<sup>7</sup> For approaches to literary agency akin to Livingston’s and Steele’s, see Allen Speight’s *Hegel, Literature, and the Problem of Agency* (2001) and Marshall Gregory’s *Shaped by Stories: The Ethical Power of Narratives* (2009).

Within this field of scholarship concerned with agency, two types of work have proved most influential for my own study. The first of these investigates the ethics of reading, in most cases assuming or asserting that literary reading can avert the hazards of voyeurism and moral evasion by fashioning what Adam Zachary Newton calls “intersubjective ties,” or “relations of provocation, call, and response that bind narrator and listener, author and character, or reader and text” (13).<sup>8</sup> I have found the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Georges Poulet, and Wayne Booth especially useful in conceiving of a literary language that fosters dialogical, even friendly, relations—rather than exploitative ones—among readers, characters, and authors.<sup>9</sup> Finally, my project, invested as it is in the potential of activist reading, draws inspiration from Paul Ricoeur’s claim that, because of the work of the reader, “the text is not closed in upon itself but open onto the world, which it redescribes and remakes” (132).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Such critiques find classic expression in Walter Benjamin’s “The Storyteller”: “What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering body with a death he reads about” (88). Similarly, Emmanuel Levinas argues that all art, “essentially disengaged, constitutes, in a world of initiative and responsibility, a dimension of evasion”; to him, enjoying literature is like “feasting during a plague” (12).

<sup>9</sup> See Bakhtin’s theory of the novel’s dialogical language in “Discourse in the Novel,” Poulet’s account of the intimate relation between reader and author in “The Phenomenology of Reading,” and Booth’s notion of companionate reading in *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (1988). Important deconstructionist accounts of quasi-/personal, ethical relations formed in literary reading are J. Hillis Miller’s *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, DeMan, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin* (1987) and much of Derek Attridge’s work, beginning with *The Singularity of Literature* (2004). Finally, Andrew Miller’s *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (2008) is a model of theoretically sophisticated, historically grounded, and formally acute scholarship that imagines ways in which fiction can urge readers out of solipsism and into saving relationships with others.

<sup>10</sup> In his book, *From Text to Action* (1991), Ricoeur describes a two-step reading process by which readers translate literature into praxis. The first step, called explanation, “bring[s] out the structure” of the text; this step is purely analytical. However, the second step, called interpretation, involves “follow[ing] the path of thought opened up by the text” and “plac[ing] oneself en route toward the *orient* of the text” (121-22). In interpretation, a reader reconfigures both herself and her world in harmony with the configuration of the text.

More generally, studying the ethics of reading corrects a blind spot in the growing field of agency studies. While authors, characters, social institutions, and disembodied forces all appear in the existing scholarship as agents, readers have been surprisingly overlooked, even though they represent the interface between fiction and history. In the period I study this elision is all the more problematic because the era witnessed dramatic changes in bourgeois conceptions and practices of reading. These changes in reading usually carried implications for the question of readers' agency, and as such they conditioned the writing and reading of fiction at the time, they offer a window on contemporary notions of agency beyond the literary realm, and they should inform our ongoing interpretations of the fiction and culture of that period. My project posits the reader of reform fiction as an exemplary figure in the Long Progressive Era's struggle with agency. Both formed by and forming the discourses that swirled around this problem, both acted upon and acting, such readers embodied the agency of late-modern, middle-class Americans.

The other type of agency scholarship that has most influenced *Reforming Readers* is the richly historicized investigation of agency from within the disciplines of history, cultural studies, and literary studies. First, James Block's *A Nation of Agents* (2002), a sweeping reinterpretation of United States history as a collective pursuit of agency, has sharpened my conception of that term, making it not a negative liberty but a particular form of freedom under constraint, a potent force generated in balancing the claims of the

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While *From Text to Action* does not focus explicitly on the ethical implications of reading, some related theoretical projects imagine salutary social outcomes from reading, including Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999) and Martha Nussbaum's *Love's Knowledge: Essays in Philosophy and Literature* (1990) and *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (1995).

individual with those of the community.<sup>11</sup> In cultural studies, Jackson Lears's *No Place of Grace* (1981), Martha Banta's *Taylored Lives* (1993), and Jennifer Fleissner's *Women, Compulsion, Modernity* (2004) have served me by situating a late-modern crisis of agency in various discrete communities and by narrating several modes of self-assertion and self-preservation through which historical actors engaged that crisis. Finally, Robert Chodat's *Worldly Objects and Sentient Things* (2008), which argues that twentieth-century literature did not announce the death of agency but its relocation in entities and energies previously considered non-volitional, has helped me to recognize not only bourgeois Americans' suspicion of their diminished agency but also their attribution of increased agency to the poor and to literary texts.<sup>12</sup>

Beyond studies of agency *per se*, an emerging literary-critical conversation about poverty fiction has helped me to frame this project. Addressing one of the first problems confronting scholars of this fiction, Amanda Claybaugh points to a "longstanding debate

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<sup>11</sup> Block narrates United States history as the evolving application of a philosophical development he traces to seventeenth-century England: the emergence of a "new human character type," the agent, meant that "individuals shifted from being servants of God and society carrying out rigidly defined duties on behalf of distantly formulated but fully designated ends. They became agents, that is, individuals participating actively in shaping the worldly means to be employed for realizing divine and collective purposes" (22). Agents did not choose the ends that their actions would serve; these were defined by God and/or society at large. But agents were the creative masters of means, of the mechanisms by which those ends were achieved. Placing the figure of the agent at the center of United States history, Block argues that the American experiment framed "modernity as the continuing project of reconciling individual prerogatives and normative order" (16). The agency civilization's "vision was of individuals freed from lifelong submissiveness within authoritarian hierarchies in every domain of societal life in order to be resubordinated to the emerging institutions of liberal society, and placed *qua* individuals as equal agents capable of undertaking the realization of collective ends" (29).

<sup>12</sup> Other exemplary studies of this historicized sort include Alan Trachtenberg's *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (1982), James Livingston's *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850-1940* (1994), and, in a British context, Andrew H. Miller's excellent *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (2008) and Anne Frey's *British State Romanticism: Authorship, Agency, and Bureaucratic Nationalism* (2010).

among historians about whether reform helped to create a more humane and enlightened world or whether it served as a form of discipline and social control” (43-44). Literary critics differ on the same point in reference to poverty fiction: does it participate in the empowerment of the poor or the consolidation of bourgeois power? Scholars have argued that poverty fiction contributes to several ends other than, or contrary to, care for the poor. Claybaugh contends that writers frequently deployed the “novel of purpose” for primarily artistic or professional aims—to enable formal experimentation, to imbue their fiction with a sense of purposefulness, or to tap a wider audience. Amy Schrager Lang and Gavin Jones each describe the ways in which fiction ostensibly about class or poverty, lacking a rich vocabulary for this subject matter, often borrows the language of race or gender and ends up saying as much or more about these topics as they do about class or poverty. In *Feeling for the Poor* (2010) Carolyn Betensky claims that Victorian “social-problem novels” did not call their bourgeois readers to ameliorative action; they taught such audiences that their feelings, and the reading that prompted them, were important by themselves (1). Such novels were manuals in “bourgeois selving” (4). Finally, Eric Schocket argues not that fiction about class serves purposes *other* than economic justice but that it tends to *undermine* justice. The trope of “unveiling” poverty for the previously ignorant reader does not move audiences to restructure society more equitably but rather to feel sympathy for the poor, which in turn promotes a false sense of cross-class identification rather than a more realistic recognition of difference.

Gavin Jones and Carolyn Betensky, however, both of whom turn a keen eye on reform fiction’s ambivalences and hypocrisies, find potential for progressive social action in this literature. In his effort to theorize poverty as a category for literary critical

discourse, Jones challenges scholars to “recognize the aesthetic dimension of poverty, the complex ways that it has catalyzed the forms and content of literary expression, without merely dismissing this aesthetic as an act of internal ‘colonization’ or as a repressive, bourgeois appropriation of the poor” (19). Betensky claims that reform fiction generally expresses both altruism and selfishness and neither disqualifies the other for critical attention: “Social problem novels [. . .] are complex, unsteady attempts to do both of these things at once—to look after the other and to look after the self. Reading them as doing purely one or the other, it seems to me, is to take only the lessons we most want from them, and not necessarily the ones we can most use” (21). I follow Jones and Betensky in acknowledging the operations of “colonization,” “appropriation,” and “look[ing] after the self” in poverty fiction but also in affirming the aesthetic possibilities in this literature and the likelihood that it carries “lessons” we can use.<sup>13</sup> Poverty fiction’s negotiation of the late modern crisis of agency through the figure of the reader, a matter impinging directly on care for the poor in the Long Progressive Era, strikes me as an eminently “usable” aesthetic engagement with poverty.

*Reforming Readers* analyzes the work of reading poverty fiction as a negotiation of the agency crisis I have described. To describe that negotiation more deeply, I provide

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<sup>13</sup> This contemporary critical turn to the aesthetic as a potential site of social transformation mirrors a strategy of many Progressive Era intellectuals, artists, urban planners, and philanthropists. In *Beautiful Democracy: Aesthetics and Anarchy in a Global Era* (2007), Russ Castronovo traces the Progressive Era’s multifarious deployments of “the beautiful” as a means of forming a more democratic public sphere. Offering a sense of this cultural project’s methodological diversity, he writes, “While university researchers hypothesized beauty’s effects on subjects, urban reformers and social activists asked if flowers, slideshows of art’s masterpieces, and ‘high-class moving pictures’ could encourage people to act as agents in command of their own ethical destinies” (9). Like Gavin Jones and Carolyn Betensky on poverty fiction, Castronovo calls aesthetics “[b]oth a tool for crafting hegemony and an instrument of change” (8). For a related study focused primarily on the cultural work of poetry, see Lisa Szefer’s *The Gospel of Beauty in the Progressive Era: Reforming American Verse and Values* (2011).

historical accounts of both poverty relief and fiction reading in this period. Thus, the analysis of reading I provide in each single-author chapter corresponds to patterns of reading and reform specific to the author's historical moment. However, three developments span the entire period, conditioning readings of all of these authors. Two of these developments are an increasing attribution of agency to fictional texts and to the poor. Novels and poor people "came to life" simultaneously in the bourgeois imagination, ceasing to be passive objects amenable to others' intentions and becoming actors in their own right. One might imagine a zero-sum game in which these trends corresponded to a decrease in agency for readers of poverty fiction: as texts and poor people grow more powerful, reformist readers must grow weaker. Such an exchange might seem even more likely in light of the third development spanning this period, namely, the middle and upper classes' gradual replacement of an integrated, autonomous self with a dis-integrated self enmeshed in and constituted by social relations. This new prototype of personhood would justify a feeling of diminished agency among the affluent, but the fiction of this period reveals no consistent surrender of volition by cultural elites. As authors observe the growing force of fiction and the poor, and the reconstitution of selfhood, they reevaluate bourgeois agency differently from one another and, accordingly, construct a variety of roles for readers to inhabit.

William Dean Howells and John Steinbeck come to understand the affluent self as radically constrained, and their fiction positions readers as minor participants in the text and as spectators of poverty. Rebecca Harding Davis and Edith Wharton also recognize constraints on bourgeois agency, but they understand acceptance of those limitations as a choice and, moreover, an essential condition of meaningful action. Therefore, their

fiction imagines readers intervening significantly in the text and in the lives of the poor.

### **Historical Contexts**

*Reforming Readers* resists a popular narrative of decline by which intellectuals have described modernity's relation to the individual. That narrative of decline itself protests a triumphalist telling of modernity's salutary advance, more popular among utopian writers like Edward Bellamy, Social Darwinists, and industrial engineers like Frederick Winslow Taylor and Henry Ford. Still more intriguing, though, are the ideological and ethical differences between analysts of modernity who are neither triumphalist nor censorious and, despite sharing a more balanced perspective on modernity, adopt very different social practices in relation to cultural change. Henry Adams and Jane Addams, two of the United States' keenest thinkers of modernity, demonstrate that even ambivalence can tend in one direction, and their lives illustrate alternate responses to even a nuanced perspective on modern "progress." Before addressing these two figures directly, I want to reference William James's writing on the human will as a conceptual framework in which their responses to modernity can appear as expressions of their thinking on agency.

Working in the increasingly scientific field of psychology, James confronted the specter of determinism in a "mechanical" or "materialistic" account of human consciousness, under the influence of which "nothing is easier than to indulge in a picture of the fatalistic character of human life" (*Talks to Teachers* 105). In a chapter on "The Will" in *Talks to Teachers on Psychology* (1899), James expresses the tug of fatalism this way:

Man's conduct appears as the mere resultant of all his various impulses and inhibitions. One object, by its presence, makes us act: another object



checks our action. Feelings aroused and ideas suggested by objects sway us one way and another [. . .]. The life in all this becomes prudential and moral; but the psychologic agents in the drama may be described, you see, as nothing but the 'ideas' themselves,—ideas for the whole system of which what we call the 'soul' or 'character' or 'will' of the person is nothing but a collective name. (*Talks* 105)

In this same text, James ultimately affirms the freedom of the will.<sup>14</sup> However, James takes care to say that voluntary action emerges not from a psychological terrain devoid of obstacles to action but from within “a complex field of consciousness,” full of inhibitions and “conflicting systems of ideas” (*Talks* 104). Indeed, the strongest acts of will emerge from conflicted minds:

[T]he mind of him whose fields of consciousness are complex, and who, with the reasons for the action, sees the reasons against it, and yet, instead of being palsied, acts in the way that takes the whole field into consideration,—so, I say, is such a mind the ideal sort of mind [. . .]. Purely impulsive action, or action that proceeds to extremities regardless of consequences, on the other hand, is the easiest action in the world, and the lowest in type. Any one can show energy, when made quite reckless. An Oriental despot requires but little ability: as long as he lives, he succeeds, for he has absolutely his own way [. . .]. But not to proceed immediately to extremities, to be still able to act energetically under an array of inhibitions,—that indeed is rare and difficult. Cavour, when urged to proclaim martial law in 1859, refused to do so, saying: "Any one can govern in that way. I will be constitutional." (*Talks* 106)<sup>15</sup>

James himself exercises his freedom rather like a constitutional monarch in that, while philosophical fatalism exerts a strong pull on his intellect, he chooses to believe in free will.<sup>16</sup> His dynamic engagement with determinism offers a framework in which to read

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<sup>14</sup> To his mind, this freedom inheres most fundamentally in the individual's capacity to fix and sustain her attention on a single idea, over against the natural, ungoverned progress of ideas through the mind (i.e., the “stream of consciousness”).

<sup>15</sup> I am indebted to Jane Thrailkill for directing me to this highly illustrative passage.

<sup>16</sup> James asserts that “the very first act of a will endowed with freedom should be to sustain the belief in the freedom itself” (*Talks* 112). For earlier discussions of the will, see James's “The

Henry Adams and Jane Addams as representative modern thinkers troubled by the problem of human agency.

Henry Adams, who simultaneously venerated and dreaded the dynamo, symbol of modern technological advance, adopted an aloof, observational posture toward life generally and confessed that he “never got to the point of playing the game at all; he lost himself in the study of it, watching the errors of the players” (10). A brilliant and intense dilettante, he characterized himself by the following qualities: “The habit of doubt; of distrusting his own judgment and of totally rejecting the judgment of the world; the tendency to regard every question as open; the hesitation to act except as a choice of evils; the shirking of responsibility [. . .]” (11). This “habit of doubt” and “hesitation to act” correspond to what James calls the “obstructed will,” characteristic of “melancholiacs,” for example, whose “minds are cramped in a fixed emotion of fear or helplessness, their ideas confined to the one thought that for them life is impossible. So they show a condition of perfect 'abulia,' or inability to will or act” (*Talks* 106).

A contemporary of Henry Adams, Jane Addams shared his ambivalence toward modernization, reflecting in *Democracy and Social Ethics* (1902) that “[a]ll about us are men and women who have become unhappy in regard to their attitude toward the social order itself; toward the dreary round of uninteresting work, the pleasures narrowed down to those of appetite, the declining consciousness of brain power, and the lack of mental food which characterizes the lot of the large proportion of their fellow-citizens” (6). She sounds a bit like a prophet of decline when she sums up her observations, “all are increasingly anxious concerning their actual relations to the basic organization of

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Dilemma of Determinism” (1884), the chapters on “Habit” and “Will” in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), and “The Will to Believe” (1896).

society” (6). Unlike Henry Adams, however, Jane Addams eschewed the mere indulgence of anxiety and the luxury of detachment in favor of social and political activism. She was quite conscious of the more passive, reflective alternative, commenting that in the face of uniquely modern social problems, “while the strain and perplexity of the situation is felt most keenly by the educated and self-conscious members of the community, the tentative and actual attempts at adjustment are largely coming through those who are simpler and less analytical” (9). Quite the analyst herself, possessing the “complex field of consciousness” of which James writes, Addams nonetheless practiced an ethics of intervention that transcended the “strain and perplexity” that she and Henry Adams both felt.

A similar tension plays itself out in contemporary scholarly discussions of the period. One party draws on critiques by David Riesman, Jackson Lears, and Christopher Lasch, emphasizing the enervating, constraining, and demoralizing effects of modernity on individuals and communities.<sup>17</sup> Another party, perhaps labeling its opponents dour and nostalgic, cites thinkers like Anthony Giddens, James Livingston, and even Charles Taylor to highlight the unique opportunities for self-making and social reform that modernity presents.<sup>18</sup> What this historical and contemporary controversy reveals, of course, is an historical moment deeply riven by ideological conflict and a set of cultural

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<sup>17</sup> See especially Riesman et al.’s *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (1950); Lears’s *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (1981); and Lasch’s *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (1979).

<sup>18</sup> See especially Anthony Giddens’ *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (1991); James Livingston’s *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850-1940* (1997); and Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (1989) and *A Secular Age* (2007).

phenomena that have posed serious interpretive challenges for the nation. The rifts that have divided skeptics of modernity from its boosters, and that have often internally divided modernity's most insightful analysts, define this historical period more tellingly than one-sided narratives of either advance or decline.

I want to highlight two impulses that drove much of the cultural change this era witnessed, namely the impulse to doubt and the impulse to reform. Superficially, these tendencies appear to move in opposite directions, the one wedded to pessimism and the other to optimism. One could imagine the doubters squaring off against the reformers to decide the shape and tone of the modern world. In fact, however, a deep affinity underlay the penchant for questioning tradition, which infiltrated every sphere of life from religion to politics and from economics to art, and the urge to reconstruct each of those spheres on new foundations. Doubt occasioned reform, and reform occasioned doubt. In America's Long Progressive Era these two impulses are not rivals but rather two sides of the one coin on which modernity traded.

In *A Secular Age* (2007), Charles Taylor objects to “subtraction stories” of modernity, which suggest that modernity is simply what is left after scraping the Western tradition clean of religious, philosophical, and political accretions from the medieval period. Taylor claims instead that modernity is a building project—creative, strategic, and additive. This is visible, for example, in the Enlightenment. A desire to ground philosophy exclusively in indubitable knowledge drove René Descartes and Francis Bacon to deconstruct contemporary epistemological orthodoxies. While these demolition projects were followed by new philosophical construction (their respective empiricisms), Taylor argues that, with the so-called disenchantment of the world to which Descartes

and Bacon contributed, a new “buffered” self emerged that, no longer subject to hovering spiritual forces, eagerly took up reformist causes in the flush of its new independence. Thus, the leveling of old epistemological foundations was itself constructive: it laid the groundwork for a modern self, who in turn built the liberal political systems of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Likewise, Steven Mintz argues that in the early United States the doctrine of American exceptionalism nourished a reform impulse. American exceptionalism rested on a belief that the United States, having broken with Old World stagnancy and decadence, symbolized a new and better way of ordering humankind; traditions were not assumed here but subjected to the same pragmatic evaluation as all other proposed forms for common life. While these beliefs gave rise to the same sense of contingency that philosophical skepticism did, religious liberalism and evangelical revivalism contributed a different sort of energy to the reform impulse. These two expressions of Christianity shared a belief in human perfectibility, and their adherents believed in a divinely ordered cosmos in which, nonetheless, humans possessed free will to determine their courses and improve themselves in the here and now. To their minds the primary change occurring in the world was not disenchantment but the coming of the Kingdom of God (Mintz 16-17, 21-23).

In the nineteenth century, Darwin’s evolutionary theory and the “higher criticism” in biblical scholarship fed a belief in the “death of God”; and while these critiques drove some Americans to despair of a meaningful and amenable universe, they also helped create a national landscape in which new philosophical, social, and cultural opportunities seemed to appear everywhere. The social order was up for grabs as never before—not,

indeed, for the poor and disfranchised but for the middle and upper classes who had a voice in shaping their neighborhoods, cities, states, and nation. When everything could be doubted, from metaphysics to political systems, everything could also be remade. Many Americans began to perceive a radical contingency in the ways in which they ordered their lives. Why could it not be otherwise? The great reform movements of the Long Progressive Era—women’s suffrage, temperance, sanitation, mental illness, civil rights, poverty—were made possible in part by the philosophical skepticism introduced by classic Enlightenment thinkers and, more immediately, Charles Darwin, from whose work Social Darwinists like Herbert Spencer and Francis Galton harvested a secular perfectionist teleology.

Whether motivated by philosophical skepticism or religious belief, the reform efforts of the Long Progressive Era gave rise to doubt whenever they failed—and they failed often. Fiction of the period thematizes the disillusionment of reformers whose idealism has shattered on the sharp, inert edges of real social problems. As this motif emerged, of intelligent and well-intentioned men and women finding their best efforts ineffectual, the human will came in for questioning. Descartes’s *cogito ergo sum* inaugurated a modern movement that posited an autonomous, self-determining individual as the cornerstone of philosophy. Liberalism assumed that figure in politics, and the applied sciences advanced on his shoulders. But if nineteenth-century social reformers repeatedly found the world unamenable to their good intentions, then perhaps the myth of the independent and potent human subject was just that—merely a myth. Perhaps forces of environment and biology loomed larger than any American Progressive wanted to believe.

What is more, the reformist impulse that energized the Long Progressive Era expressed itself in the professionalization of the public sphere and in the ascendancy of the specialist over the generalist. The analytic impulse that gave birth to Frederick Winslow Taylor's "scientific management" and Henry Ford's assembly line dramatically reduced the range of laborers' competency, fitting them to do only one, minute task at an accelerated pace for an extended interval. And this impulse was not limited to industry. Increasingly, traditional spheres of civic engagement like the arts, charity, philosophy, and science—domains historically inhabited by all sorts of educated people—became the exclusive territory of professionals who, by defining a body of knowledge, a set of methods, and a system of apprenticeship for their respective fields, established their unique authority to work in, pronounce on, and patrol the borders of those fields. By establishing specialized training as a necessary ground of effective social action, professionalization contributed to a broad rethinking of human agency that encroached on the prerogatives of the democratic, liberal self and relegated power and freedom to a new class of "experts" in every field of human endeavor.<sup>19</sup> Among the forms of labor most affected by these seismic shifts were poverty relief and literary reading.

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<sup>19</sup> Classic studies of professionalism include David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (1950); C. Wright Mills's *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (1951); Burton Bledstein's *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (1976); and Thomas Haskell's *The Emergence of Professional Social Science* (1977). More recently, Thomas Strychacz's *Modernism, Mass Culture, and Professionalism* (1993) and Stephen Schryer's *Fantasies of the New Class: Ideologies of Professionalism in Post-World War II American Fiction* (2011) provide illuminating literary histories of professionalism either situated in or (in Schryer's case) beginning in the Progressive Era. I will return to these contemporary scholars' work in a history of literary reading below.

## History of Poverty Relief

Between 1860 and 1945 American poverty relief evolved in three roughly successive phases, which I call the traditional, Progressive, and statist. This evolution incrementally excluded ordinary citizens from the work of relieving poverty and attributed increased agency to the poor. Two types of development primarily account for the differences between these phases: the first, an epistemological change, involved the replacement of a theological understanding of poverty with a “scientific” one, and then the splintering of that “scientific” perspective into various, more specific forms of what Alice O’Connor calls “poverty knowledge.” The second, an administrative change, involved the eclipse of private, communal poverty relief by public, bureaucratic forms of the same.<sup>20</sup> As the emerging social sciences crowded out theology and bureaucratic institutions appropriated the charitable work of communities, poverty relief became an increasingly rarefied project to which individuals who were qualified only by their good intentions could hardly gain access.

Until the middle of the 1800s Americans, by and large, understood poverty theologically. The basic doctrinal schema that formed their views finds expression in the opening dictum of John Winthrop’s sermon, “A Model of Christian Charity” (1630): “God Almighty in His most holy and wise providence, hath so disposed of the condition of mankind, as in all times some must be rich, some poor, some high and eminent in power and dignity; others mean and in subjection” (206). By this account, social

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<sup>20</sup> In this period Americans also differed on the relative influence of moral and environmental factors in producing and prolonging poverty, but because opinion on this point does not follow a linear path from one position to the other, the controversy does not seem to me as useful heuristically as the epistemological and administrative differences. I will, however, reference the moralist-environmentalist debate because of its implications for reformers’ understanding of agency—both their own and that of the poor.



hierarchy is not an oppressive order but a social form that guides individuals into separate vocations necessary for sustaining a common life; in this frame the poor no less than the rich claim a divine calling, a unique manner of manifesting God's glory—the wealthy, for example, in their “love, mercy, gentleness, [and] temperance” and the poor in their “faith, patience, [and] obedience” (Winthrop 206). The complementarity in this structure is plain. That “some must be rich, some poor” does not imply a social antagonism; instead this order underscores human interdependence, ensuring that “every man might have need of other, and from hence they might be all knit more nearly together in the bonds of brotherly affection” (Winthrop 206). The duty of the wealthy to those in need is unequivocal: in catechetical form Winthrop's sermon prescribes liberal giving, dismantles self-preserving objections to this principle, and then concludes bluntly, “if thy brother be in want and thou canst help him, thou needst not make doubt, what thou shouldst do, if thou lovest God thou must help him” (209).<sup>21</sup>

Through the early-nineteenth century this theology governed not only individuals' private exercise of charity but also local communities' systems of public assistance for the poor. For this multi-tiered task of charity, early American communities depended primarily on family and communal networks, even when aid was superintended by the local government or financed by a poor tax. But because early Americans generally did not understand poverty as a flaw in the social fabric or a phenomenon to be eradicated, local governments readily shared the burden of caring for the poor, and they administered aid “straightforwardly, without long investigations or elaborate procedures, without

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<sup>21</sup> Almost two hundred fifty years later, Rebecca Harding Davis's essay “At Our Gates” would put an even finer point on the matter. There Davis argued that the affluent were not absolved of a charitable duty when they deemed a poor person “undeserving”; rather, “[t]he more of a fraud or a criminal he is the more he needs [a helping hand].”

severe discomfort or dislocation” (Rothman 31).<sup>22</sup> A standard component in their systems of aid was outdoor relief—monetary assistance that did not require recipients to move into someone else’s home or an almshouse and did not call on them to perform any labor. However, this traditional method of poverty relief and the philosophy underlying it came in for strong criticism in the second half of the nineteenth century.

As a new generation of Americans drifted from the Calvinist orthodoxy of their predecessors, new interpretations of poverty encroached on the one exemplified by Winthrop’s sermon. “Scientific philanthropy” emerged in the latter half of the nineteenth century declaring that empirical investigation, not theological reflection, offered the best knowledge of poverty. The theological framework did not simply vanish, of course. Steven Mintz argues that nineteenth-century religious liberalism and evangelical revivalism, which shared a belief in human perfectibility, played a prominent role in reframing poverty as a social ill to be cured rather than an inevitable condition to be accommodated (Mintz 16-29). No longer a necessity but an aberration, poverty became an object of investigation as never before, and the inchoate social sciences emerged as the preeminent epistemological tools for the job. Scientific philanthropists conceived the case study and the “friendly visitor,” a volunteer or paid individual who visited and interviewed the clients of philanthropic agencies in their homes, as the primary means of gathering and systematizing information about the poor.

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<sup>22</sup> In *The Discovery of the Asylum*, David Rothman explains early American communities’ tolerant approach to poverty relief this way: “It was as unthinkable to allow the destitute to shift for themselves as to let commerce flounder or children grow up untrained. Thus, without second thought, the colonists relieved the needy, the widows and orphans, the aged and sick, the insane and disabled. This customary and legitimate function did not require finely drawn or detailed legislation, great fuss or trepidation” (14).

As such agencies proliferated in urban centers, some means were required to coordinate their efforts. The Charity Organization Societies (COS) filled this need; founded in London in 1869 and quickly imported by Americans, the COS operated through local branches, each of which aimed to synchronize the work of the various charitable agencies in a particular city. The establishment of the COS represents not only a formalizing of the scientific approach to poverty knowledge but also a beginning in the bureaucratization of poverty relief. In this way it stands as the exemplary institution of Progressive Era poverty relief. However, it also marks an ideological cleavage in that field that was never fully bridged even under the New Deal, namely the split between moralism and environmentalism.

Moralists contended that vicious behavior caused poverty: the poor were poor because they lacked the virtues of thrift, temperance, and diligence. Environmentalists argued conversely that external forces, even systemic ones, foisted poverty on the poor. This disagreement, which was relatively unimportant to traditional reformers, reached a fever pitch among Progressive and statist reformers. Moralists advocated the abolition of outdoor relief, arguing that such aid, by placing no requirements on recipients, fostered the vices that surely impoverished recipients in the first place. According to Walter Trattner, the logic ran thus: “By encouraging the poor to rely upon the public dole rather than upon their own energies, and by removing the dread of want, considered by many to be the prime mover of the needy, the poor laws [especially outdoor relief] destroyed the incentive to work, causing the poor to become even more idle and improvident” (56). Thus, it was with an eye to moral accountability that a new class of philanthropists limited their work to indoor relief—“care offered in homes other than one’s own and [.

.] in institutions” (Axinn and Stern 21). Administered by moralists, systems of indoor relief subjected applicants for aid to personal investigation in hopes of serving only the “deserving” poor and encouraging moral reform among the vicious. Environmentalists, however, resisted policy innovations involving this sort of interrogation. They targeted not the poor for reform but the housing, sanitation, and labor conditions thought to be responsible for poverty.

At the core of the moralist-environmentalist debate lay questions of agency and responsibility. Who, or what, was to blame for poverty—the poor, the affluent, the built environment, an economic system? And who was responsible for alleviating or eliminating it? In its early days the COS harbored both perspectives, before finally veering sharply toward the environmentalist position.<sup>23</sup> Public opinion remained divided on this issue even in the 1930s, after the stock market crash devastated communities that knew nothing about Wall Street. However, Franklin Roosevelt’s epoch-making New Deal was from its inception oriented toward environmental and systemic causes of poverty. Its “alphabet soup” of social programs, which aimed above all to provide citizens with a safety net (a “social security”), addressed Americans’ newfound sense that much of life was beyond their control. The New Deal reflected a popular sense of impotence, but it obliquely contributed to that feeling as well. As the creation of Roosevelt’s renowned “brain trust,” a cadre of Columbia and Harvard professors, the New Deal expressed the

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<sup>23</sup> My account of the traditional and Progressive phases of poverty relief aims at a broad synthesis of six major historiographical works: Robert Bremner’s *From the Depths: The Discovery of Poverty in the United States* (1956); David Rothman’s *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (1971); Paul Boyer’s *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820-1920* (1978); Alan Dawley’s *Struggles for Justice: Social Responsibility and the Liberal State* (1991); Steven Mintz’s *Moralists and Modernizers: America’s Pre-Civil War Reformers* (1995); and James Patterson’s *America’s Struggle Against Poverty in the Twentieth Century* (2000).

culture of professionalism that had been reshaping poverty relief since reformers first appropriated social scientific methods; that professional culture enthroned the university-trained specialist as its highest authority—not the community activist or the benevolent neighbor. The New Deal redrew the spheres of influence in which Americans understood themselves to operate, as it shifted responsibility for care of the poor away from local and state institutions toward federal agencies.

Historians have chronicled citizens' opposition to the New Deal on the grounds that government aid "demoralized" its recipients, undermining a sense of self-reliance in the poor.<sup>24</sup> Scholars have noted comparatively few protests, however, that claimed the New Deal encroached on the traditional roles of neighborhoods, churches, and private agencies. Thus, the image that emerges is of the affluent American trying to remove the speck from his brother's eye (making sure the poor man or woman remains personally accountable) while ignoring the log in his own eye (overlooking the erasure of his own social responsibility). One of the most interesting features of this scenario was the comfortable American's lack of interest in the New Deal's implications for his own agency. For all his "defense" of the poor man and woman's will, his own culturally sanctioned sphere of influence was shrinking unnoticed under his feet. Not an employee of a New Deal agency himself, if ever he wanted to respond personally to the plight of the unemployed, he would find it harder to do so than he would have a generation before. As ordinary citizens' personal contact with the poor grew rarer, he and others like him had less to contribute to discussions of poverty relief on a local or national level. Such a

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<sup>24</sup> See Alan Dawley's *Struggles for Justice* (1991), James Patterson's *America's Struggle Against Poverty in the Twentieth Century* (2000), and Alice O'Connor's *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (2002).

trend eventually hardened into a new social arrangement where only professionals knew the poor and, in a bit of circular reasoning, only professionals were considered qualified to assist them.

While some affluent Americans were anticipating the “demoralizing” effects of federal aid to the poor, scholars of poverty were entertaining a new perspective on the agency of the poor. In the 1930s and 1940s, scholars like Robert and Helen Lynd, W. Lloyd Warner, William F. Whyte, and E. Wight Bakke began to investigate poverty not only in terms of political economy, as their Progressive forbears did, but in terms of culture. Revising the old moralist doctrine that the vices of the poor perpetuated their economic situation, these new scholars’ work recognized and described “cultures of poverty” that differed from middle- and upper-class cultures but were quite rational and functional for all that.<sup>25</sup> The poor participated in distinctive cultures not because they could not assimilate the values of the affluent but because their material circumstances called for different modes of behavior. This new thesis recast the poor as agents in their own right, thoughtful makers of culture instead of poor imitators who needed help becoming more like the affluent.

While this change implies no formal limitation of the middle and upper classes’ agency, it does at the end of the Long Progressive Era provide a snapshot of the poor and the affluent moving in opposite directions—the former gaining new recognition as actors

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<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Robert and Helen Lynd’s *Middletown: A Study in American Culture* (1929); W. Lloyd Warner and Paul S. Lunt’s *The Social Life of a Modern Community* (1941); William F. Whyte’s *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum* (1943); and E. Wight Bakke’s *The Unemployed Worker* (1940) and *Citizens Without Work* (1940). For helpful discussions of the culturalist trend in sociology that these works exemplify, see Alice O’Connor’s *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (2001), esp. Chapter 2, and James T. Patterson’s *America’s Struggle Against Poverty in the Twentieth Century* (2000), esp. pp. 88-89.

and the latter relinquishing familiar roles as engaged citizens and neighbors. These opposite courses had been set at the advent of “scientific philanthropy” when moralizing Progressives (in a very different tone than the culturalist scholars above) saddled the poor with responsibility for their poverty and when trained professionals supplanted concerned neighbors as the agents of charity. Meanwhile, another reassignment of roles, equally significant for the shape and cultural work of poverty fiction, was occurring in the literary sphere.

### **History of Reading**

Fiction reading in the Long Progressive Era underwent an evolution that closely paralleled the changes I have described in the realm of poverty relief. Antebellum reading was grounded in the philosophy of self-culture. Post-World War I reading was grounded in the philosophy of the Book-of-the-Month Club and the university-tenured New Critics. In the antebellum period reading was undoubtedly a form of entertainment, but it was also a means of self-discipline. Literary culture was predicated on the sense that one’s character formation was her own responsibility, and reading moral fiction morally was one way of fulfilling that duty. After World War I, reading fiction was still about self-improvement, but the general reader now sought not character but Culture—and that from the recommendations of trained literary professionals. Culture was no longer a self-reflexive activity; it was a commodity that specialists possessed by virtue of extensive apprenticeships and that general readers could acquire at a reduced cost by reading what (and how) those specialists recommended. Responsibility for reading—both the choice of books and the application of particular hermeneutics—had shifted from the general reader to the literary professional.

In antebellum America, self-culture designated the work of disciplining one's moral and intellectual faculties to recognize and love the good, the true, and the beautiful. Assiduous performance of this task produced character, a keyword for these thinkers, which entailed self-mastery, autonomy of the will.<sup>26</sup> Reading literature played a central role in self-culture, refining the reader's intellect and emotions through contact with what Matthew Arnold would famously call "the best that has been thought and said in the world." Even in the antebellum period, there existed a "literary cultural elite" whose deep familiarity with the Western cultural tradition helped position them as guides for the general reader; but unlike their twentieth-century descendants, these cultural arbiters meant to equip the general reader to select and appropriate literature on his own. They offered not reading lists or cocktail knowledge but "the power of ready and subtle thought" (Stevenson qtd. in Rubin 7). As Joan Shelley Rubin expresses it, "Relying on their counsel, the 'average man' would not so much surrender to their dicta as 'engage in obeying his own instructed mind'" (Rubin 7). James L. Machor adopts a similar model of the relationship between antebellum reviewers and middle-class readers, representing the former as "tutelary agents empowering the reading public" (38). In the words of one such reviewer, their task was to "enlighten the public mind, . . . That each may become the

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<sup>26</sup> For an extended study of American discourses of character in the latter half of the nineteenth century, see James Salazar's *Bodies of Reform: The Rhetoric of Character in Gilded Age America* (2010). For more on the closely allied discourse of self-culture, see Chapter 1 of Joan Shelley Rubin's *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (1992), which focuses on William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Charles Eliot Norton as the doctrine's major proponents. In *Creating the Culture of Reform in Antebellum America* (2006), T. Gregory Garvey usefully links Emerson's treatment of self-culture, which can be reductively interpreted as a purely individualistic pursuit, to the politics of reform. On a transition from nineteenth-century "character" culture to twentieth-century "personality" culture, see Warren Susman's "'Personality' and the Making of Twentieth-Century Culture" in *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (1984).



judge of what he reads” (qtd. in Machor 38). Hence, these literary elite were assistants in a labor of self-culture that ultimately aimed at the reader’s independence from their guidance.

Through the post-Civil War years this relationship evolved such that the literary elite, finding their role formalized and subsidized in the emerging modern university, increasingly did less to empower readers and more to appropriate readers’ power to themselves. As economic prosperity replaced a culture of production with one of consumption, a lust for Culture overwhelmed the antebellum drive for character through self-culture, and literature became less an edifying discipline and more a distinguishing ornament. This transition announces itself in the title of Noah Porter’s 1871 *Books and Reading: Or What Books Shall I Read and How Shall I Read Them*. The title’s second question (“how shall I read them?”) reaches back to a model of cultural mediation that trained readers in skills that they could apply independently. But the first question (“what books shall I read?”) adds to the old model a new pedantry and a wider, more totalizing scope. The title assumes a nearly helpless reader, disoriented by the challenge of “books and reading” but possessing the wisdom, at least, to consult an expert like Porter, the president of Yale University.<sup>27</sup> This book, its title suggests, can show the way even to such a benighted soul.

While Porter’s volume includes an appendix of suggested readings on various topics, its bulk is reserved for instruction on how to select books and how to read well.

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<sup>27</sup> This portrait of the reader is reproduced in William Dean Howells’s *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, when the *nouveau riche* Irene Lapham consults the well-bred but decidedly modern Tom Corey about which books her family should include in the library of their showy new home (98-101). In that scene she enacts both the commodification of culture (she could as easily be asking which upholstery or crown moldings to choose) and the layperson’s deferral to literary authority that I describe above.

Closer to the turn of the century, however, literary elites like Charles Eliot Norton, Charles Dudley Warner, and Charles W. Eliot abandoned the careful how-to work and simply provided the public with reading lists in the form of multiple book series—Norton’s Heart of Oak Series in the 1890s, Warner’s thirty-volume *Library of the World’s Best Literature* (1897), and Eliot’s Harvard Classics (1909). This cultural innovation was rather like a doctor saying, “Take two of these and call me in the morning.” No longer was the emphasis on training readers to improve their own selection and assimilation of literature, and to improve themselves in the process; now the selection had been carried out by established men of letters, and, as to proper methods of reading, the mere consumption of these books was considered enough to make the reader more cultured.<sup>28</sup>

These new principles are most clearly on display in Eliot’s Harvard Classics, which were also known as his “Five-Foot Shelf” because, while president of Harvard University, Eliot had periodically imagined “a five-foot shelf of books that would furnish a liberal education to anyone willing to devote fifteen minutes per day to reading them” (Rubin 28). Rubin points out that, while in his introduction to the series Eliot maintains the antebellum linkage between culture and self-making, “he also identified a liberal education with a list of great books, a move which, to some observers, smacked of the

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<sup>28</sup> Amy Blair calls this status-oriented form of literary consumption “reading up”; it occurs whenever “a reader approaches a text because experts have deemed it ‘the best’ thing to read and reads in the interest of self-interest”—that is, in hopes that reading the text “elevates the reader in a cultural and social hierarchy” (3, 2). Blair’s book, *Reading Up: Middle-Class Readers and the Culture of Success in the Early Twentieth Century United States* (2012), builds on the work of Joan Shelley Rubin in *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* and Janice Radway in *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (1997), but it focuses especially on the cultural work of Hamilton Wright Mabie’s literary column in *The Ladies’ Home Journal* from 1902 to 1912.

substitution of specific knowledge for a refined sensibility. Additionally, his willingness to quantify the time required for reading suggested cramming rather than training, undermining the idea that culture required sustained effort” (28). Eliot’s Harvard Classics, then, like Norton’s and Warner’s series, signal a transition whereby reading lost its identity as a self-directed practice for the building of character and came to resemble a prescribed diet or exercise regimen aimed at making good impressions.

This trend reaches its height with Harry Scherman’s invention of the Book-of-the-Month Club in 1926. Catering to would-be readers who could not independently keep pace with the modern print industry’s overwhelming output, the Book-of-the-Month Club deployed a subscription model to deliver to readers the “best” of those new books. The Club made no secret of who would select the “best” literature each month; the panel of literary authorities charged with this task—including Henry Seidel Canby, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, William Allen White, Christopher Morley, and Heywood Broun—was strategically publicized in order to validate the enterprise. These learned men and women could be trusted, so the marketing campaigns maintained, to identify the highest quality writing from the contemporary presses. The subscription service performed the remaining task of delivering the experts’ selections to the readers.<sup>29</sup>

Thomas Strychacz argues that cultural changes like the Book-of-the-Month Club must be understood in relation to the emergence of the modern university: “Any account of the historical processes governing the establishment of authoritative discourses in American consumer society must include a description of how universities at the end of

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<sup>29</sup> The definitive histories of the Book-of-the-Month Club remain Rubin’s *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (1992) and Radway’s *A Feeling for Books* (1997). My treatment of the club, and of many of the literary marketing phenomena that anticipated it, is indebted to both of these books.

the nineteenth century institutionalized specialized discourses and communities of competence [. . .]” (22). The professionalization of literary study in the university legitimated the growing divide between generalists and specialists in the broader literate culture, even as some of the new professionals explicitly disavowed that trend. The New Critics and Formalists, for example, whose methods came to dominate literary studies beginning in the 1930s and 1940s, eschewed the impulse to remake literary studies in the image of the thoroughly specialized sciences. Strychacz claims, however, that these critics’ legacy of esoteric scholarship runs counter to their denunciations: “As antagonistic as many formalist critics were to an urban, managerial society, their work ultimately forged a covert relationship with that society’s structures of authority” (35). If the New Critics were not would-be scientists, they were the quintessential literary specialists of mid-century; and, as such, they attained much of the symbolic value and deference that accrued to their colleagues in the sciences.

Gerald Graff’s argument in *Professing Literature* supports Strychacz’ conclusions. Offering an “institutional history” of literary pedagogy in America, Graff focuses on the multi-generational conflict between those in the academy who prioritized appreciation and investigation of literature, respectively. While these parties wore different names at different stages of Graff’s nearly two-century history, together they embodied an ongoing controversy over the modern impulse to professionalization as it impinged on literary studies in America. Genteel generalists of the nineteenth-century and New Humanists in the twentieth similarly opposed the narrowing of literary studies to arcane investigation modeled on the sciences and abstracted from daily life, whether that investigation took the form of philology in the nineteenth century or literary history in the twentieth.

Literature, they insisted, should be a light guiding readers into noble thought, feeling, and conduct; but reducing literature to an object of technical study by university professors deprived it of its power to elevate the national culture—or even the bemused students of those professors. However, Graff, like Strychacz, exposes the contradictions in this oppositional position:

It was because they believed that Arnoldian culture should exert national leadership that the generalists eagerly supported the professional ambitions of departments of English and urged the legitimation of American literature as a college subject. Yet this larger vision of cultural leadership was precisely what led the generalists to find fault with those departments for betraying this leadership responsibility to professional interests. (81-82)

In Graff's and Strychacz' accounts, then, literary academics secured a cultural authority for themselves that many of them quickly learned to despise because, in granting them a platform from which to model good reading for the culture, that authority threatened lay readers' capacities for self-determination, a priority that as humanists these professors held dear.<sup>30</sup> Thus, in the Long Progressive Era, many of the structures that aimed to democratize literary reading or weave it more deeply into public life in fact generated a class of professional readers who stood between the publishing house and the general reader, digesting, evaluating, and interpreting the products of the former for the latter.

Much like the affluent man or woman who wanted to serve the poor, over the course of

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<sup>30</sup> In *Fantasies of the New Class: Ideologies of Professionalism in Post-World War II American Fiction* (2011) Stephen Schryer extends this narrative of literary professionalization into the latter half of the twentieth century. He identifies the "new class" as those postwar literary intellectuals who critiqued the "social engineering" and "bureaucratic rationalism" of the welfare state that in its rigid institutionalism tended to produce formulaic and unimaginative social solutions (3, 13). The new class imagined a different role for the intelligentsia. This generation of literati thought their cultural leadership should be exercised not through technocratic reforms but through a kind of cultural education that developed critical intelligence in the middle class and "an aesthetic capacity to live with paradox, to keep contraries in play without resolving them" (4). The new class's role was to be exemplary; they fantasized that practicing subtle thought and feeling in their own work provided the masses a compelling cultural model by which they, too, could resist the bland flatness of mid-century bureaucratic culture.

the Long Progressive Era the general reader grew less capable of fulfilling her desire independently of highly professionalized mediating structures.

It is worth noting one more parallel between the evolution of poverty relief and literary reading in this period. In *Print in Motion: The Expansion of Publishing and Reading in the United States, 1880-1940* (2009), Carl Kaestle and Janice Radway describe print culture of that period in terms of a “tension between centralization, concentration, and standardization on the one hand, and specialization, small-scale production, and the diversification of published reading material on the other” (21). In the emergence of reading guides for the upwardly mobile and institutionally sanctioned hermeneutics for university students, we have seen something of the consolidating forces to which Kaestle and Radway refer. However, another feature of print culture in this period is the “creation of literatures that illuminated the abilities of people previously excluded from the domains of legitimate book culture” (4). Kaestle and Radway explain that the “centralizing tendencies” that so affected affluent reading culture “were checked somewhat by the contrapuntal effects of the emergence of print forms targeting [. . .] a range of [demographic groups] who had reason to question dominant cultural formations and the views and values that underwrote them”—among them “non-English speakers, African Americans, working-class readers, women,” and “socialists” (21). Thus, parallel to the field of poverty relief, reading culture in the Long Progressive Era witnessed the shrinking of affluent readers’ traditional roles and the expansion of readerly roles among previously disenfranchised groups, including the poor.

## Reading Poverty Fiction

How, then, do the modern penchants for doubt and reform, and their expression in professionalized reform and literary cultures, pertain to reading poverty fiction in the Long Progressive Era? The trend toward specialization transformed the fields of poverty relief and reading. Just as the assembly-line worker unseated the craftsman, so the social worker encroached on the traditional domain of the charitable neighbor and the literary critic on that of the general reader. Under the new dispensation, the charitable neighbor may, through “scientific” training, become a social worker, but until that time he remained unqualified to offer assistance to the poor. Likewise, the general reader may pursue a course of study to become a literary critic; but, if she did not, she should consult professionals about her choice of books and about appropriate responses to them.

The figure of the fiction reader changed dramatically as a new class of literary professionals turned literary appreciation and interpretation into specialized tasks and as literature repeatedly staged dramas of the individual will straining against natural or cultural constraints. As a persona on which to project anxieties about increasing professionalization and apparently diminishing agency, the middle-to-upper-class reader of the period from 1860 to 1945 tells the story of social reform in America’s Long Progressive Era. That reader mirrors the complex, shifting position of the affluent American throughout that period vis-à-vis the nation’s social problems and the new professions constructed to address them. Writing fiction about poverty amid the cultural trends I have outlined, Rebecca Harding Davis, William Dean Howells, Edith Wharton, and John Steinbeck constructed their readers as exemplary figures whose agency as participants in the text and as concerned citizens implicitly comments on contemporary

debates about the methods of social reform, the function of literary criticism, and the nature of human freedom and responsibility.

The historical narratives of poverty relief and literary reading that I have traced continually intersected in the texts I study, leaving indelible traces throughout. For example, the fictions of Rebecca Harding Davis and William Dean Howells reflect their times, casting poor characters as rather passive recipients of charity from the affluent. In *Life in the Iron-Mills*, the poor protagonist Hugh looks desperately to Doctor May and a preacher for insight about how he can improve himself, while Hugh's cousin Deb becomes a member of a Quaker community where "long years of sunshine, and fresh air, and slow, patient Christ-love, [are] needed to make healthy and hopeful [her] impure body and soul" (73).<sup>31</sup> In Howells's fiction the poor appear primarily as a topic of bourgeois conversation, but, when they do show up in physical form, it seems to be in flashes of misery, as in the case of a beggar in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* who receives a bit of change from Basil March with tearful gratitude and embarrassing enthusiasm. However, the poor are different in Edith Wharton's and John Steinbeck's work—active and wise. In Wharton's *Book of the Homeless*, the refugees guide their affluent caregivers; Wharton admits that the clients of her hostels "help us to help them" (xxi). Similarly, Steinbeck's *Tortilla Flat* praises the wisdom of a poor *paisano* community's "strong but different philosophical-moral system" (*Life in Letters* 97) and in *Cannery Row* Doc declares the unemployed denizens of the Palace Flophouse the "true philosophers" (129).

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<sup>31</sup> It should be noted, however, that *Life in the Iron-Mills* is counter-cultural even on this point: as a member of the Quaker community, Deb becomes "more loving"—and given the text's model of love, one should also assume more activist—than her new neighbors who first extended charity to her (73).



A parallel transformation in textuality occurs over the span of the fiction in this study. A mere tissue in Davis's hands, the fictional text becomes a living organism in Steinbeck's. In *Life in the Iron-Mills* the narrator's story constitutes only the "outside outlines of a night," which point beyond themselves to a "muddy depth of soul-history [that] lies beneath" (47). Her story posits an extra-textual "depth" to be reached by penetrating the text, by going *through* it somehow. However, the narrator of *Cannery Row* compares the stories in this book to delicate marine animals that a collector procures only when they "ooze and crawl of their own will onto a knife blade"; likewise, he will compose his narrative by "open[ing] the page and [letting] the stories crawl in by themselves" (2, 3). Like the poor, fictional texts grow more solid and animated from Davis to Steinbeck.

Bourgeois selfhood follows a different trajectory, though, from integration and sovereignty to disintegration and permeability. In *Life in the Iron-Mills* human beings bear the image of God. The text references Christ as the archetypal human being, and his participation in the triune Godhead models personhood that is simultaneously discrete and relational. The three Persons of the Trinity do not merge with one another but they are one. The Trinity models unity in diversity—a perfectly integrated identity. However, Steinbeck literally and figuratively dismembers the human being, as in the image of "little unborn humans [. . .] sliced thin and mounted on slides" in Doc's Cannery Row laboratory. Listed in an inventory of Doc's aquatic specimens, these "humans" are no more integral than dissected anemones, buttlestars, or sharks. Indeed, the inventory mingles them with other creatures, reinforcing a view of personhood that Steinbeck

advances both implicitly and explicitly: the human being is so fundamentally related to her environment as to be indistinguishable from it.

Despite the consistency of these three trends throughout the fiction I study, these texts commend two different types of readerly response: intervention and observation. The former is social reform; the latter is, at its best, self-reform and, at its worst, voyeurism. While Davis and Wharton, the authors who maintain a humanist confidence in the power of the reader, urge their readers to social activism, Howells's and Steinbeck's interrogation of the human suggests to the reader only a posture of reflective watching. Between Davis and Steinbeck, the difference in the reader's role is dramatic. *Life* boldly calls the reader to intervene in the lives of poor people, while Steinbeck's work suggests they step back from the spectacle of poverty and reconsider not only the negative unintended consequences of intervention but also the notion of an independent human subject on which agency—the very ability to intervene or withdraw—is often predicated. However, there is no a straightforward and uninterrupted decline in the reader's agency across the period that these authors bookend. The figure of poverty fiction's reader does not so much progress from Davis to Steinbeck as she wanders among the options they represent, zigzagging and doubling back on her path, as indeed the chronological structure of this dissertation insists: Davis the intervener, Howells the observer, Wharton the intervener, Steinbeck the observer.

The ambivalence of poverty fiction in the Long Progressive Era, reflected by this nonlinear movement, constitutes much of its relevance in a contemporary setting. Scholars argue that post-World War II fiction expresses paranoia about the incursions of the State on private life, but fiction of the Long Progressive Era, while engaged in a

struggle with modern institutions over individual agency, does not imagine a monolithic, sinister State in the mode of post-war writers. The earlier writers manifest a deep ambivalence about their place in relation to the emerging professions and the work of poverty relief, honoring the work of reform but worrying over the highly systematic forms it was taking. This was an era of possibility. In the post-war era the State grew so ominous in writers' imaginations that alternative visions and nuanced responses were hard to come by. In the Long Progressive Era, writers' ambivalence permitted the suggestion of many ways forward. The future was unclear and undetermined. I argue that contemporary citizen-readers can learn from and undergo transformation through this period's poverty fiction, whose authors were willing to make choices from within a set of tensions that they did not seek to simplify or simplistically resolve.

Chapter 2 shows how Rebecca Harding Davis paired an awareness of environmental influences on human behavior with a persistent belief in individual agency. She aimed to resuscitate human volition from what she deemed the stifling effects of professionalized philanthropy and sensational literature. The former recast a universal duty to the poor as the special calling of trained professionals. Meanwhile, contemporary literature, with its sensational and sentimental proclivities, enervated the will; calculated to produce thrilling affects, such literature invited greedy consumption by the reader and asked little in return. The holograph version of *Life in the Iron-Mills* (1861), unknown to critics until its recent recovery, presents the Incarnation of Christ as an exemplary act of will in the face of—indeed, constituted by—limitations on one's power. The embodiment of God models the self-constraining behavior that Davis considers, paradoxically, empowering; and it models a sort of reading that culminates not

in affect or even in thought but in the literal practice of charity, in embodied presence among the poor.

William Dean Howells was no less troubled by poverty than Davis was, but Chapter 3 shows how his interrogation of human agency corresponds to a dramatically different notion of reading than hers. In his fiction from the mid-1880s onward, Howells shares Davis's sensitivity to environmental constraints on the will, but he adds to this a keen analysis of the will's own weakness, particularly under the influence of an ironic perspective that recognizes the cultural contingency of every moral claim. Moreover, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890) imagines the self as a microcosm of New York City's anarchic social landscape, composed of many competing voices among which none dominates. When no moral claim and none of the self's constitutive voices can establish authority over others, agency falters and, in one character's words, "It's hard to get outside" the self (*A Hazard of New Fortunes* 471). Especially in his late fiction Howells explores Spiritualism, seemingly in hopes of transcending the self and grasping some unforeseen agency; but *The Undiscovered Country* (1880) and *The World of Chance* (1893), which pair utopian economics with Spiritualism, only reframe the earlier impediments to choice by presenting characters whose internal voices are literal and no easier to arbitrate between. Facing this impasse, Howells invites readers only to add their voices to the conversation. If solidarity in paralysis is meager compensation, he bequeaths to readers his own self-castigating mantra: "Words, words, words! How to make them deeds, things?"

Edith Wharton imagines a disintegrated self, and environmental constraints on that self, much like Howells does, and her writing on poverty and reform thematizes the

difficulty of choosing between alternatives. However, Chapter 4 argues that the personal and social limitations that debilitate Howells's characters become, in Wharton, the necessary conditions of agency. If paralyzed idealism takes center stage in his fiction, active compromise drives hers. More specifically, Wharton's essays, her novels *The Valley of Decision* (1902) and *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), and her multigeneric collection *The Book of the Homeless* (1916) reveal the foundation of her aesthetics and ethics to be sympathy, a particular kind of compromise made when one surrenders his autonomy and enters a transformative liminal space between self and other or, in the case of fiction reading, between reader and text. Sympathy involves a willful dissolution of the self's boundaries and a merging with a personal or textual other. This model of social and aesthetic practice corresponds, on one hand, to Wharton's "innate distaste for anything like 'social service'" and, on the other hand, to her opposition to modern commercial discourses that represented culture as a commodity. Her aversion to "social service" fixates on reductionism and hubris in philanthropy, which disregards the complexity and unyielding individuality of social problems and people. In the aesthetic realm, she claims that commercialism flattens art, which is not merely to be consumed. Having an internal structure, art limits the range of reasonable interactions with it; and having a sort of personality, it invites audiences to a dialogue. However, across the texts this chapter studies, Wharton enacts the compromise that she prescribes, incrementally surrendering her doctrinaire opposition to both consumptive reading and "social service." The latest of these works, *The Book of the Homeless*, is an unabashedly commercial endeavor intended to raise funds for her World War I charities, and consuming this text enacts that sympathy to which Wharton believes fiction calls its readers.

Chapter 5 studies the mid-career writing of John Steinbeck, whose critique of poverty relief radicalizes Howells's but borrows the premises of Wharton's commendation of sympathy. Wharton contests the depiction of poor people as passive, ephemeral objects and declares them fitting subjects for mutual relationships with affluent people. In *Tortilla Flat* (1935) and *Cannery Row* (1945), Steinbeck also recognizes the subjectivity of the poor but draws an opposite conclusion: he pronounces the middle and upper classes unfit for any but an observational relationship with the poor because, he maintains, attempts at reform inevitably do violence to those being reformed. Howells's similar retreat from social reform stems largely from his relocation of social conflict to the individual psyche—a movement of the outside to the inside. In *The Sea of Cortez* (1941) and *Cannery Row*, Steinbeck extends this development by disavowing any distinction between outside and inside. Influenced by marine biologist Ed Ricketts, Steinbeck's ecological vision deconstructs biological (and moral) taxonomy and, with it, the discrete category of human being (and the distinction between good and evil). This scientifically inflected perspective bespeaks Steinbeck's ambivalent relationship to a culture of professionalism that arrogated authority to technically trained experts in virtually every field of labor, including social reform and literary reading. While Steinbeck explicitly eschews this technocratic impulse, his narrators assume an expert's role in their quasi-scientific repudiations of agency. Paradoxically denying both the justice and the possibility of social reform, *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row* follow Howells's novels in inviting readers not to a dialogue with the text but to a participation in the author's perspective.

Curiously, Steinbeck echoes Rebecca Harding Davis, the author to whose writing this study now turns, in declaring the ministry of Jesus Christ a model for reading. However, as with most every question of textuality, the poor, selfhood, and agency, about Christ the two authors disagree. I will examine Steinbeck's perspective in Chapter 5, but *Reforming Readers* begins with Davis's concept of incarnational reading.

**“Come Right Down With Me”: Incarnational Reading  
in Rebecca Harding Davis**

“It is the first duty laid down for us by the Elder Brother of us all. We must visit, feed, help the sick, the poor, the prisoner, in person, *not* by agents, giving to the work whatever intelligence, zeal and tenderness is in us.”

Davis, “At Our Gates” (1889)

“[I]t is necessary we should consider how to treat [the poor], gravely and calmly, uninfluenced by either mawkish sentimentality or that cold-blooded logic which is equally narrow and unjust.”

Davis, “Indiscriminate Charity” (1877)

In the first quotation above, Rebecca Harding Davis identifies care for the disenfranchised as the preeminent moral duty of Christians. By discussing the proper exercise of that duty in polemical terms, emphasizing how it ought *not* to be performed, both quotations relate Davis’s convictions about charity to her historical moment, when poverty relief especially was conditioned by two prevailing discourses—the one marked by “mawkish sentimentality” and the other by “cold-blooded logic.” Both of those approaches involve, as I will explain, a measure of disengagement from the poor; Davis, however, prescribes a movement toward those in need, preaching charity “in person” and calling for “direct individual intercourse between the classes” (“Indiscriminate Charity”). While Davis wrote about these issues extensively in essay form, *Life in the Iron-Mills* (1861), her first major work of fiction, also mediates between the discursive poles that she rejects; in this text she pioneers an aesthetic praxis culminating in the Christian charity that her essays advocate.



For Davis, “consider[ing] how to treat [the poor]” is both an ethical and an aesthetic problem. When she renounces “cold-blooded logic” and calls for charity “in person, *not* by agents,” she alludes to the mid-century rise of “scientific philanthropy,” a movement that subjected poverty to the epistemological tools of science and spawned an array of philanthropic agencies to administer aid according to the results of empirical research. But the “mawkish sentimentality” she decries on the other side is nowhere more recognizable than in nineteenth-century sentimental fiction, where morally simplistic characters and plots promote, above all, strong affective responses from readers—often at the expense of rational analysis and behavioral change.<sup>1</sup> In confronting these ethical and aesthetic challenges, Davis draws on a common source of inspiration, namely, the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, according to which the Second Person of the Trinity assumed a human form in Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of ethics, Davis’s critique of scientific philanthropy and her insistence on direct, personal, embodied care for the poor mirrors the work of Christ, who renounced divine prerogatives and lived among the poor to whom he ministered. Moreover, the Incarnation models agency as self-limiting choice, a definition that not only defends

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Tompkins’ *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860* and Shirley Samuels’ edited volume, *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America*, represent the first major works in what is now a vast body of scholarship that attends to the long-overlooked tradition of sentimentality in American literature. These two books offer an excellent introduction to American sentimental literature and to the criticism that continues to proliferate around it.

<sup>2</sup> The Gospel of John begins with a dense theological prologue that, echoing the opening lines of Genesis, identifies Jesus as “the Word” and as God: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). Later in the prologue, the writer speaks of the Incarnation, saying, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14a). As I will demonstrate, this mystery of the Word becoming flesh profoundly influences Davis’s vision of literature and its function.

human choice against biological and environmental determinism but even posits such constraint as an essential condition of meaningful action. Christ effects salvation for the world *by*, not *despite*, subjecting himself to the limitations of embodied existence.

Likewise, the charity that Davis preaches is not rendered impossible or ineffective by modernity's purported impositions on selfhood; rather, such charity is constituted by acts of solidarity with those most severely limited in the modern world, especially the poor.

This chapter also aims to show how the Incarnation structures Davis's aesthetic. *Life in the Iron-Mills* commends a mode of engaging the text that I call incarnational reading—a real-world performance of a text's ethical imperatives. In the case of *Life in the Iron-Mills*, incarnational reading consists in the reader's direct, personal service to the poor. Such reading runs counter to the forms of disengagement that Davis claims sentimental fiction fosters, for it culminates not in an emotional experience but in embodied action. At the same time, Davis recognizes the likelihood that readers will read her text sentimentally. Writing as she does, in a manner that stakes the text's success on one (unconventional) kind of reading, constitutes a sacrifice of authorial control that parallels Christ's subjection to bodily existence. Both acts are expressions of agency, choices that compromise one's sovereignty in the hope of a greater good. Through acts of incarnational writing and reading, the word indeed becomes flesh, rendering the practice of fiction a charitable work enacted jointly by author and reader.<sup>3</sup> Better to describe this

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<sup>3</sup> Locating the Incarnation at the center of this text radicalizes a strain of Davis criticism that has emphasized the body in *Life*, particularly the ways in which characters' bodies signify about their class status and social power. In "Representing and Self-Mutilating the Laboring Male Body," Caroline S. Miles reads *Life* in conversation with a "nineteenth-century American rhetoric that equated white manhood with transcending and replacing the material body" and that "represent[ed] embodiment in terms of victimization, enslavement, and blackness" (89, 94). In this rhetorical context, the mill worker Hugh Wolfe's thick corporeality excludes him from the social privilege enjoyed by the refined and nearly "impalpable" Mitchell, an affluent white visitor

transformation of fiction into action, I situate Davis's incarnational ethics and aesthetics in historical debates over poverty relief and fiction-reading practices. Then, in a close reading of *Life in the Iron-Mills*, I describe how that text, merging Davis's ethics and aesthetics, stages a radical intervention both in contemporary discourses of poverty and, when the text is read incarnationally, in the lives of the poor as well.

### **"Cold-blooded Logic"**

In fiction and nonfiction Davis wrote frequently of the individual's ethical responsibility to the poor. In "Indiscriminate Charity" she argues that, to "ordinary human beings," caring for the needy who come in one's path "would appear [. . .] only the dictates of common sense, as well as the direct teaching of Him who bade us individually feed the hungry and clothe the naked"; and the quotation from "At Our Gates" that opens this essay affirms the primacy of that responsibility among all the "dut[ies] laid down for us" by Christ.<sup>4</sup> However, the philanthropic institutions of her day

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to the mills (Davis, *Life* 51). In "Benevolent Maternalism and Physically Disabled Figures" Rosemarie Garland Thomson constructs a parallel argument about a literary tradition that, by portraying female charity as the work of able-bodied benefactresses on behalf of physically disabled women, granted the former an influential social role to perform outside of the domestic realm, while systematically excluding the latter from any such privilege. In Thomson's reading, the Quaker woman and Deb inhabit these roles of empowered benefactress and anathematized beneficiary. For other studies that take up Davis's fascination with the body, see Mark Seltzer's "The Still Life" and Kristen Boudreau's "'The Woman's Flesh of Me.'" A quotation from Miles's article indicates both my indebtedness to this body of criticism as well as my discontinuity with it: she writes, "It is the laborer's body that captures Davis's artistic imagination, that inspires her to write the story of Hugh Wolfe, that reminds us of the signifying power of bodies [. . .]" (90). I argue, however, that one particular, historical, and extraordinary body—the body of God in Jesus—inspires Davis to write *Life* and, moreover, that in this text the Incarnation inverts the value systems described by these critics and, thus, favors embodiment at every turn, not only in the characters but also in the reader.

<sup>4</sup> Davis's fiction and essays seem to constitute scholars' primary source of information about her religious beliefs; biographers tell us little of this on the basis of her private writings or others' testimony. As a teenager Davis attended Washington Female Seminary, where she "studied geometry, literature, music, and drawing, and took courses in Evidences of Christianity, Mental Philosophy, and Butler's Analogy"—and graduated as valedictorian in 1848 (Harris 23). In her

suffer some of this wide-ranging social analyst's most withering critiques. Lampooning the methods of late-nineteenth-century poverty relief, Davis writes, "How different it was once! The Good Samaritan put his hand into his own pocket and gave to the wounded man; now he would hand him over to a band of lady visitors, and let loose a society for repressing mendicancy upon him, before he should have a drop of oil or wine" to soothe his pains ("A Grumble" 103). What can account for her simultaneously claiming charity as the preeminent Christian duty and satirizing her generation's busiest agents of charity? The answer lies in a nineteenth-century shift in the theory and practice of poverty relief.

As Chapter 1 described, the nineteenth century saw Americans move from a primarily theological understanding of poverty to an ostensibly scientific one, and the methods of poverty relief changed along with this epistemological shift. When Americans believed that the poor performed a divinely ordained role in society, for which they were not to blame, the middle and upper classes administered aid "straightforwardly, without long investigations or elaborate procedures, without severe discomfort or dislocation" (Rothman 31). With their poverty implying no reason for ostracism, the poor inhabited a fairly central place in their communities; they were known to and aided by their neighbors. However, the advent of a scientific approach to poverty required a new class of specialists to study and manage poverty, and it presented new explanations for this

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literary biography entitled *Rebecca Harding Davis and American Realism*, Sharon M. Harris writes, "Although she was a Christian raised in the Episcopalian faith, Davis rejected organized worship at an early age and periodically struggled with her faith, especially during the Civil War years. When she came to terms with her own beliefs, she aligned herself with a loving and merciful God [. . .]" (49). This faith in a benevolent God seems to have animated an activist ethic of love to others. A bit of advice to her son Richard, included in Harris biography, captures the pragmatic tenor of her religion: "When her eldest son was away at school and felt dissatisfied with his advisor's suggestion that prayer was a sufficient antidote to melancholy, Davis counseled, 'When you feel as if prayer was a burden, stop praying and go out and try to put your Christianity into real action'" (55).

condition, from adverse environmental factors to personal vices. Philanthropic agencies emerged to investigate poverty at the local level and to administer (or withhold) aid to individual applicants according to their particular circumstances. With the rise of these agencies, poverty relief grew more systematic, exacting, and impersonal. No longer deemed capable of understanding or relieving poverty, communities abdicated care of the poor to specialized institutions.

It is this later response to poverty that Davis holds in such low regard, and her critique emphasizes two of its weaknesses. First she deconstructs the assumption, which she attributes to the new philanthropic institutions, that “every man who asks for food is a scoundrel and fraud until he proves himself otherwise” (“At Our Gates”). While conceding the point that “much trickery and imposture” exists among the poor, she turns this argument against those who make it an excuse to neglect the poor: “are the rich all honest in purpose and clean in hands when they set about earning a living?” (“Indiscriminate”) Thus she subjects cynics to the same moral scrutiny to which the new philanthropic agencies subjected their applicants. In accordance with an early American theological tradition, Davis assumes that the poor stand on the same moral plane as the wealthy, if not on a higher one. She maintains the universal responsibility to aid the poor, “be [the poor man] honest or a thief,” and she further contends, “The more of a fraud or a criminal he is the more he needs [a helping hand]” (“At Our Gates”).<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps more than scientific philanthropy’s dismissal of the “undeserving poor,” that movement’s tendency to cordon off the poor from mainstream society disturbs

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<sup>5</sup> Here Davis’s theological debt bypasses Winthrop and goes directly to Jesus, who, when criticized by the morally circumspect Pharisees for associating with “tax collectors and sinners,” answered, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance” (*New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Luke 5:31-32).

Davis, who believes that alleviating poverty depends on “direct individual intercourse between the classes” (“Indiscriminate”). The emergence of agencies that specialize in poverty relief contributes, Davis contends, to a widespread failure of community and mutual understanding:

[T]o those who have most carefully considered the condition of the dangerous classes, statistics of prison reform, bureaus of charity and the systems for their relief, the truth has been more apparent with each year that the failure in these systems arises from this very disposition of individual men and woman [*sic*] to throw the onus of responsibility wholly on to organized charitable bodies, the refusal, in short, of educated people to recognize in the needy, men and women like themselves.  
 (“Indiscriminate”)

Ultimately, Davis laments the social and physical distance that “bureaus of charity” put between rich and poor because they exclude the possibility of embodied, holistic care for the needy, who require not only the money or food that agencies can offer but also “the human compassion, the trust, the strong word and loving touch which shall heal soul as well as body and give them another chance for this world and for Heaven”

(“Indiscriminate”). Here, in her emphasis on proximity and bodily contact, Davis most clearly displays the importance of the Incarnation for her social ethic. Her commentary on poverty relief invariably maintains the necessity of moving toward the needy and sharing their experience because she believes God did precisely that in the person of Jesus.

### **“Mawkish Sentimentality”**

What then of Davis’s fiction? Given her conviction of the need for direct, individual contact with the poor, can poverty fiction be anything more than another obscuring layer, like the philanthropic agencies, between middle-class readers and the poor? Indeed, while Davis recognizes a “danger” in philanthropic work “that we are

moved as much by excitement and emulation and the love of picturesque and adventure [. . .] as by a pure and nobler motive,” she perceives the same hazard, perhaps amplified, in the reading of sentimental fiction—that is, fiction whose success depends on its ability to stimulate powerful affects in the reader (“Two Methods”).<sup>6</sup> Davis was hardly alone in this concern; her opinions on the issue, manifest in her fiction, engage a contemporary controversy over the social function of fiction, which was every bit as vociferous as the one surrounding methods of poverty relief.

In *Carnival on the Page* Isabelle Lehuu describes an antebellum “publishing revolution” during which the very definition of literacy came under scrutiny. When “a multitude of news sheets, magazines, and inexpensive paperbacks,” generally of a sentimental bent, first infiltrated the market, they reshaped a print culture previously dominated by “rare, expensive, and revered books” (17). Amid this diversification of reading materials and readers, reading itself became “not just a measurable ability but rather a contested terrain where social differences were exposed and opposite values confronted” (Lehuu 9). Between advocates of the old and new print cultures, the conflict of values surrounded the task of defining reading’s proper function.

In *The Letters of the Republic* Michael Warner attests that a century before *Life in the Iron-Mills* was published, upon the emergence of the American novel, “Americans

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<sup>6</sup> When I refer to sentimental literature, I mean also to indicate literature more frequently described as sensational. While “sentimental” and “sensational” often refer to discrete bodies of literature with different formal characteristics and cultural functions, the practices of sentimentalism and sensationalism should be understood as proximate points on a continuum. Even circumscribed by the narrowest definitions, these genres share not only the aim of affecting readers emotionally but also the liability of distancing readers from the real-life people that they represent fictionally—the former by eliding action while prioritizing “right feeling” and the latter by repelling readers through disgust. In *Life in the Iron-Mills*, the development in Doctor May’s attitude toward Hugh Wolfe, which I describe below, demonstrates the simplicity of alternating between these forms of literature—and their attendant ethical evasions.

endlessly avowed a fear that fiction would detach readers' sentiments from the social world of the polity, substituting a private drama of fancy. They wrote of such fears in virtually every magazine and newspaper in the country" (175). Christopher Castiglia argues, without particular reference to literary reading, that the antebellum period brought precisely this detachment of private and public, of psychological interior and political exterior, as Americans came to "misrecognize the location of the social, finding it, not in association with others, but in the turbulent and conflicted interiors of [their] own bodies" (2). At the time of *Life*'s publication, then, cultural critics attuned to this abandonment of the public sphere worried all the more about the publishing revolution that Lehuu describes. Janice Radway's account of the new cheap books' appeal helps explain antebellum fears about the antisocial drift of literate culture:

In many cases [these readers] aimed simply to experience pleasure in its manifold forms, accompanied by diverse affective and somatic effects. Whether cheap fiction books were to produce the skin-crawling sensation of fear, the upwelling tears of pathos, the erotic excitements of romance, or the bated breath of suspense, they were picked up precisely because they *were* successful at moving the body and provoking the emotions. (142)

Most arbiters of culture perceived a threat in this mode of reading. If Americans in the early republic feared that the novel would privatize a reading culture that had previously fostered engagement in the public sphere, then the more ephemeral publications of the antebellum period threatened to atomize literate culture still further and to draw individual readers more deeply into "private drama[s] of fancy." Cultural critics worried over these changes not only because privatization made it more difficult to regulate the moral content of the nation's reading but also because, on a structural level, it defined a



space where individual readers could disengage themselves from the claims of social life, a virtually unthinkable prospect in pre-nineteenth-century America.

Hence, Lehuu explains that in the antebellum period, books offering instruction on appropriate reading indicate that, “if practiced with restraint and with a purpose, reading was regarded as a useful recreation, but excessive reading for mere pleasure was morally wrong” (128). *Useful* is the crucial term: reading was expected to be socially generative, encouraging virtuous public activity rather than private self-indulgence. However, Lehuu contends that newspapers’ sensationalist human-interest stories “offered exposure as a substitute for human contact” (51), and Carolyn Betensky similarly claims that “social-problem novels” of this period encouraged “the idea that it *matters* how I feel about poverty, whether or not I do anything more than care about it” (1). This “valuation of bourgeois feeling as an end in itself,” independent of action, signals a change in American reading practices that many traditionalists, Davis among them, disapproved of and sought to reverse (51).

Unlike later realists such as William Dean Howells, Hamlin Garland, and Henry James, Davis did not employ nonfiction to articulate her aesthetic principles; rather, she used fiction to theorize about fiction. For example, in her first full-length novel, *Margret Howth* (1861), the narrator explicitly positions the text in opposition to sentimental literature with its escapist tendencies. Calling this text “very crude and homely”—“a dull, plain bit of prose”—the narrator anticipates the reader’s disappointment over the text’s drabness (6). “I know the glimpses of life it pleases you best to find,” she writes, and proceeds to delineate the characteristic marks of literature in the sentimental tradition: “idylls delicately tinted, passion-veined hearts, cut bare for curious eyes; prophetic

utterances, concrete and clear [. . .]. You want something, in fact, to lift you out of this commonplace, to kindle and chafe and glow in you” (7). But the narrator denies the reader these pleasures, confessing, “I want you to dig *into* this commonplace” (7). These passages obstruct the path of escape—of “fancy”—that had lain open to the reader.

Counter to authors in the sentimental vein, Davis consistently practices an aesthetic of the quotidian—what Sharon M. Harris calls her “theory of the commonplace”—in order to promote her readers’ engagement with the real world *through* immersion in her fiction (3).<sup>7</sup> Thus, Michele L. Mock calls Davis a “textual activist” because she understands fiction as a “participative and dialogic expression of social activism” (126). In *Life in the Iron-Mills* the narrator invites readers deep into the text in order to return them finally to the world of daily, public life. My analysis of that text demonstrates the means by which it impels the reader, in accord with Davis’s ethics and aesthetics, to enter the lives of the poor in Christian charity.

Gregory S. Jackson situates *Life in the Iron-Mills* in a literary tradition that he calls “homiletic realism,” a mode of fiction that adapted the form of early American Christian sermons in order to “facilitate private devotion, strengthen moral autonomy, and foster social engagement through particular acts of reading” (158). The homiletic novel accessed audiences’ powers of volition through their imaginations, “employ[ing]

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<sup>7</sup> Davis’s short story “Marcia” (1876), a miniature *künstlerroman*, further elaborates Davis’s response to sentimental fiction. The story tells of the eponymous writer-protagonist’s sojourn in Philadelphia, a flight from her Mississippi home in pursuit of a literary career. The narrator, an author himself, praises Marcia’s writings for their rejection of “sunsets, duchesses, [and] violets” in exchange for the “dirt and dreary monotony” of rural Mississippi and its “swamp, the slimy living things in the stagnant ponds, the semi-tropical forest, the house and negro quarters” (310, 312). The narrator says that in Marcia’s fiction “[t]here was none of the usual talk of countesses, heather, larks, or emotions of which she knew nothing,” unlike the sentimental fiction in which one can find “not a solid grain of common-sense, not a hint of reality or even possibility” (312).

allegorical frames to create social environments immediately present to readers [. . .] in which individuals imagined possibilities for personal transformation” (31). Jackson argues that this type of fiction directly responded to “two challenges plaguing most late-nineteenth-century congregations: Christian resignation in the face of naked social need and parishioners’ enervating doubts about religion’s relevance in a fast-paced age of industry, mechanization, and scientific advancement” (159). Like the sermonic tradition it adapted, homiletic realism proceeded on the conviction that experience was the best tutor of the will. However, since direct experience of social need was precisely the thing lacking in these congregations, the homiletic novel constructed a virtual reality that authors hoped would stimulate the will and elicit social intervention. A pioneer of this literary practice, *Life in the Iron-Mills* invites readers deep into the text in order to return them finally to the real world. My analysis of that text demonstrates the means by which it impels the reader, in accord with Davis’s ethics and aesthetics, to enter the lives of the poor in Christian charity.

### **Reading *Life***

Davis’s story features two members of the working class in a factory town, Hugh Wolfe and his cousin Deb. With an untutored talent for sculpture and an inarticulate sensitivity to beauty, Hugh longs for a life beyond the iron mills where he works, for a realm of aesthetic and spiritual experience for which his social position offers little vocabulary. When some affluent men visit the iron mills and pause to discuss a sculpture that Hugh has carved in his free time, Deb steals money from one of the men and offers it to Hugh, who ultimately keeps the money after wavering between a belief that theft is always wrong and, on the other hand, a sense that broad economic inequities justify his

keeping it. When authorities apprehend him and sentence him and Deb to prison terms, Hugh despairs of the life he longed for and commits suicide, using a bit of tin like that he used to employ for sculpting. As officials and curious observers file in and out of his bloody jail cell, an unknown Quaker woman sits quietly with Deb in her grief. This woman, after Deb's release from prison, brings her to live with the Quaker community, where Deb experiences healing and an unprecedented thriving in body and spirit.

Christ's Incarnation inspires both the content and structure of *Life in the Iron-Mills*. But this foundational element has been obscured by an episode in the text's editorial history that remains largely unknown and unremarked. In her essay "The Censored and Uncensored Literary Lives of *Life in the Iron-Mills*," Janice Milner Lasseter studies the holograph version of the text, from which the *Atlantic Monthly* inexplicably deleted a paragraph between Davis's submission and their publication of *Life*. Although the edited version remains the standard for contemporary editions of *Life*, the holograph version preserves the theological center of the text. In the edited version, near the end of the day in which Hugh struggles to decide whether or not to keep the stolen money, he visits a church where the minister is preaching charity but in erudite language suited to the cultured congregation—and, therefore, incomprehensible to Hugh. On the heels of this failed encounter, though, the holograph version hints that this "trial-day of [Hugh's] life" (Davis, *Life* 65) would have ended differently "[i]f [Christ] had stood in the church that night" (qtd. in Lasseter 176).<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In the deleted paragraph, the narrator wonders, "Could Wolfe have seen [Jesus] as He was, that night, what then? [ . . . ] If He had stood in the church that night, would not the wretch in the torn shirt there in the pew have 'known the man'? His brother first. And then, unveiled his God" (qtd. in Lasseter 176).

The critical difference between the preacher and Jesus lies in the character of their respective ministries—the preacher’s eloquently abstract, Jesus’s coarsely embodied. The narrator calls the preacher there a “Christian reformer” with a “heart [. . .] summer-warm with charity,” but the church building is constructed “to meet the requirements and sympathies of a far other class than Hugh’s” (64). And while the mellifluous words of the sermon “sounded in [Hugh’s] ears a very pleasant song,” they ultimately “passed far over the furnace-tender’s grasp, toned to suit another class of culture” (64). The failure of this sermon for Hugh lies in the clergyman’s well-intentioned, liberal assumption that he can “cure this world-cancer with a steady eye that had never glared with hunger, and a hand that neither poverty nor strychnine-whiskey had taught to shake” (64). The preacher wants to effect salvation from a position of uninhibited power; no hunger or want or addiction should constrain his freedom to act. By contrast, the text’s holograph version, calling Jesus a reformer “who did not fail,” emphasizes the incarnational—that is, self-limiting—character of his ministry: “A social Pariah, a man of the lowest caste, thrown up from among them, dying with their pain, starving with their hunger, tempted as they are to drink, to steal, to curse God and die. Theirs by blood, by birth. The son, they said, of Joseph the carpenter, his mother and sisters there among them” (qtd. in Lasseter 176). Unlike Davis’s preacher, Christ fully inhabits the world of those to whom he ministers, embracing its burdens, and the narrator suggests that this way of life is essential to anyone who would intervene in Hugh’s story. The edited text hints at the necessity of incarnational charity, but this excised passage from the holograph version makes sense of those intimations pervading *Life*, integrating them into a coherent theological system and, as I will explain, a consistent mode of relating text, reader, and “real life.”

The narrator's explicit instructions for engaging her story assume fresh significance when the Incarnation is restored to the center of the text. Before the narrative descends into the squalor of Hugh's underclass life, the narrator addresses her implied middle-class reader:

This is what I want you to do. I want you to hide your disgust, take no heed to your clean clothes, and come right down with me, —here, into the thickest of the fog and mud and foul effluvia. I want you to hear this story. There is a secret down here, in this nightmare fog, that has lain dumb for centuries: I want to make it a real thing to you. (41)

The language here is thoroughly incarnational. Just as Christ came down from heaven to earth, so the reader, to “hear this story” and encounter its “secret,” must “come right down with [the narrator]”; and as Christ divested himself of divine prerogatives upon entering a world marred by sin and death, so the reader must shed the vestments of middle-class identity, “tak[ing] no heed to [her] clean clothes” amid the “fog and mud and foul effluvia” of Hugh's neighborhood. The text, then, calls for readerly acts of descending and stripping that are modeled on the Incarnation.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> I apply these metaphors of descending and stripping to the work of reading, but incarnational motifs structure Davis's aesthetic generally, in *Life in the Iron-Mills* and in other texts. In *Life*, Hugh Wolfe functions not only as a type of the country's new industrial labor force but also as a figure of the artist. His practice of hewing figures out of the korl is itself an art of descent and divestiture (“Life” 48). Excavating the “strangely beautiful” forms hidden in blocks of industrial waste material, his work suggests Davis's own aesthetic project (48).

Moreover, the narrative structure of *Life* rehearses the incarnational motif: the road leading from the town proper to the iron mills “lay on the river, a mile below the city-limits,” and it “had been quarried from the solid rock, which rose abrupt and bare on one side of the cinder-covered road” (45). Thus, passage to the mills involves a descent from town and, sometime in the past, a stripping of the rocky landscape, a shedding of layers. Moreover, when some affluent men visit the mills—where, significantly, the “half-naked” workers have shed their clothes to withstand the heat (53)—the visitors compare the scene to Dante's *Inferno*, invoking a still more schematic narrative of descent than *Life* itself represents (50).

Finally, Hugh's sculpting art also resembles the engraving craft esteemed by the writer-protagonist of “Marcia,” published fifteen years after *Life in the Iron-Mills*. Marcia's fiction, which mirrors Davis's unsentimental realism, performs the same work with words that engraving (and sculpting) perform with material media: as the latter artforms achieve expression by carving away unwanted material, Marcia's literary realism tells a truth through its elimination of

But what does it mean to read incarnationally? And how would such reading differ from that which is characterized by “mawkish sentimentality” or “cold-blooded logic”? Davis’s metaphor suggests depth, engagement, charity, and embodiment; but to understand more fully the practice to which *Life* calls its audience, one must first look to the multiple scenes of failed reading in this text, which help through antithesis to define incarnational reading. The most conspicuous of these reading scenes occurs when three highly literate visitors to the iron mills stumble upon the figure of a starving woman that Hugh has sculpted (or “hewn”) from kohl, the refuse of the iron-smelting process.<sup>10</sup> The crude work of art, so unexpected in this setting, rouses their interpretive faculties. The text metonymizes each of the three visitors—the wealthy mill owner Kirby as the “pocket of the world,” the compassionate doctor May as the “heart,” and the analytical flâneur Mitchell as the “head” (56, 56, 57)—and each of these men produces a corresponding reading of the sculpture, and of Hugh.

Kirby, one of the owners of the mill, is callous and dismissive: he scoffs at Hugh’s pastime and only grudgingly concedes that there may exist “some stray gleams of mind and soul among these wretches” (54). By themselves, Kirby’s disdain for Hugh and his general dehumanization of the workers mark his reading as a failure by the narrator’s standards, which require at least attentiveness to these characters’ stories. But a more

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sentimental excesses. As noted previously, in her writing “there was none of the usual talk of countesses, heather, larks, or emotions of which she knew nothing”; her fiction is distinguished not so much by the content it presents as by the content it removes (i.e., “sunsets, duchesses, violets”).

<sup>10</sup> The text shows this group to be well-read when they not only compare the mills to Dante’s *Inferno* but even a particular worker to one of the poem’s characters (“Yonder is Farinata himself in the burning tomb” [50]). Moreover, despite being in the mills for a tour, which one would expect to command their full attention, the men discuss a newspaper article that one of them reads aloud. Reading apparently pervades their lives.

significant condemnation lurks in Kirby's declaration that he "wash[es] his hands of all social problems" (55); for Mitchell compares him to Pilate, the Roman official who succumbed to public pressure for Jesus's crucifixion but washed his hands of responsibility for Jesus's death (*New Oxford Annotated Bible*, Matt. 27:24-26). Kirby hands Hugh over not to violent men but to a harsh socioeconomic world in which Hugh lacks an advocate such as Kirby could be.

Appalled by the mill owner's heartlessness, Doctor May responds far more emotionally to Hugh and the kohl-woman and proves himself an exemplary reader in the sentimental mode. He identifies Hugh as a "latent genius to be warmed into life by a waited-for sunbeam," which he can provide in a "friendly word or two" (56). Himself a "philanthropist, in a small way," the doctor "complacently" affirms Hugh's talent and charges him, "Make yourself what you will. It is your right" (56); and having offered Hugh nothing more than verbal encouragement, May finds himself "glowing with his own magnanimity" (56).<sup>11</sup> Again, in times after this night, when May prays for the laboring classes to which Hugh belongs, he "glow[s] at heart, recognizing an accomplished duty" (58). Granted, May almost certainly believes prayer a materially effectual practice; I do not intend to argue that he does nothing kind or meaningful in response to Hugh. Rather, it is the narrow scope of his action and his feeling of self-satisfaction at that uncostly aid that marks him as a typical sentimental reader. Fitting

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<sup>11</sup> Davis's critique of May evokes a passage in the biblical book of James: "If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead" (*NOAB*, Jas. 2:15-17).



squarely in that role, he derives a pleasurable feeling from the mere impulse to help Hugh and from a few words and prayers that constitute for him a very small sacrifice.<sup>12</sup>

If Doctor May neatly exemplifies the sentimental reader, then a third visitor to the mills, Mitchell, personifies the epistemological posture of scientific philanthropists. Admittedly, he represents no mirror image of these new charity workers; he explicitly disavows philanthropy, arguing that “Reform is born of need, not pity” (57). Maintaining that “No vital movement of the people’s has worked down, for good or evil,” he places the burden of reform on the shoulders of the poor: “Some day, out of their bitter need will be thrown up their own light-bringer, —their Jean Paul, their Cromwell, their Messiah” (57). But in this conviction Mitchell is no stranger to the scientific philanthropists; while Americans before the nineteenth century freely assumed the care of the poor, the innovative charity workers of Davis’s era assigned the poor increased responsibility for their own uplift. For Mitchell, as for Davis’s new philanthropists, this shifting of responsibility entails a stance in relation to the poor that can aptly be described as “cold-blooded.”

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<sup>12</sup> The text more firmly links May with the sentimental tradition when, after Hugh’s arrest and sentencing, it shows him reading a report of Hugh’s trial in a sensationalist newspaper. The passage immediately preceding this scene, and following Hugh’s decision to keep the stolen money, frames May’s reading in a manner that condemns sensationalist representation:

Do you want to hear the end of [Hugh’s story]? You wish me to make a tragic story out of it? Why, in the police-reports of the morning paper you can find a dozen such tragedies: hints of shipwrecks unlike any that ever befell on the high seas; hints that here a power was lost to heaven,—that there a soul went down where no tide can ebb or flow. Commonplace enough the hints are,—jocose sometimes, done up in rhyme. (65)

The next sentence finds Doctor May reading a newspaper that contains the report of Hugh’s trial, to which he responds indignantly, “Scoundrel! Serves him right! After all our kindness that night!” (65). Here the reader witnesses the easy movement from the emotions fostered by sentimental literature, which May exhibits in the iron mills, to those provoked by sensational writing, which he expresses in this scene.

*Life*'s introduction to Mitchell emphasizes his habits of ocular penetration and self-preserving retreat, movements that define the work of the new philanthropists whom his character evokes:

The young man talking to Kirby sat with an amused light in his cool gray eye, surveying critically the half-clothed figures of the puddlers, and the slow swing of their brawny muscles. He was a stranger in the city,—spending a couple of months in the borders of a Slave State, to study the institutions of the South,—a brother-in-law of Kirby's,—Mitchell. He was an amateur gymnast—hence his anatomical eye; a patron, in a *blasé* way, of the prize-ring; a man who sucked the essence out of a science or philosophy in an indifferent, gentlemanly way; who took Kant, Novalis, Humboldt, for what they were worth in his own scales; accepting all, despising nothing, in heaven, earth, or hell, but one-ideal men; with a temper yielding and brilliant as summer water, until his Self was touched, when it was ice, though brilliant still. Such men are not rare in the States. (51)

His “anatomical eye” renders his vision sharp, severe, rapacious, as he “survey[s] critically” the bodies of the mill workers, “stud[ies]” Southern institutions in “a couple of months,” and “suck[s] the essence out” of complex systems of thought. Indeed, Hugh fancies him “a Man all-knowing, all-seeing” (59). But for all the penetration of Mitchell's gaze, he maintains distance from the objects of his investigation. Though his eye is an efficient implement of retrieval and taxonomy, it remains “cool,” with an “amused light” in it (51). He is “*blasé*.” Most importantly, he guards himself against the sort of scrutiny, and change, to which he subjects everything around him; for when “his Self [is] touched,” his “temper”—usually “yielding and brilliant as summer water”—turns to “ice.” Thus, when Mitchell and his companions encounter Hugh and the kohl woman, his “probing eyes” are “mocking, cruel, relentless” in their inspection of Hugh (54); but he stands “aloof” from the scene, exuding the “air of an amused spectator at a play” (53,

55).<sup>13</sup> For his part, Hugh immediately perceives that, though he possesses some aesthetic kinship with Mitchell, there is “between them [. . .] a great gulf never to be passed” (52). As Caroline Miles argues, that chasm marks the distance between Hugh’s thick corporeality and Mitchell’s virtual disembodiment—characterized by “the impalpable atmosphere belonging to the thorough-bred gentleman” (51). It is precisely this distance that Christ’s Incarnation inspires Davis to close.

After three failed responses to the korl-woman—Kirby’s, May’s, and Mitchell’s—one might reasonably doubt the capacity of Hugh’s sculpture, or of art as such, to effect meaningful change in an audience. Amy Schrager Lang considers such doubt the very impetus of the text; she argues that “the questionable capacity of art to represent, much less redeem, the iron puddler becomes itself the story’s subject” (85). According to Andrew J. Scheiber, Davis intends not “the creation of aesthetic values, but [. . .] the interrogation and demolition of them” because she understands “that to achieve the aesthetic effect is all too easy, and that true discipline is not in artistic creation, but in

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<sup>13</sup> A connoisseur of ideas, aloof and uncommitted, Mitchell closely resembles Davis’s sketch of Ralph Waldo Emerson in her essay “Boston in the Sixties” (1904), where she reflects on a conversation she had with him upon their first meeting. Sensing Emerson’s interest in her Virginian experience of the Civil War, Davis eagerly and loquaciously tells him what she has witnessed of the conflict, only to conclude later that his interest was quite impersonal:

If [Thomas] Edison had been there [Emerson] would have been just as eager to wrench out of him the secret of electricity, or if it had been a freed slave he would have compelled him to show the scars on his back and lay bare his rejoicing, ignorant, half-animal soul, and an hour later he would have forgotten that Edison or the negro or I were in the world—having taken from each what he wanted. (449)

Davis’s offense at Emerson, and his fictional avatar Mitchell, seems less personal than philosophical and ethical, for Emerson’s gaze tends to exploit its objects. Both figures “suck the essence” out of something or someone they observe but never permit themselves to be changed in the encounter.

resistance to the temptations it presents” (102).<sup>14</sup> After all, when Mitchell “look[s] at the furnace-tender [Hugh] as he had looked at a rare mosaic in the morning” (Davis, *Life* 17), it is what Mark Seltzer calls the “aestheticization of the natural body” that neutralizes any ethical response he might make to Hugh and permits Mitchell to commodify him—an object for aesthetic consumption, an “amusing study” rather than a man (Davis, *Life* 17). *Life* implies not only that art permits of self-serving readings but that some forms of art, like sentimentalism, even encourage them. Nonetheless, it is important to affirm Davis’s commitment to art, and particularly literature, as such.

In his study of homiletic realism, Gregory Jackson contends that that literary mode’s allegorical nature militates against voyeurism because it implies a fundamental connection between the fictional world of the text and the quotidian world of the reader, between representation and reality. By “blurring the distinction between the real and the figural” and calling readers to translate fiction into action, the allegorical foundation of homiletic realism “denie[s] readers the role of passive onlooker” (8, 32). I argue that *Life in the Iron-Mills* also resists voyeuristic reading, but the text does not follow Jackson’s account in doing so. Davis refuses to abandon literary representation not because her chosen mode bars the door to escapism. She vividly dramatizes three escapist “readings” of Hugh’s kohl-woman. For Davis, art diagnoses moral problems and encourages audiences to redress them, but she insists through the kohl-woman that art does not

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<sup>14</sup> In *Vanishing Moments: Class and American Literature* (2006), Eric Schocket identifies these temptations as invitations to be “conciliated, compensated, or otherwise distracted” by the literary experience of sympathetic identification with the laboring classes. Although he reads Davis as offering this false conciliation, he concurs with Scheiber in arguing, “When it comes to textual representations of labor, [. . .] we need to resist being interpellated into the text’s affective apparatus of identification. Indeed, “disidentification” would be a more productive critical stance, since it would lead us to explore the structural causes for inequity” (32).

redress the problems itself.

Davis persists as a fiction writer on the basis of a paradox that Jackson overlooks, namely, that the Incarnation calls readers to exercise their agency by limiting their freedom. God's becoming human, and the affluent's becoming poor, are peculiar acts of will in that their moral power derives from a *renunciation* of power. Jackson situates the homiletic novel in a contest between, "on the one hand, evangelical factions attempting to muscularize volition and, on the other, various strains of determinism, ranging from a lingering predestinarianism to emergent forms of evolutionary causality," and he sees the homiletic novel unambiguously affirming and cultivating volition (159). I read *Life in the Iron-Mills* in a similar manner but find Jackson's invocation of muscular Christianity misleading when applied to this text, for *Life* associates agency with weakness and humility, not with brawn and self-assurance. *Life* calls readers to exercise their volition in identifying with the poor, but it does not present this self-sacrificing work as a simple solution to poverty, an irresistible reform movement that scatters social ills with a glance. The text remarks the failures of "many a political reformer [. . .] and many a private reformer too, who has gone among [the poor] with a heart tender with Christ's charity, and come out outraged, hardened" (42). Identifying with the poor is not a steroid for the moral muscles; it is the willful assumption of a burden that just might crush one. This is why *Life in the Iron-Mills* can critique art *per se* without repudiating it.

The notion that Davis knowingly pursues her moral purpose through a flawed medium corresponds to her incarnational theology that couches divine intervention in human affairs in the same terms. For Davis, the model of meaningful human action is the work of redemption performed by God in Christ under the limiting conditions of human

existence. Therefore, the hazards of sentimentalism do not disqualify literature as a means of promoting justice; rather, those pitfalls mark literature as a suitably confining medium, much like human flesh to God.<sup>15</sup>

With the exception of Christ, only one “reader” in *Life* satisfies the narrator, namely, the Quaker woman who comforts Deb in Hugh’s jail cell after his suicide. Although she hardly speaks to Deb—and when she does, her words are few and economical—her ministry of presence is also decidedly lingual. It emerges from the center of Quaker communal life, the Quaker “meeting-house” where “Once a week they sit [. . .] in their grave, earnest way, waiting for the Spirit of Love to *speak*, opening their simple hearts to receive His *words*” (73, my emphasis). These men and women are incarnational readers: having received the words of God, having encountered the Word himself, they go about embodying that divine language among the poor. And in her quiet attendance on Deb, the Quaker woman displays the aesthetic nature of her embodied reading, as she brings “a vase of wood-leaves and berries,” opens the window to the “woody fragrance” of “fresh air,” and promises Deb that Hugh will not be buried “[u]nder t’ mud and ash” of the “town-yard” but by the Quaker’s home on the hills, where “the light lies warm” and “the winds of God blow all the day,” “where the blue smoke is, by the trees” (72). By her physical presence in the jail cell, her material gifts to Deb, and the “slow, patient Christ-love” that enfolds Deb into the Quaker community, this woman transfigures the language of the meeting-house into corporeal care.

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<sup>15</sup> For a related argument about the potential in linguistic imperfection, see Patrick Greaney’s *Untimely Beggar: Poverty and Power from Baudelaire to Benjamin* (2008). Greaney’s complex thesis asserts that because French and German modernist literature associated poverty with power and potential (e.g., in the prospect of revolution), that literature represented the poor in a deliberately “impoverished language” through which authors hoped to participate in the power of the poor.

Moreover, the Quaker woman provides the text's closest approximation of Christ's incarnational ministry. The divine Word motivates her to perform the actions that the narrator desires from her reader and that Christ models: she descends to the jail from the hills where she lives, and her physical form—a "homely body, coarsely dressed in gray and white"—is divested of accessories (72). This simple embodiment distinguishes her from every other character who aims to engage the poor; in Hugh's jail cell "local editors," "boys with their hands thrust knowingly in their pockets," and other visitors are "coming and going all day," but the Quaker woman offers Deb her consistent physical presence, "outstay[ing] them all" (72).<sup>16</sup>

If this incarnational reading originates in the Quaker meeting-house, though, how can a non-Quaker reader of *Life* enact such a reading? How can he make the word flesh? Davis's text itself constitutes a space like the Quaker meeting; its words, too, call for embodiment. The narrator repeatedly indicates that she wants the reader to experience something beneath the surface of her story; she locates hope for the poor there and prophesies that the reader will perceive it, too, "if your eyes are as free as mine to look deeper" (41). And about the "terrible tragedy," "soul-starvation," and "living death" of her characters' lives, the narrator claims, "I can paint nothing of this, only give you the outside outlines of a night, a crisis in the life of one man: whatever muddy depth of soul-

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<sup>16</sup> In Davis's previously referenced short story "Marcia," the eponymous writer-protagonist nearly starves to death while trying to get her realist fiction published; and, at the nadir of her career, she lies sick in bed surrounded by curious acquaintances who never before realized she was in such poor health. Closely paralleling Hugh's deathbed tableau, this scene in "Marcia" puts an author in the position of defeat and prostration that Hugh occupies in *Life*. This juxtaposition of Hugh the industrial laborer and Marcia the writer emphasizes the constraint, both commercial and formal, under which authors produce their art. The scene suggests, as I have argued above, that writing fiction possesses an incarnational quality of its own when authors subject their aesthetic and ethical aims to flawed forms and generic conventions.

history lies beneath you can read according to the eyes God has given you” (47).

However, representing this story as merely the “outside outlines of a night” and, elsewhere, the “outline of a dull life” problematizes the invitation to “look deeper” and read “beneath” (47, 40). There is no depth in an outline; there is no “beneath” in which to read. But the textual impasse that Davis creates is active and meaningful, in that it impels the reader to conclude that this “deeper” space lies outside the confines of the narrator’s story. In calling the reader into “muddy depths of soul-history” of which she “can paint nothing,” the narrator prescribes not only, or even primarily, an interpretive work *within* the text but an embodied movement into real lives—the lives of one’s local poor—*beyond* the text.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> In *Rebecca Harding Davis and American Realism*, Sharon M. Harris reads the narrator ironically; she finds her rhetoric of hope (“the promise of the Dawn”) decidedly sentimental and considers this a marker of Davis’s disapproval. By Harris’s reading, the bourgeois narrator remains inured to the radical social critique that Davis mounts through Hugh, Deb, and the korrwoman. Several critics since Harris have taken a similar line (see Scheiber, Pfaelzer, Lang, and Goodling). But this interpretation is problematic on at least two levels.

First, it is anachronistic, assuming a model of writing and reading that did not obtain in 1860s America. In *Getting at the Author: Reimagining Books and Reading in the Age of American Realism*, Barbara Hochman argues that until the 1880s the interpretive convention she calls “reading for the author” dominated nineteenth-century American reading practices; in this hermeneutic frame “reading was a ‘kind of conversation’ with the writer,” whose “‘individuality’ emerged from his or her text in the course of reading” (2, 1-2). The modern dissociation of author and narrator, on which Harris’s reading of *Life* depends, had not yet taken hold; rather, “the digressive, self-reflexive narrator was associated with the writer of the text and often seen as the repository of moral, social, and intellectual values” (7). For a complementary discussion of antebellum reading practices and the figure of the narrator, see Nina Baym’s *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America*.

Second, the language that Harris identifies as sentimental and, therefore, antithetical to Davis’s social and aesthetic vision is actually language that aligns the narrator with the Quaker woman’s ministry to Deb and with Davis’s “theory of the commonplace,” Harris’s own coinage. Critics sometimes stumble over the narrator’s comments on the material objects lying about her room: she says, “A half-moulded child’s head; Aphrodite; a bough of forest-leaves; music; work; homely fragments, in which lie the secrets of all eternal truth and beauty. Prophetic all!” (74) These items, so the argument goes, invoke a romantic aesthetic and indicate the narrator’s distance from the rough world of Hugh and the laboring classes. But the reader has seen “a bough of forest-leaves” before in *Life*, when the Quaker woman brings Deb “a vase of wood-leaves and berries” in Hugh’s jail cell. And Davis’s theory of the commonplace, as Harris articulates it, could well be summarized in the narrator’s assertion that “the secrets of all eternal truth and



*Life in the Iron-Mills* thus explodes the sentimental account of fiction reading, which terminates in the reader, in the achievement of some affect. Carolyn Betensky argues that “[s]ocial-problem novels teach us to read our own reading, know our own knowledge, and feel our own feeling about the poor and working classes as important” (6). But *Life* redefines reading to transcend these self-congratulating exercises and to encompass charitable action, which a reader performs as an expression—an incarnation—of a fictional text.<sup>18</sup> Because Davis assumes this model of reading, she understands the writing of fiction as the commencement of an aesthetic event. Hence, the whole practice of fiction as Davis conceives it becomes for her an appropriate, and better, alternative not only to sentimental literature but also to scientific philanthropy because the aesthetic event she initiates ends in ethical labor, which is not less but more corporeal

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beauty” can be found in quotidian “work” and such “homely fragments” as these that lie about the narrator’s room. The narrator’s language is, then, consistent with Davis’s own aesthetic vision. The tension between literary romanticism and realism, transcendence and immanence, that inheres in her vision and in the narrator’s words is precisely the tension affirmed in the Incarnation, an antinomy the flattening of which entails not only theological heresy but also, in this case, a misunderstanding of Davis.

<sup>18</sup> Davis’s absorption with the Incarnation persists throughout her career, as evidenced, for example, by her annual practice of writing a Christmas story and her 1889 essay, “The Plague Spot of America,” in praise of Fr. Damien’s and Fr. Boglioli’s literally self-sacrificing ministry to lepers in Hawaii and Louisiana, respectively. Further, her 1866 short story “The Harmonists” applies her incarnational ethics to a critique of utopianism. The story narrates an idealist’s disillusionment with a community modeled on George Rapp’s nineteenth-century utopian settlements in Pennsylvania and Indiana. The idealist Knowles travels to that fictional community expecting to find a spiritual and intellectual life purified of earthly passions and attachments, and he sounds decidedly anti-incarnational when he warns his companion, the narrator, that they “must leave all worldly words and thoughts outside, *as a snake drops his skin*” (173, emphasis added). When Knowles meets the utopians and finds them rather crude sensualists, he recoils and seeks out the community’s leaders, saying of the commoners, “These are the flesh of the thing; we’ll find the brain presently” (175). When the leadership only confirms Knowles’s first impressions, he finally renounces the utopian ideal in favor of a more comprehensive social interdependence, choosing to “go back into the world” where “a thousand fibres of love and trade and mutual help [. . .] bind us to our fellow-man, and if we try to slip out of our place and loose any of them, our own souls suffer the loss by so much life withdrawn” (178). In renouncing an ideal of spiritualized independence and submitting to the “fibres” that “bind us to our fellow-man,” Knowles embraces the life of agency through self-limitation that the Incarnation models to Davis.

and personal than the policies of the new philanthropy workers. It comes as little surprise, then, that in her essay “Women in Literature” (1891), Davis hopes that some of her sisters “will not always be content to expend their force in society, or even in charitable work” but will take up authorship, writing “the inner life and history of their time” (404). She can, without contradiction, express her familiar skepticism toward late-nineteenth-century “charitable work” because the literary writing that she commends to women needs only incarnational readers to render it a lively, embodied practice of care for the disenfranchised. The next chapter accentuates Davis’s accomplishment in coordinating her ethics and aesthetics, for there William Dean Howells imagines a similarly integrated fiction but, almost in spite of himself, sacrifices his ethical vision to an aesthetic investment in personalities like Mitchell’s—the dilettantish observer whose complex interiority perpetually resists commitment.

### **“It’s Hard to Get Outside”: William Dean Howells and the Heteroglossic Self**

In his essay “Tribulations of a Cheerful Giver” (1895), William Dean Howells echoes Rebecca Harding Davis’s “Indiscriminate Charity,” her essay defending private charity offered without regard to the recipient’s merits. However, the authors deliver their defenses in very different tones, which correspond to their dissimilar approaches to poverty relief. Both authors commend a form of charity that “scientific philanthropy” was supposed to have rendered obsolete, but Davis’s essay is hortatory, calling for a return to the old-fashioned form, while Howells’s is confessional, appealing only for toleration of his anachronistic view. Being careful not to “cast slight upon the organized efforts at relieving want,” and noting his own participation in such efforts in Boston and New York, Howells writes, “All I contend for is the right—or call it the privilege—of giving to him that asketh, even when you do not know that he needs, or deserves to need” (136). Where Davis condemns the practices of her generation and embraces her untimeliness, Howells defers to contemporary convention and all but apologizes for his indecorum. These different dispositions toward the same charitable practice reflect Howells’s and Davis’s respective philosophies not only of poverty relief but also of human agency.

Howells’s essay notes his own practice of institutionalized and private charity, but it marks him as a “giver” less confident of his individual influence than Davis was of hers. His deference toward “organized efforts” at poverty relief is telling: if he actively engages the poor, he also passively submits to all manner of social norms—including

methods of poverty relief—over which he feels little control and which he expects to distort even his most charitable intentions. Doubting his agency, he sounds beset—a victim, as his title indicates, of “tribulations.”

Howells often sounds a more confident note when, as a literary critic, he preaches his gospel of socially conscious realism. His long essay *Criticism and Fiction* (1892) synthesizes his campaign for a new literature that would “tend to make the race better and kinder” (85), especially with regard to economic inequality. He sees a “humanitarian impulse” already sweeping contemporary fiction and claims that “Art [. . .] is beginning to find out that if it does not make friends with Need it must perish” (85). However, despite these professions of optimism, Howells’s fiction entertains serious doubts, if not outright despair, about literature’s capacity to transform readers. His skepticism begins with himself, a reader profoundly moved by Leo Tolstoy’s egalitarian social vision but unwilling to enact it himself.<sup>1</sup> In a letter to Edward Everett Hale, Howells draws a frustrated contrast between his own copious writing on poverty and his scanty action: “Words, words, words!” he laments; “How to make them things, deeds [. . .]?” (Howells *Letters* 419) The question implies a blockage between his beliefs, so often committed to paper, and his material, embodied manner of life. Either the author’s will is too weak to make the adjustments he imagines, or his will—the human will *per se*—is truly incapable of bridging the gap—blocked, that is, by a more powerful, external agency. His poverty fiction entertains both possibilities.

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<sup>1</sup> In a famous letter to Henry James, he professes a feeling that “‘civilization’” must “[come] out all wrong in the end, unless it bases itself anew on a real equality,” but he confesses, “Meantime I wear a fur-lined overcoat, and live in all the luxury my money can buy” (Howells *Life in Letters* 417).

The question Howells puts to himself also resonates with his readers, who may well ask what, if any, difference Howells's "words" make for their ethical conduct. While Howells never brought his practice into line with his Tolstoyan convictions, his poverty fiction commends to readers the unsatisfying compromise on which he settled. This chapter describes the consolations, as three Howells novels present them, of psychologizing social conflict, of moving the discordant public sphere "inside"; and it demonstrates the means by which those novels tend to perform that relocation for readers.

Christopher Castiglia argues that in antebellum America, "the interior became a micro-version of the social" (3). The individual human psyche assumed new significance "not simply as an individual's 'private' realm of desires, affects, and appetites, but as a realm of disruption and attempted order that, mirroring the often tense struggles between popular demand and juridical control, may be called an *interior state*" (3). I contend that even in the late 1900s, particularly after Howells's public response to the Haymarket Affair in 1886, his fiction enacts the trend that Castiglia describes.<sup>2</sup> The novels *Annie Kilburn* (1887), *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1889), and *The World of Chance* (1893) increasingly transfer social conflict to the individual psyche, merging two arenas that remain independent in his earlier work. Furthermore, these novels develop a

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<sup>2</sup> On May 4, 1886, at a peaceful labor demonstration in Chicago's Haymarket Square, an unknown person threw a bomb, and its explosion and the ensuing gunfire from police left at least eleven people dead and many more wounded. Thereafter, the courts convicted eight anarchists of conspiracy, though none knew each other and none was alleged to have thrown the bomb. Four of the men were hanged on November 11, 1887; one escaped the gallows by committing suicide in prison; and in 1893, Illinois governor John Altgeld pardoned the remaining defendants. Howells, like many others after him, considered the trial of these men a travesty of justice and wrote a letter to the *New York Tribune* calling on readers to petition the Illinois governor to commute the anarchists' sentences. Though he solicited public support from many of his literary friends, none joined him in the cause. For a fuller study of the Haymarket Affair in historical context, see Carl Smith's *Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief: The Great Chicago Fire, the Haymarket Bomb, and the Model Town of Pullman* (1995). For a study of Howells's response to the events, see Garlin Sender's *William Dean Howells and the Haymarket Era* (1979).

corresponding idea of selfhood, which abandons Enlightenment ideals of unity and sovereignty for multiplicity and contingency. In Howells's late fiction, the self contains multitudes—and gets very little done.

### **Irony**

To preface my analysis of the psychologizing move in the *A Hazard of New Fortunes* and *The World of Chance*, I want to describe an ironic attitude that several of Howells's characters assume toward themselves in the earlier novel *Annie Kilburn* and in *Hazard*. Analyzing this posture, typical of Howells's favorite characters, provides an introduction to the ethical and aesthetic problems that all three novels wrestle with and fail to overcome. These novels register a tension between Howells's two chief goals for his fiction: an ethical goal to make his readers more humane and charitable, especially by staging encounters with morally exemplary characters in the line of Leo Tolstoy, and an aesthetic aim to write realistically, particularly through the representation of complex, ambivalent characters rather than flat heroes and villains.

*Annie Kilburn* situates these contradictory impulses in the communal life of Hatboro, Massachusetts, a small town whose stark socioeconomic divisions Reverend Peck works by word and deed to eliminate. His Social Gospel ethics, condemning the separation of rich and poor, end up dividing the affluent classes, some of whom admire Peck's ethical commitment and others of whom resent his critique of Hatboro's economy. The eponymous protagonist and her closest friends feel the power of Peck's claims, but none sacrifices her social standing to join the preacher in his life and ministry among the poor. Thus, the text reproduces Howells's central conflict as an author: Reverend Peck enacts the radical, ethical commitment that Howells finds so compelling, while Annie and

other affluent liberals equivocate in an “agnosticism [that] extends among [the] cultivated people to every region of conjecture” (673). *Annie Kilburn* tells the story of these liberals’ moral evasions and introduces a mechanism for coping with the internal tension that results: a self-ironic perspective is the therapy that agnosticism prescribes and the means by which these characters excuse their inaction.

The text introduces this therapy through Annie’s acclimation to it. Upon returning to Hatboro after living for several years in Italy, she wishes “to be of some use in the world” and imagines herself playing Lady Bountiful to Hatboro’s poor, dispensing gifts from her abundance. When Reverend Peck criticizes her naive vision, Annie descends into a cycle of self-questioning that produces no action. Having recognized the complicity of such charity in perpetuating class divisions, Annie must find another way “to be of some use.” However, she cannot fathom the alternative that Peck presents of sacrificing her class status for a life among the poor. She feels caught between two untenable options. By this time, however, a visit from her childhood girlfriends has acquainted her with the self-ironic perspective from which Hatboro’s ruling class regards itself and which comes to structure—and lighten the mood of—her ethical introspection. The narrator describes her friends’ technique as they share town gossip: “Annie’s friends had also to distinguish themselves from the rest of the villagers, and it was easiest to do this by an attitude of criticism mingled with large allowance. They ended a dissection of the community by saying that they believed there was no place like Hatboro’, after all” (663). This practice of “criticism mingled with large allowance” enables the women to scrutinize their community in a way that ostensibly distinguishes them from it but, then, to reclaim their place within the community and affirm its merits. This paradoxical

manner of self-appraisal, at once critical and tolerant, is the whole lesson of *Annie Kilburn* for its protagonist, and for the reader who enters Hatboro even more a stranger than Annie.

Peck's challenge to Annie's philanthropy tests her nascent skills in self-irony. When her friend Putney teases her about Peck's criticism and calls her a "moral Cave Dweller," Annie "did not find the atonement to which [Putney] brought her altogether painful. It seemed to her really that she was getting off pretty easily, and she laughed with hearty consent at last" (727). Annie enjoys the sympathetic satire of her friend and finds that his perspective, in which her folly actually makes her more likable, is one she can appropriate for herself. Ultimately, this ambivalent self-appraisal insulates her against the radical character of Peck's moral challenge—not by resolving the tension between her ethical theory and practice but by sanctioning it, even celebrating it, as a permanent condition.

Putney voices the ironist's credo—and Howells's—when he tells his son "There's always something to say on both sides" (726). Several critics have read Howells as a predecessor of Richard Rorty's ironist, one of the set of people who are "always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves" (73). Thomas Peyser, for example, considers Howells "too aware of the multiplicity of values held by different people around the globe ever to give [himself] over wholeheartedly to a narrow or parochial way of looking at things" (*Utopia* 97).<sup>3</sup> By accepting the incoherence

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<sup>3</sup> For a related reading of Howells, which links his use of irony to the project of literary realism, see Phillip Barrish's excellent chapter on him in *American Literary Realism, Critical Theory, and Intellectual Prestige, 1880-1995* (2001), esp. pp. 40-45.



of her ethical position, Annie gains the peculiar sort of conflicted stability that Charles Harmon considers essential to American liberalism:

Howells implies that dramatizing one's self-division is a way to achieve a provisional self-integration; that exploring self-doubt is how middle-class liberals endow themselves with the cultural prerogatives of self-assurance; and that believing American culture is in crisis—fearing that there are no sure values to hand down from generation to generation—is precisely what gives a large part of American culture its continuity. (186)

Harmon's analysis cogently describes the work of irony in the lives of Annie and her friends, but it appears in an essay on *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, the novel that followed *Annie Kilburn* and to which this chapter now turns.

*A Hazard of New Fortunes* transports the previous novel's main ethical conflicts to the expanded stage of New York City and more explicitly interrogates the ethical work of literature by organizing the plot around a literary magazine start-up. At the beginning of the novel, the protagonist Basil March leaves his job with an insurance firm to accept a position as editor of the new publication, *Every Other Week*. The job involves moving his family—his wife Isabel and their son and daughter—from Boston to New York, where the conspicuousness of poverty compels Basil and Isabel to evaluate their affluent lifestyles. Before examining the struggles with agency and selfhood that attend the couple's self-assessment, I want briefly to sketch the role of *Annie Kilburn*-esque irony in their lives, for it constitutes the psychological framework from within which they face a new city's ethical challenges.

The Marches' irony consists in seeing themselves from multiple perspectives simultaneously without privileging any one of them. The text most clearly outlines this ironic structure in the context of a meal, as Basil and Isabel reflect on their underwhelming dinner on a train from Boston to New York: "They thought well of

themselves now that they could be both critical and tolerant of flavors not very sharply distinguished from one another in their dinner [. . .]" (40). The Marches delight not only in the subtlety of their palettes but also, and more importantly, in their ability to critique and tolerate flavors simultaneously—the same capacity for “criticism mingled with large allowance” that Howells teaches Annie Kilburn. The Marches’ application of this skill beyond the culinary realm to their own social attitudes and habits is the couple’s defining moral practice.<sup>4</sup>

The same train ride occasions a more substantive act of self-irony, as the Marches experience a “comfortable self-aborrence” over the fact that they do not miss their children who remain at home (39). “Abhorrence” denotes an intense emotion; that they experience it “comfortabl[y]” does not so much qualify the intensity of the emotion as it proves the vigor and robustness of their ironic sense, which can hold together a self pulled fiercely in opposite directions. The depth of the Marches’ dependence on irony also manifests itself in a conversation between Basil and Isabel during a period when she is nostalgically “lamenting the literary peace, the intellectual refinement” of their Boston life and he, walking about the city and listening to various preachers, is wrestling with the radical economics of Christianity (306). When Basil tells Isabel that the Boston life they miss was “very pretty” but “it was not life—it was death-in-life,” the moment marks a fork in the road, a potential crisis for the couple (306). Basil’s religious searching has

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<sup>4</sup> Phillip Barrish argues that realist authors and characters accrued cultural distinction by cultivating a taste for the “really real.” In Howells’s post-Haymarket fiction, Barrish claims, the “really real” consists of the “irreducible complexities and ironies, as such, of America’s social problems” (38). Similarly, Thomas Peyser identifies the “key attribute” of many of Howells’s protagonists as “the ability to generate witty commentary exposing the antinomies and absurdities of high society” (106). The Marches are marked as favorites of Howells by their skill in recognizing the social problems *and* their insolubility as well as the contradictions they live as high-society progressives.

brought them to a place where making significant changes in their lives has become imaginable. However, irony plays its familiar role here, diffusing a crisis of identity:

[Isabel] liked to hear him talk in that strain of virtuous self-denunciation, but she asked him, "Which of your prophets are you going to follow?" and he answered, "All—all! And a fresh one every Sunday." And so they got their laugh out of it at last, but with some sadness at heart, and with a dim consciousness that they had got their laugh out of too many things in life. (306)

This passage indicates that, familiar and reliable as irony is for the Marches, its consolations are not perfect. On this occasion, the couple feels more acutely than usual the cost of their salvaged equilibrium.

### **Agency and Selfhood**

In Howells's fiction irony responds to something; it is, in contemporary therapeutic parlance, a coping mechanism. In the following section I want to specify more precisely the threat to which irony responds and the kind of self that it both assumes and perpetuates. A useful starting point is the character of Margaret Vance, whose relative insignificance in the novel constitutes her significance for this analysis. When Howells introduces Margaret, she is a sophisticated socialite and, like many in her class, "a congeries of contradictions and inconsistencies" (254). With the Marches she takes pleasure in an ironic view of herself. However, some altruistic behavior effects a change in her character. Compromising her reputation, she visits a family whom the New York elite have ostracized and whom she too finds rather uninteresting, but her action carries an unintended consequence: "As she went home [from the visit], Margaret felt wrought in her that most incredible of the miracles, which, nevertheless, any one may make his experience. She felt kindly to these girls because she had tried to make them happy [. . .]" (259). Her external act of will alters her internal condition. Margaret begins the novel as a

socialite vexed by competing desires and loyalties; she ends it as a nun, an identity in which she is “at rest” and empowered, as Isabel quips, to “do all the good she likes” (495). Such dramatic personal change follows in some way from her decision to visit the unfriended family, or from a series of decisions like that one; it is a kind of willful act that transforms her very self in the process.

Margaret’s life seems to answer Howells’s query about how words can become things and deeds: by making small choices that, in time, reform one’s character and facilitate new patterns of behavior.<sup>5</sup> However, Margaret hovers on the periphery of the text, and a scene from her early socialite days renders this marginalization exceptionally ironic. After first meeting her, Basil waxes rhapsodic on Margaret’s virtues, and when Isabel affirms that such sophisticated girls “are the loveliest of the human race” but suggests that “perhaps the rest have to pay too much for them,” Basil promptly replies, “For such an exquisite creature as Miss Vance [. . .] we couldn’t pay too much” (250). While the sight of a girl running from the police interrupts this conversation, with the implication that she and others like her embody the cost of cultivating Miss Vances, when read backward from the end of the novel after Margaret’s transformation, the scene points rather to Howells’s lack of investment in Margaret. He did not pay *enough*—to develop her more thoroughly, to make her central to the text, to make the reader attend to her. Instead, he splurged on Basil and Isabel to achieve an aesthetic effect, a realist characterization, and the cost lies in Howells’s unrealized ethical purpose of rendering idealism compelling.

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<sup>5</sup> This answer resonates with William James’s comments on the ethical value of habit in *The Principles of Psychology*. When Howells reviewed that book in the July 1891 issue of *Harper’s*, he singled out the “Habit” chapter for special praise (315-16).

In the novel's final lines, another encounter with Margaret, now a nun devoted to a life of poverty, reiterates Howells's neglect of her. When Isabel and Basil pass her on the street in the wardrobe of her new community, "the peace that passeth understanding [. . .] looked at them from her eyes" (495). While Margaret continues her "free, nun-like walk" down the street, the text remains with the Marches who walk in the opposite direction and speculate about her current life. In the book's last line, Basil concludes, "Well, we must trust that look of hers" (495). His statement is a small act of faith, a little refusal of his wonted agnosticism. Still, it costs him very little, virtually nothing. Indeed, standing at the periphery of the text, underdeveloped, Margaret hardly compels belief. Because Howells keeps her at the margins and the Marches at the center, the novel calls the reader to "hazard" very little on Margaret's agency-rich story, not even a walk down the street in her direction.

A very early scene concerning the *Every Other Week* articulates the principle according to which Howells prioritizes the Marches over Margaret. When the magazine's creator, Fulkerson, recruits Basil as his editor, the offer prompts an internal tug-of-war for Basil, and the narrator's peculiar interest in this situation provides a gloss on Howells's aesthetics and ethics. The narrator compares Basil's vacillating perspective on the job to those of a man considering a crime; commenting that "The process is probably not at all different," he adds the interesting judgment that "to the philosophical mind the kind of result is unimportant; the process is everything" (81). So it is in Howells's poverty fiction: the performance or neglect of poverty relief (see Margaret and the Marches, respectively) interests him less than the processes by which characters engage the idea of social reform. The novel's drama lies in the characters' inward lives, in their

shifting opinions and motivations, in their tentative stalking of (and retreat from) decisive action. For this reason, Margaret Vance's intriguing path from socialite to nun claims very little of the narrator's attention; her commitment to a life of service involves a kind of closure, an end to processes of self-ironic introspection.

Despite the indecision of the Marches or of characters like the dilettante Beaton, Margaret's (underdeveloped) narrative indicates that *A Hazard of New Fortunes* does not simply eviscerate the notion of human agency. The text depicts human beings functioning in dynamic relations with their environments, and those characters are not thereby deprived of all freedom. After all, they have a hand in building the environments that in turn constrain them. However, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* tends toward a strong environmentalism, and a conversation between its protagonist couple illustrates how the novel's superficially balanced perspective tilts in one direction. Basil March professes to his wife Isabel that the contemporary "economic chance-world," which offers no one financial security, drives people to cruel competition. When Isabel protests that things would not be as bad if people "were not so greedy and so foolish," he agrees that "We can't put it all on the conditions; we must put some of the blame on character" (437). But he immediately reverts to an environmental emphasis, claiming, "But conditions *make* character; and people are greedy and foolish, and wish to have and to shine, because having and shining are held up to them by civilization as the chief good of life" (437). Less ambiguous is Basil's assertion that even if he and Isabel were to sacrifice their social standing and move into a poor neighborhood, it would do the poor "not the least [good] in the world" (66). Where *Annie Kilburn* dramatizes *weakness* of will in the face

of complexity, the later novel posits an *incapacity* of will to overcome social conditions.<sup>6</sup> Basil and other characters in *Hazard* demonstrate their share of volitional weakness, like the “cultivated people” in *Annie Kilburn*, but Howells further constrains the characters of the later novel with social conditions unresponsive to their (imagined) best efforts.

These failures of the will—in *Annie Kilburn* and *Hazard*, from weakness or incapacity—stimulate the ironic response that both novels depict. Annie’s and the Marches’ brand of self-irony responds to a perceived gap between the person each thinks she should be and the person she thinks she is. This multiple selfhood fosters and feeds on Howells’s “criticism mingled with large allowance.” One can trace the constitution of this ironic self throughout *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. The novel suggests, for example, that metropolitan landscapes produce a peculiar type of social self that lacks distinct borders. The narrator describes the Marches’ personal reformation on moving from parochial Boston to worldly New York:

This immunity from acquaintance, this touch-and-go quality in their New York sojourn, this almost loss of individuality at times, after the intense identification of their Boston life, was a relief, though Mrs. March had her misgivings, and questioned whether it were not perhaps too relaxing to the moral fibre. March refused to explore his conscience; he allowed that it might be so; but he said he liked now and then to feel his personality in that state of solution. (296-97)

The “almost loss of individuality” that Isabel perceives and the “state of solution” in which Basil’s personality hangs depend on what the text elsewhere calls a “solvent in New York life that reduces all men to a common level [. . .] and brings to the surface the deeply underlying nobody” (243).

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<sup>6</sup> For more on the distinction between weakness and incapacity of will, and an illuminating study of agency and reading, see Andrew H. Miller’s book *The Burdens of Perfection: On Ethics and Reading in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (2008).

While the foregoing passage imagines a self (or, perhaps, a “nobody”) in relation to other selves, *Hazard* also makes claims about the internal structure of the self, particularly in the context of Isabel’s concerns with morality. As the Marches discuss Dryfoos’s unwonted benevolence after his son’s death, Basil doubts that events ever change people, and when Isabel asks what does change people, his answer presents a model of selfhood that corresponds to and underlies *Hazard*’s treatment of agency:

Well, it won’t do to say, the Holy Spirit indwelling. That would sound like cant at this day. But the old fellows that used to say that had some glimpses of the truth. They knew that it is the still small voice that the soul heeds; not the deafening blasts of doom. I suppose I should have to say that we didn’t change at all. We develop. There’s the making of several characters in each of us; we *are* each several characters, and sometimes this character has the lead in us, and sometimes that. (485-86)

In Basil’s account, the self sounds very much like a Howells novel: both feature “several characters” who move in and out of the foreground, and neither changes with a dramatic turn of events but rather “develop[s]” as “sometimes this character [. . .] and sometimes that” assumes the lead role. This seemingly anarchic quality lies at the heart of Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia, which he considers a defining feature of novelistic form. Heteroglossia refers to the diverse voices—languages, discourses, dialects, idiolects—that populate modern novels and compete for attention, if not dominance. Bakhtin argues that within this linguistic (and ideological) diversity, “official,” unifying forces are also at work. Novelistic discourse is always both anarchic and governed, centrifugal and centripetal.

*A Hazard of New Fortune* divides time democratically among a diverse cast of characters, but it clearly privileges the Marches and their perspectives. Thus, the novel is itself classically Bakhtinian. Moreover, *Hazard* provides a model of its own form in *Every*



*Other Week*, the literary magazine that Basil edits. With its incongruous band of contributors and its unconventionally mixed media, the publication's first issue seems to Basil a product of "crazy fortuities" (195).<sup>7</sup> However, these "heterogeneous forces did co-operate" to make the first issue "representative of all [the staff's] nebulous intentions in a tangible form" (195). While Basil can conceive of this "homogeneity" as the result of his editorial "manipulation," he also senses his lack of volition in the matter: "To be sure, he had chosen all the material, but he had not voluntarily put it all together for that number; it had largely put itself together, as every number of every magazine does" (196). Basil's originality is constrained by an already existing form for literary magazines, which dictates that they must contain "a story, and then a sketch of travel," "a literary essay and a social essay," "a dramatic trifle," and so on (196). As with the Bakhtinian novel, *Every Other Week* manifests the differences among its contributors, the unifying vision of its editor, and a dynamic relation between these poles that inheres in the form itself.

Curiously, Howells posits this novelistic form as a model of the self. While Basil imagines each person as a composite of "several characters" who alternately take the "lead" role, Fulkerson markets *Every Other Week*, that novel in miniature, as "the idea of self-government in the arts" (213). By this formulation, the novel is the literary expression of self-government; in its management of heteroglossia, the novel enacts aesthetically the task that each person performs existentially: coordinating the "several

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<sup>7</sup> Speaking of the improbable constitution of *Every Other Week*, Basil opines, "I don't believe there's another publication in New York that could bring together [. . .] a fraternity and equality crank like poor old Lindau, and a belated sociological crank like Woodburn, and a truculent speculator like old Dryfoos, and a humanitarian dreamer like young Dryfoos, and a sentimentalist like me, and a nondescript like Beaton, and pure advertising essence like Fulkerson, and a society spirit like Kendricks" (324).

characters” of whom her self is comprised.<sup>8</sup> The notion of selfhood supposed in this analogy corresponds to one that Christopher Castiglia describes in antebellum American culture, where, he argues, “the interior became a micro-version of the social, not simply as an individual’s ‘private’ realm of desires, affects, and appetites, but as a realm of disruption and attempted order that, mirroring the often tense struggles between popular demand and juridical control, may be called an *interior state*” (3). Thus, social conflict is translated into psychological conflict, and political action is replaced by self-discipline.<sup>9</sup> Howells’s “social fiction” of the late 1880s dramatizes precisely these movements, while participating in the reconception of selfhood that they entail; if the modern self resembles a state, it also resembles the thoroughly socialized novel that Bakhtin theorizes.

Upon facing the complexity of modern social life, many of Howells’s characters relocate social conflicts to their own psyches, expecting to find conflict more manageable there but finding interiority, so constituted, a prison. The consummate dilettante Beaton, for example, possesses an “aesthetic and moral complexity” that is “chiefly a torment to itself”; his habit of capricious self-indulgence leaves his emotions flat and his will “somehow sick” (394). He suspects that “if he could once do something that was thoroughly distasteful to himself, he might make a beginning in the right direction,” but after some tentative experiments in this vein fail, he concludes that “His trouble was that

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<sup>8</sup> *Hazard* extends the novel-as-self metaphor when Fulkerson describes the relationship of image and text in *Every Other Week*. Calling for a design in which a picture “spreads [. . .] over the print till you can’t tell which is which,” he says that such pictures “behave [. . .] sociably” (140). Characters, then, are not the only players in a text expected to “get along”; all the elements of a text, including its pictures, interact with one another like persons in a social landscape.

<sup>9</sup> Castiglia concretizes the manifestation of these movements in Jacksonian America: “reform moved from a focus on structural injustices such as slavery to individual vices such as drinking, gambling, masturbation, eating spicy foods, smoking, reading trashy novels, and wearing tight corsets” (8).

he could not escape himself; and for the most part, he justified himself in refusing to try” (394, 395). Confronting his angst later in the novel, Margaret Vance asserts that “There is no comfort for us in ourselves” and then adds what could well serve as an epigraph for both novels: “It’s hard to get outside” (471).

Though Margaret does “get outside,” we have witnessed Howells’s lack of attention to her story, and his attention to or neglect of the novel’s various characters guides the reader’s own cognitive and affective focus. The Marches command the reader’s attention not only because the text foregrounds them in the plot but also because Howells deploys his own irony in a manner that encourages the reader to identify with the couple. This affiliation occurs early in the novel when the narrator offers an extended third-person introduction to the protagonists that gently lampoons their self-satisfaction: we are told that they feel “a glow almost of virtue” over their well-appointed house and that Basil’s literary life seems to them “very meritorious” (26, 27). Even so, the narrator continues,

neither [Basil] nor his wife supposed that they were selfish persons. On the contrary, they were very sympathetic; there was no good cause that they did not wish well; they had a generous scorn of all kinds of narrow-heartedness; if it had ever come into their way to sacrifice themselves for others, they thought they would have done so, but they never asked why it had not come in their way. (27)

This ironic description invites the reader to share the narrator’s smiling judgment on the Marches’ self-absorption. The reader and narrator now share the Marches’ secret, which even the couple seems not to know, namely that they have never been called on to sacrifice for others because, “very much wrapt up in themselves and their children,” the Marches make no space for others (26).

*A Hazard of New Fortunes* would be a very different book if the reader maintained this privileged relationship with the narrator throughout. The surprise of the novel is that the Marches are in on the secret, or they very quickly come to be. Basil especially sees himself as comprehensively as the narrator does. What happens when the reader finds that the Marches see themselves as clearly as he and the narrator do? After the reader chuckles at Basil and Isabel's apparent lack of self-awareness, this surprise forges a double bond of sympathy between the reader and protagonist. First, the reader must exchange her critical posture toward Basil for one of welcome. The narrator's critical perspective on Basil, which he offers to the reader, is one that Basil himself shares. So he belongs in the company of the narrator and reader, not under their scrutiny. Secondly, finding herself in error about the Marches may destabilize the reader's own sense of self-awareness: while she thought she was enjoying a privileged perspective, she was actually in the dark. The dramatic reconstruction of the relationships among narrator, character, and reader—from ones based on unequal knowledge to ones based on sympathy—makes all the difference in the reader's moral judgments about the novel's action and particularly the Marches' disengagement from the poor. The Marches are now friends of the reader, and the event that established this relationship—the embarrassment of the reader in her erroneous judgment of the Marches—counsels caution in future judgments. It encourages the reader to adopt the same tentative posture that the Marches demonstrate.

The text excludes other characters from this circle of identification and affection. This structure of irony distinguishes the Marches as the characters who most profoundly shape the reading experience because that peculiar form of irony invites the reader into a

relationship with them, making them peers and friends. Like Margaret, many characters cannot command the reader's attention for long. Fulkerson is too frivolous to engage the reader; Dryfoos, the magazine's financier, is too aggressively capitalistic and emotionally inaccessible; and the artist, Alma Leighton, lacks depth, functioning only as a critic of Beaton. Beaton, like the Marches, wrestles with the problem of human agency, but ultimately his self-deluding proclivities in this realm disqualify him for the reader's sympathy. The sociopolitical radicals Lindau and Conrad are certainly compelling, but they remain less influential in the reader's experience because their lack of irony disallows them the novel's primary means of inviting a relationship with the reader. The reader has very limited emotional access to these characters because they do not participate in the self-satire of the Marches and because they seem unruffled by questions about their own agency.

In *A Hazard of New Fortunes* a particular use of irony not only compensates characters for their anxieties about agency but also guides readers' sympathies and colors their perspectives. In *Hazard*, the characters who would otherwise be objects of irony are capable of regarding themselves from multiple perspectives; the critique traditionally reserved for narrator and reader together, and enabled by a character's ignorance, Howells's characters perform on themselves. Their sophisticated self-knowledge brings them up to the level of narrator and reader; it initiates them into the circle of privileged information. Hence, all three parties enjoy the faculty of seeing themselves both as they are and as they "should" be, and solidarity easily arises from sharing this complex position.

Through this manipulation of irony, *Hazard* tends to reproduce in readers the strangely gratifying crisis of agency that Howells himself inhabits. An ambivalent self-reflexiveness, at once critical and sympathetic, constitutes the central pleasure of reading these novels. Critic Thomas Peyser describes this experience in terms of a conversation, and his language sits well with the concept of heteroglossia. He argues that “Howells deals with the disruptions of cosmopolitan skepticism by trying to inaugurate a culture of conversation, a culture that contains competing views of an uncertain world by putting them into endless dialogue” (27). Howells does imagine society as a democratic assemblage of voices, and Peyser is right to see the author’s fiction similarly: “he presents us with novels full of talk about social transformation that nevertheless issue in nothing but a kind of enlightened deadlock” (102). What this assessment fails to recognize is that Howells removes the conversation further from the public sphere than even the novel takes us. Since a truly public “conversation” proves too disorderly for him and many others, he not only fictionalizes it but also drives it into the individual psyche. With these two alternative conversations established, Howells invites readers to a virtual sociality with fictional characters as internally divided as they are.

### **Spiritualism and Selfhood**

John Crowley marks *A Hazard of New Fortunes* as the moment in Howells’s career when the author’s “impetus for addressing public issues lost velocity” (19). Certainly, his fiction after 1890 engages matters of socioeconomic injustice less explicitly and frequently than his fiction of the late 1880s does. The later era replaces depictions of urban class stratification and labor unrest with explorations of strange psychological and metaphysical phenomena. Dreams, mesmerism, and Spiritualism become Howells’s

métier across works like *The Shadow of a Dream* (1890), *A World of Chance* (1893), *Questionable Shapes* (1903), and *Between the Dark and the Daylight* (1907)—as though he were returning to a Hawthornian romanticism. Recent scholars have taught us to seek the political even in these preternatural settings, though, and their counsel proves fruitful in the study of Howells's late fiction.

One can profitably read Howells's fictional treatments of Spiritualism as investigations of agency, continued from his classic poverty fiction in a different setting. In *Ghosts of Futures Past: Spiritualism and the Cultural Politics of Nineteenth-Century America* (2008), historian Molly McGarry argues that, oriented around séances for communicating with the dead, Spiritualism offered practitioners extraordinary power: “the potential for affective connection across time, personal transformation, and utopian political change” (8). However, in *Necro Citizenship: Death, Eroticism, and the Public Sphere in the Nineteenth-Century United States*, Russ Castronovo interprets Spiritualism—and a range of related practices concerning death and the afterlife—in a manner to similar to Christopher Castiglia's thesis that nineteenth-century Americans displaced politics from the public sphere to the psychological interior, in the process changing politics profoundly. Castronovo reads practices like mesmerism, clairvoyance, and séances as venues indulging “a fantasy of democracy that seems beyond the disruption, contestation, and unresolved agitation of politics” (xi). He describes a “necro ideology” that marks “the unmarked soul as refuge from the politicized body, idealizing the afterlife as a perfected social order, and representing passivity and somnolence as democratic virtues” (13). I find McGarry's and Castronovo's contradictory theses useful

for analyzing two of Howells's Spiritualist fictions, *The World of Chance* (1893) and, briefly, his earlier novel *The Undiscovered Country* (1880).

In *The Undiscovered Country*, the Shakers understand Spiritualism in terms more like McGarry's than Castronovo's. The text follows the Spiritualist experiments and final disillusionment of Dr. Boynton and his daughter Egeria, a medium, as they move from Boston to a rural Shaker community, which Boynton imagines as a setting more conducive to his work. To the Shakers, however, Spiritualism is a means to their utopian communal life; and by treating communications with the dead as an end in themselves, Boynton alienates himself from the Shaker community. In *The World of Chance*, a man named Denton has an "internal Voice" that "tells him what to do" (189)—a "familiar spirit" or "a kind of ghost" (189)—which Denton's father-in-law relates to Spiritualism, calling it "a survival of some supernatural experiences of his among the Shakers" (190). The consistent message of this Voice is explicitly concerned with poverty, telling Denton that someone must "atone" for the socioeconomic injustices of modern life and urging him to imagine his children, his sister-in-law, and himself as potential sacrifices.<sup>10</sup>

Comparing *The World of Chance* to *The Undiscovered Country* reveals the evolution of Howells's use of Spiritualism. In *The Undiscovered Country*, the function of communications with the dead is either apolitical, as with Egeria who channels messages bearing no relation to social conflict, or utopian, as with the Shakers who consider those communications an aid to their distinctive communal life. However, in *The World of Chance*, Denton's Voice urges not the establishment of a new economic or political system but a symbolic atonement for social injustice, a sacrifice of one human life. The

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<sup>10</sup> Richard Brodhead reads the novel's plot as an "unmeaning idiosyncrasy" and argues that this idiosyncratic quality "puncture[s] the significance of his chosen dramatic situation" (93).



individualized character of this message, with which Denton carries on a painful private struggle, illustrates Howells's relocation of social conflict to the personal interior. The contrasts between *The Undiscovered Country* and *The World of Chance* frame Howells's use of Spiritualism as a corroboration of Castronovo's thesis and an instantiation of the privatization of politics that Castiglia describes. Moreover, rather than offering an empowering alternative to the solipsistic novelistic self, these novels radicalize that model of selfhood by literalizing the interior voices it posits and intensifying the conflicts between them. As in all of Howells's poverty fiction, it is useful to consider what social phenomena condition this (new) form of heteroglossic selfhood.

Howells's poverty fiction dramatizes a contest between human agency and forces transcending the self: in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, those external forces are primarily environmental; in *The Undiscovered Country* and *The World of Chance*, those forces are both environmental and metaphysical—including spirits of the dead, chance, and Providence. I will focus the rest of this analysis primarily on the later *World of Chance*, which, according to Scott Dennis, “stridently amplifies the characters and themes in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*” (293). Set in New York like *Hazard*, *The World of Chance* also features a writer-protagonist, Percy Bysshe Shelley Ray, whose encounters with an aging utopian, Hughes, affords parallels to Basil March's relationship with the radical Lindau and whose sense of irony, nourished here by the sardonic philosopher Kane, perpetuates his agnostic curiosity toward the semi-Tolstoyan vision that Hughes preaches. As Ray pursues the publication of his first novel, which itself features romantic elements including mesmerism, the vagaries of literary reception occasion an extended inquiry into the metaphysical influences on human behavior. Baffled by the unexpected successes or

failures of books, the publishers and authors that Ray knows repeatedly cite luck or chance as the only viable explanation. Initially, the protagonist partially accepts this metaphysical rationale, while reserving some agency for himself. The first time a publisher offers to review his novel manuscript, Ray tells himself that he “must try to be very good and to merit the fortune that had befallen him,” as though the good “fortune” came in prophetic recognition of his subsequent behavior. Indeed, he enters into a struggle with fortune, “str[iving] to arrest the wheel which was bringing him up, and must carry him down if it kept on moving”; and he aims to bargain with the Divine, making promises of virtue and assuming that “the thing most pleasing to his god would be some immediate effort in his own behalf, of prudent industry or frugality” (66). At this point Ray cannot accept that a happy outcome, like the review or acceptance of his manuscript, may occur independently of his agency.

After his novel is published, however, he regards its mysterious success and decline as effects of chance or Providence. In fact, he begins to “wonder if life had not all been a chance with him”; it seems to him that “nothing [. . .] was the result of reasoned cause”—neither his book nor economics nor human psychology (374). As these meditations evolve, he comes to suspect that what is called chance actually manifests an arcane providential order, of which we get a “glimpse [. . .] once or twice in a lifetime” (375). While the sincerity of this turn to order (on the novel’s last page) remains uncertain, such ambiguity is irrelevant to the text’s broader inquiry about human agency, for neither chance nor Providence, as conceived here, accommodates human enterprise. Both operate remotely and ineluctably, overwhelming other agencies, so that human activities produce the “effect of intention”—to take Howells’s language out of context—

only to the extent that the ubiquitous machinations of chance and/or Providence remain invisible.<sup>11</sup>

In *The World of Chance* Kane shares Basil March's opinion that the individual is "what [conditions] shape him to," and he posits a self so environmentally contingent that a person could not move into different conditions "without breaking himself in pieces and putting himself together again" (207). The effects of this novel's metaphysical landscape on the self resemble those of social conditions on Basil and Isabel March. Much as Basil enjoys experiencing his self in a "state of solution" in the New York scene, in *The World of Chance* Ray finds his self dissolved, or negated, in the culture of his writer friends, whose lack of direction and "want of meaning"—in short, their submission to chance—forms a "bond" that carries them together "through vast cyclones of excitement that whirled them round and round, and made a kind of pleasant drunkenness in their brains, and consoled them for never resting and never arriving" (214). When this vision of a storm-tossed, inebriated social body passes, Ray immediately adopts an opposite perspective that shows "himself and those around him full of distinctly intended effort, each in his sort" (214). However, this dramatic switch, which reasserts the discrete, purposive individual, underlines the threat that Isabel March recognizes in New York's social "solvent": it endangers individual agency, compromising what she calls the "moral fibre" (214).

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<sup>11</sup> In some instances *The World of Chance* and *A Hazard of New Fortunes* lay responsibility for a negative outcome on "human nature." However, characters use even this "humanist" attribution to deny their own agency, more than once making the defense that they "had at least not invented human nature" (*Hazard* 167). By this strange formula, to blame human nature is to blame something or someone other than oneself.

While a world governed by chance throws people together in these transformative ways, Howells's representations of Spiritualism specify a particular set of internal relations corresponding to these external ones. The resulting self is much like the novelistic self of *Hazard*; only, in the Spiritualist model, the heteroglossia that constitutes personhood is literal. In *The Undiscovered Country* Egeria is a spiritualist medium, a channel through whom the dead communicate with the living. As a medium, her person becomes a heteroglossic forum. However, more than the subject of an arcane power, she is the docile object through whom other agents exercise their wills. Her mediumship depends on her renunciation of self-government. Her own consciousness must be suspended for her to channel the voices of the dead, who also exert control over, and once injure, her body. If the hypnotic role confers on her some privileged status and perhaps some unique powers, it also exhausts her physically and psychologically, and after her extended recovery from two taxing séances, she confesses a desire to abandon her mediumship. Egeria's spiritualist experience suggests the division, rather than a multiplication, of agency that attends all heteroglossic selves, even the mundanely novelistic.

In *The World of Chance*, Denton's experience of the Voice, whose dictates his family repeatedly talks him out of obeying, is so continuous as to constitute a sort of relationship. On one occasion when Ansel leaves a conversation with his wife and Ray and is then heard talking in an adjacent room, Mrs. Denton wryly comments that "Ansel doesn't say much in company, but he's pretty sociable when he gets by himself" (222). Clearly referencing Ansel's private conversations with the Voice, Mrs. Denton's remark highlights the fundamental similarity between Ansel's interior life and the novelistic self

that Howells presents in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. The novelistic self and Ansel's spiritualist self are both heteroglossic; they are constituted by an internal dialogue among equal, competing voices.<sup>12</sup> The spirituality of Ansel's Voice does not make it more authoritative for him than various emotional or intellectual impulses for others; though it "tells him what to do," it does not compel obedience, apparently even in Ansel's suicide, which seems more an act of despair than conviction. Ansel's refusal to obey the Voice indicates that it exists in a basically balanced relationship with other internal voices, not to mention those of his family.

Howells does not imagine the reader only as an observer of these heteroglossic selves. He believes in his models of personhood enough to think they describe his readers. Therefore, when a character comments on episodes involving hypnosis in Ray's novel, "We felt like we were living it," she presents the model of readership governing Howells's novel: it works on a reader like hypnosis, insinuating into his consciousness a previously external voice. Where *A Hazard of New Fortunes* plays host to an ongoing anarchic conversation and urges the reader to participate, *The World of Chance* aims to implant a similar conversation inside the reader.

While Howells dramatically revises the concepts of agency and selfhood that Rebecca Harding Davis employs, imagining the work of novels as hypnotic suggestion also implies a different notion of textual agency. Davis is at pains to express the limitations of fictional texts; *Life in the Iron-Mills* suggests that it, and all works of art, are useless if an audience does not somehow perform them in the public sphere. The text is a mere tissue between reader and world, and the reader makes this tissue "work" only

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<sup>12</sup> Ansel resembles the novelistic self more closely than Egeria does because the multiple voices constitute rather than displace his consciousness. Moreover, this heteroglossic state is continual with him, not occasional.

by penetrating it. Howells's *The World of Chance*, on the other hand, imagines the novel suspending readers' conscious agency and imposing on them a will of its own.

This is a late development for Howells. His previously referenced letter to Edward Everett Hale, distinguishing sharply between "words" and "things, deeds," denies language vitality and power. However, writing a "Bibliographical" preface for a 1909 edition of *Hazard*, Howells recognizes this novel as "the most vital of my fictions"; it took its form, says the author, "as nearly without my conscious agency as I ever allow myself to think such things happen" (4). As though it were its own author, the novel "compelled into its course [materials] which [Howells] had not known lay near" (4). Given *Hazard's* comparison of the novel to the self, it is not surprising that Howells attributes a kind of sentience to this work. From here it is no great leap to imagining the novel as hypnotist. Even in *Hazard* Basil claims that novelists, by way of their fiction, "really have the charge of people's thinking nowadays" (485).

However, the context of Basil's comment is his larger argument that, contrary to the canons of popular fiction, people do not change in response to major life events. So he claims that novels shape most people's opinions on this issue even as he contradicts the teaching of novels. Herein lies a crucial qualification of Howells's empowerment of texts. His fiction presents the people over whom novels exert great power, including the readers of Ray's book who feel themselves hypnotized, as uncritical readers.

Sophisticated readers like Basil—ironists—can distance themselves from fiction and thereby critique it. Late in his career Howells plays at the personification of texts: his "Bibliographical" essay for *A Hazard of New Fortunes* asserts that the novel came into being virtually on its own and "stood on its own feet" (6), while his collection of essays,

*Imaginary Interviews* (1910), opens with an interview of the “Easy Chair,” Howells’s abandoned editorial platform at *Harper’s* now made “an animate presence” (3). But such personifications are indeed play, for they coincide with the waning of Howells’s confidence in his cultural influence. In these late years Howells does not think his texts are acquiring greater power. Quite the opposite: he feels himself pushed to the cultural periphery, and imagining his writings as loyal friends is a grandfatherly sort of joke, tinged with sadness. Nonetheless, Howells brings us some distance from Davis’s intentionally thin texts that point always beyond themselves to the “real world,” and in doing so he prepares us for the solid structures of Wharton’s fiction, the literary built environments that she imagines shaping her readers.

## Compromising Ideals: Sympathy as Social and Aesthetic Practice in Edith Wharton

William Dean Howells's poverty fiction foregrounds the bourgeois self perpetually in conflict with itself—or, more precisely, the bourgeois self as a site of displaced and never-resolved social conflicts. Edith Wharton's writing on poverty, an underappreciated portion of her *oeuvre*, thematizes the same middle- and upper-class ambivalence, but where Howells internalizes social conflict and ends up with characters disengaged from social reform, Wharton forces psychological ambivalence “outside,” resolving internal conflict through social interactions. Exemplifying this practice is *The Book of the Homeless* (1916), an edited collection of essays, fiction, and other artworks that helped finance Wharton's refugee homes during World War I.<sup>1</sup>

In the author's long and varied literary career *The Book of the Homeless* seems like a singularity, even a contradiction of social and aesthetic principles to which Wharton was fervently committed. In her 1934 autobiography *A Backward Glance*, while reflecting on the charity work that this book aided, she announces her “innate distaste for anything like ‘social service’” (348)—and does not say the distaste mellowed with time. As for the book's aesthetic incongruities, Wharton's essay “The Vice of Reading” (1903)

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<sup>1</sup> At the outbreak of World War I, Wharton had been living in Paris for seven years; and while waiting for an opportunity to remove to England, she “was asked by the Comtesse d'Haussonville, President of one of the branches of the French Red Cross [. . .] to organize a work-room for such work-women of [her] *arrondissement* as were not yet receiving government assistance” (*A Backward Glance* 340). Although “totally inexperienced in every form of relief work,” Wharton answered the request affirmatively and established a work-room that would be only the first of many such charities, including hostels for refugees and children's homes. The scale of the relief work that Wharton administered was rivaled only by that of the Red Cross.



sharply criticizes the “mechanical reader” for his instrumentalist approach to literature, which commodifies literature and makes it *for* something else, not an end to itself. But what sort of book could be less an end to itself than this “Who’s Who” of cultural elites—Joseph Conrad, Thomas Hardy, William Dean Howells, William James, Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Auguste Rodin, George Santayana, Igor Stravinsky, W. B. Yeats, and Theodore Roosevelt all contributed—which, together with an auction of the contributed manuscripts and artworks, aimed to raise money for a charity? I do not intend to reconcile this text neatly with the social and aesthetic positions that Wharton assumes in her autobiography and “The Vice of Reading.” Rather, I argue that its uneasy *rapprochement* with those positions provides the very key to understanding Wharton’s philosophy of the duty to one’s neighbor, particularly the poor, and also to literary texts. *The Book of the Homeless* testifies to Wharton’s work on behalf of refugees, a labor that sacrifices her inclination against “anything like ‘social service’”; likewise, the text compromises Wharton’s aesthetics for the sake of an ethical commitment. For Wharton, such compromise defines the related tasks of caring for the other and reading literature. It is the structure of sympathy, the fundamental principle that underlies and orders her tastes and behaviors.<sup>2</sup>

Although in 1914 Wharton considered herself a novice (“totally inexperienced”) in charitable work, she had already written two novels concerning poverty relief, which

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<sup>2</sup> Writing on Wharton’s novel *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), which this chapter examines at length, Allen F. Stein argues that Wharton presents compromise as “the law of all social life” (336). Closely attuned to the “limitations inherent in human nature,” Wharton makes the necessity of compromise her “prevailing truth”—“not [ . . . ] in the sense of a lack of principle, certainly, but [ . . . ] in the sense of a willingness to accept that one cannot achieve all one might wish to” (330, 331, 336). This chapter specifies sympathy as the particular form of compromise that governs Wharton’s social and aesthetic practices, and the chapter tracks her evolving exercise of sympathy from the beginning of her career through her involvement in World War I.

progressively developed the aesthetic and ethical categories that structured her work as the United States's preeminent charitable organizer during World War I. Those two novels, *The Valley of Decision* (1902) and *The Fruit of the Tree* (1907), underline a moral duty to care for the poor; and the first of these, like William Dean Howells's poverty fiction, dramatizes the ebb and flow of a would-be philanthropist's willpower. The novel is set in Italy on the cusp of the Enlightenment, and the protagonist Odo, heir to the duchy of Pianura, loves the poor and embraces the new liberalism that imagines a more egalitarian society. However, when he comes to power with intent to initiate social reforms, his political opponents' resistance and the masses' own disorderliness temper his idealism. In its title, *The Valley of Decision* suggests the state of suspended, even tortured agency that so often characterizes Howells's favorite characters, while the titles of the book's subdivisions—"The Old Order," "The New Light," "The Choice," "The Reward"—trace the movement of agency.<sup>3</sup> As William Vance argues, "the core of the narrative concerns what will happen to Odo and what he will *choose* to be and to do" (187).<sup>4</sup> Vance lists "the limits of power" among the novel's many themes; I place that philosophical problem first among Wharton's concerns here. Even while Odo remains

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<sup>3</sup> The title manifests the same concern as that of Wharton's short story collection from the year before, *Crucial Instances* (1901). "Crucial instance" is a philosophical term originating with Francis Bacon that invokes the image of a crossroads (see the Latin root, *crucis*). In Bacon's empirical framework, it is an experiment that enables one to determine the cause of a phenomenon by eliminating the other possible causes. Similarly, in Wharton's usage it is an existential moment where many paths lay before an agent and the choice of one path excludes the others.

<sup>4</sup> Vance interprets Odo as a "mask" for Wharton, which conceals a very "personal investment [. . .] in her hero's ambivalence and self-definition" (169). He argues that Wharton "project upon Odo her own speculative, curious, independent, novelistic attitude toward life, which wholly inhibits him as a politician but makes possible precisely her own self-realization as a novelist" (195). The implications of this "attitude toward life" manifest in Odo's habit of ethical vacillation, described below.

committed to justice for the poor, he finds the execution of it more challenging than he had imagined. Imagining his hero St. Francis's era as one "when hearts inflamed with the new sense of brotherhood had but to set forth on their simple mission of almsgiving and admonition," Odo concludes that now "To love one's neighbor had become a much more complex business, one that taxed the intelligence as much as the heart [. . .]" (572).<sup>5</sup> In fact, loving one's neighbor taxes Odo's will as much as his heart and intelligence. Though he is known for his revolutionary social vision, in recognizing the complexity of social reform, Odo habitually falls prey to "a stealing apathy of the will, an inclination toward the subtle duality of judgment that had so often weakened and diffused his energies" (508). Faced with the complexity of sociopolitical systems, the intransigence of rivals, and the intractability of the poor, Odo moderates his high estimate of the individual's agency, eventually regarding life not as the sum of individual strivings but as "an incomplete and shabby business, a patchwork of torn and ravelled effort" (239).

The same insight defines Wharton's treatment of agency in *The Fruit of the Tree*, a novel that James Tuttleton reads as a gloss on "the perils of abstract idealism." In this text John Amherst aspires to improve conditions in a town built around the factory that his wife Bessy owns, but her family's resistance to his progressive ideals and her own recoil from self-sacrifice interfere with Amherst's goals. When Bessy dies, Amherst remarries and, though his second wife, Justine Brent, shares his social idealism, other

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<sup>5</sup> This language echoes William Dean Howells' novel *Annie Kilburn*, in which Reverend Peck shows Annie the inadequacy of individualized charity under unjust social conditions. After this revelation she maintains that "we must continue to do charity" but asks a friend, "But don't you see how much more complicated it is? That's what I meant by life not being simple any more. It was easy enough to do charity when it used to seem the right and proper remedy for suffering; but now, when I can't make it appear a finality, but only something provisional, temporary— Don't you see?" (818)

disagreements ruin their romantic expectations of married life. A chastened Justine channels Odo from the earlier novel when she frames all of human existence as a series of compromises:

But life is not a matter of abstract principles, but a succession of pitiful compromises with fate, of concessions to old tradition, old beliefs, old charities and frailties. [ . . . ] And she had humbled herself to accept the lesson, seeing human relations at last as a tangled and deep-rooted growth, a dark forest through which the idealist cannot cut his straight path without hearing at each stroke the cry of the severed branch: “*Why woundest thou me?*” (624)

As disappointed as Justine sounds here, Wharton’s novels present her and Odo’s disillusionment as experiences pregnant with possibilities of a renovated, pragmatic agency. Elsewhere, *The Fruit of the Tree* depicts compromise in more explicitly hopeful terms. Once, after making a difficult decision for the good of her marriage, Justine reflects on the benefits of having made a similar choice with lower stakes in the past: “such a patchwork business are our best endeavors, yet so faithfully does each weak upward impulse reach back a hand to the next” (565). If this “patchwork business” of human effort is “incomplete and shabby,” as *The Valley of Decision* says it is, it is also sustaining and empowering in moments of great need, as Justine recognizes.

Against a passive, Howellsian response to the limitations of all human action, Wharton’s novels thematize compromised idealism as an appropriate engine of human relations. The principal characters in these novels repeatedly confront the limitations of their own agency; they find their wills bounded by agents other than themselves, be they institutional or personal, natural or supernatural. However, Odo’s and Justine’s compromises with these forces outside themselves set the pattern for Wharton’s prescribed mode of engaging both the poor and literature, namely sympathy. Sympathy is

the compromise that Wharton commends for social and aesthetic relations; it is the content of her intervention in contemporary debates over both poverty relief and fiction reading in America.

### Sympathy

*The Valley of Decision* disdains liberal thinkers of the Enlightenment who, in their “sentimental optimism,” recognize neither the sacrifices that reform demands nor the violence that revolution will entail (7, v. 2). For these figures in the “early days of universal illusion,” “Utopia was already in sight; and all the world was setting out for it as for some heavenly picnic ground” (147, v. 1). But Wharton suggests that their “tearful philanthropy” lacks any “close contact with misery” (7, v. 2; 223, v. 1). Against this merely intellectual “philandering with reform,” the text advances St. Francis as the figure of genuine service motivated by sympathy. As a boy, harassed by his foster family, Odo finds a “melancholy kinship” with St. Francis because, painted on the wall of the Pontesordo chapel, the saint’s face is “lit with an ecstasy of suffering that seemed [. . .] to reflect [. . .] the mute pain of all poor downtrodden folk on earth” (3, v. 1). When Odo’s foster mother drags him from the chapel to receive word of his father’s death, he desperately glances toward this painting of St. Francis, “who looked back at him in an ecstasy of commiseration” (10). Underscoring the centrality of Franciscan charity, the novel ends with an adult, world-weary Odo revisiting the chapel at Pontesordo and praying under the saint’s gaze. St. Francis’s com-miseration, his being miserable *with* the sufferer, contrasts the philanthropy that the novel’s utopian reformers only discuss at a distance from real need.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, the novel emphasizes the intimate knowledge of suffering that sympathy entails when it says that one of Odo’s friends offered him “that penetrating sympathy which was almost

In *The Fruit of the Tree*, Wharton makes the same distinction between the experience of sympathy and a style of philanthropy that, aiming to serve the poor from afar, serves primarily the philanthropist's ego. The novel criticizes "one-sided idealist[s]" whose social "panaceas" overlook the person (47). While Amherst recognizes "the need of a philosophic survey of the [labor] question," he is convinced that "only through sympathy with its personal, human side [can] a solution be reached" (48). To him a central problem of the industrial system lies in the "disappearance of the old familiar contact between master and man," and the most pressing need is "to bring [the employer] closer to his workers" (48). No legislation can reconcile these two until the employer "entered personally into [the employees'] hardships and aspirations—till he learned what they wanted and why they wanted it" (48).

Wharton sketches the model for such interaction in a conversation between Bessy Westmore and Justine Brent, which juxtaposes two forms of charity, the one intense and self-conscious, the other lightly self-deprecating. When Bessy shrinks from the idea that Justine might resume her nursing work in "that dreary hospital" and Justine claims she finds the place interesting, Bessy "indulgently" grants that "many people go through the craze for philanthropy" (231). To Bessy's mind, her friend's interest in nursing the sick exemplifies a fashion among affluent women to engage in systematic charitable work—a "craze" that eventually dissipates as inexplicably as it first took hold. But Justine laughs at the ascription to her of a "philanthropic" motive, claiming "I don't think I ever felt inclined to do good in the abstract"; instead, a slippage in categories of self and other, described again by a corporeal metaphor, accounts for her charity:

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a gift of divination" (163). This uncanny understanding of another's pain stands in sharp contrast to the philanthropists' innocence of poverty.

[I]t's only that I'm so fatally interested in people that before I know it I've slipped into their skins; and then, of course, if anything goes wrong with them, it's just as if it had gone wrong with me; and I can't help trying to rescue myself from *their* troubles! I suppose it's what you'd call meddling—and so should I, if I could only remember that the other people aren't myself!" (231)

Justine's "forgetfulness" distinguishes her service to others from "the craze for philanthropy"; a lost sense of autonomy separates the form of charity that Wharton commends from the self-conscious "social service" that she shuns.

### **Selfhood**

Wharton's notion of sympathy requires a theory of porous, indiscrete selfhood. In *The Writing of Fiction* she argues, "The bounds of a personality are not reproducible by a sharp black line, but each of us flows imperceptibly into adjacent people and things" (7). *The Valley of Decision* and *The Fruit of the Tree* make a project of deconstructing the autonomous personality. The earlier novel sets about that task in a cabalistic medical treatment for the young prince of Pianura. The Duke, whose philosophical education left him "bewildered" by "distinctions between [. . .] the object and the sentient," solicits the medical care of one Count Heiligenstern, whose quasi-animistic and magical philosophy tends to dissolve subject-object distinctions. In the central event of the young prince's treatment, the Count assembles family and friends, including Odo, "to witness the communication of vital force to the prince, by means of the electrical current" (336). In the strange scene that follows, Odo feels the room and his own self subjected to, even permeated by, "some unseen influence" external to them: "It was as though the vast silence of the night had poured into the room and like a dark tepid sea were lapping about his body and rising to his lips. His thoughts, dissolved into emotion, seemed to waver and float on the stillness like seaweed on the lift of the tide. He stood spell-bound, lulled,

yielding himself to a blissful dissolution” (337). As the structure of the room seems to fall away, so the structure of Odo’s self yields to dissolution.

The pervasive language of “dissolution” in this scene anticipates Wharton’s doctrine of selfhood in *The Writing of Fiction*, which bears repeating: “The bounds of a personality are not reproducible by a sharp black line, but each of us flows imperceptibly into adjacent people and things” (7). More telling than this echo, however, is the similarity between the passage from *The Writing of Fiction* and a description of Justine Brent’s sympathy as “penetrating—like some imponderable fluid, so subtle that it could always find a way through the clumsy processes of human intercourse” (446). The parallels between these latter passages, one about the self and one about sympathy, implies that sympathy is that which escapes the “bounds of a personality” and, in so doing, enables the self to “[flow] imperceptibly into adjacent people and things.” Both *The Fruit of the Tree* and *The Valley of Decision* demonstrate this mechanism.

In the earlier novel Odo’s relationship with Fulvia disintegrates his otherwise tightly contained self, exposing it to the currents of life outside himself: “His other sentimental ties had been a barrier between himself and the outer world; but the feeling which drew him to Fulvia had the effect of levelling the bounds of egoism, of letting into the circle of his nearest emotions that great tide of human longing and effort that had always faintly sounded on the shores of self” (95).<sup>7</sup> The image is like that of a broken levee, which no longer separates land from sea—much like the description of the Count’s

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<sup>7</sup> Wharton’s language of “levelling the bounds of egoism” recalls Basil March’s claim in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* that there is a “solvent in New York life that reduces all men to a common level [. . .] and brings to the surface the deeply underlying nobody” (243). However, while for the Marches this leveling contributes to an “almost loss of individuality” that, in turn, inclines them toward passivity, in *The Valley of Decision* the leveling impels Odo toward a deeper engagement with “the outer world.”



rite, which permits “the vast silence of the night” to “[pour] into the room” and behave “like a dark tepid sea [. . .] lapping about” the witnesses. In a similar manner Wharton disintegrates the self in *The Fruit of the Tree*, thus preparing it to participate in sympathetic relations with others.

In *Fruit*, to experience sympathy the self must be, above all, receptive and elastic. Justine recognizes the opposite of these characteristics in Bessy’s “hard small nature,” which constitutes a form of “imprisonment”: “Not to be penetrable at all points to the shifting lights, the wandering music of the world—she could imagine no physical disability as cramping as that” (227). Her counsel to Bessy is that she must reimagine her self as neither a consumer nor a commodity but as an entity dis-integrated and scattered about by its own adventurous catholicity:

[A]s human nature is constituted, it has got to find its real self—the self to be interested in—outside of what we conventionally call “self”: the particular Justine or Bessy who is clamouring for her particular morsel of life. You see, self isn’t a thing one can keep in a box—bits of it keep escaping, and flying off to lodge in all sorts of unexpected crannies; we come across scraps of ourselves in the most unlikely places—as I believe you would in Westmore, if you’d only go back there and look for them! (229)

This is the same posture that allows Justine habitually to find her self, as noted above, inside other people’s skins. Wharton again unites receptivity and elasticity in her account of sympathy when Justine describes her marriage with Amherst as “a multiplication of points of perception, so that one became, for the world’s contact, a surface so multitudinously alive that the old myth of hearing the grass grow and walking the rainbow explained itself as the heightening of personality to the utmost pitch of sympathy” (472). Here, a relationship with an other stretches out the self into a living “surface” that vibrates with “the world’s contact.”

That Wharton disintegrates selves to fit them for sympathetic relationships distinguishes her theory of personhood from William Dean Howells's and aligns it with Rebecca Harding Davis's. In Howells's fiction the disintegration of the self impedes decision-making and proves "too relaxing to the moral fibre" (*Hazard* 296). Rebecca Harding Davis does not posit a disintegrated self, but her incarnational theology, which sees self-limitation as a necessary condition of redemptive action, dovetails with Wharton's notion that sympathetic relationships become possible not through a self-aggrandizing consolidation of one's personality but through an opening of its borders, a choice to become socially vulnerable. Wharton's deconstruction of the self should not be mistaken, then, for a repudiation of the self or of human agency. Her oft-cited opposition to literary modernism rests largely on her claim that its practitioners "reduce to the vanishing point any will to action, and their personages are helpless puppets on a sluggish stream of fatality" (172). Wharton stakes her literary identity on the defense of the human agent. In Wharton's fiction, though, as in Davis's, that agent exercises its power most fully when it embraces and makes an asset of its limitations.

### **Borderlands**

As sympathy seems to transcend the borders of the self, Wharton's writing suggests that art, too, is best when it dissolves the boundaries between apparently discrete entities and, constructing a liminal space, reconstitutes those entities in a dynamic relationship. In a review for the *Times Literary Supplement*, Wharton heaps praise on Geoffrey Scott's *The Architecture of Humanism* (1914), in which he argues for such a dynamic relationship between architecture and its inhabitants, claiming that "[w]e adapt ourselves instinctively to the spaces in which we stand, project ourselves into them, fill

them ideally with our movements” (169). Because architecture is modeled on the states and movements of the human body, “[t]he tendency to project the image of our functions into concrete forms is the basis, for architecture, of creative design. The tendency to recognise, in concrete forms, the image of those functions, is the true basis, in its turn, of critical appreciation” (159). In the relation between architecture and its inhabitants, both undergo a sort of change because “*We [transcribe] ourselves into terms of architecture,*” and, conversely, “*We transcribe architecture into terms of ourselves*” (159). Scott’s account of human beings’ relation to the built environment draws on the philosophy of American Renaissance architecture, the preferred idiom of Edith Wharton and Progressive urban reformers, too.

The American Renaissance, nourished in Rome’s Ecole des Beaux Arts and pioneered by the architectural firm McKim, Mead & White, drew inspiration from the noble, orderly, symmetrical designs of the Italian Renaissance. It rejected, on the one hand, the structural asymmetries and decorative clutter of the Victorian-era Gothic and, on the other hand, the mechanical functionalism of the modern. This neoclassical ideal remains visible in Columbia University’s Low Library, additions to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Boston’s Public Library, the Mall in Washington, D.C., and many other designs in eastern and midwestern cities, although perhaps its consummate expression in the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 (the “White City”) no longer remains (Benert 40-47). Labeled the City Beautiful movement in its urban planning phase, the American Renaissance assumed a “relationship between the built environment and the national character” (Fryer 13), and it practiced a politics of space that aimed to “bring order and harmony to American cities” and “help to acculturate and assimilate the foreign-born, the

poor, and the new rich alike” (Benert 38).

Edith Wharton possessed close ties to this architectural movement. Herself enamored of the Italian Renaissance, she applied its principles in her first book, *The Decoration of Houses* (1897), co-authored with interior designer Ogden Codman. Wharton solicited Charles McKim’s opinion of the book prior to publication, hoping that she and Codman “might, in a slight degree, co-operate with the work [McKim was] doing in [his] Roman academy” (qtd. in Benert 30). While he suggested a few revisions to the introduction, McKim warmly approved the whole, responding, “Hats off to every word!” (qtd. in Benert 30) *The Decoration of Houses* aims to restore the “natural connection between the outside of the modern house and its interior” by treating interior decoration as “a branch of architecture” rather than, what it has become, “a superficial application of ornament totally independent of structure” (xix, xx, xix). In short, Wharton and Codman appeal for unity and cooperation between outside and inside, both of which exert a strong influence on the physical, mental, and emotional states of the inhabitants.

One curious feature of Wharton’s book returns us to her praise of Geoffrey Scott and his attention to architectural boundaries and liminality: alongside an introductory chapter on architectural history, the two longest chapters in *The Decoration of Houses* are devoted to “Hall and Stairs” and “Doors.” Wharton’s lengthy discussion of these thresholds, combined with chapters on “Entrance and Vestibule” and “Windows,” reveals an unexpected fixation on in-between spaces. The book discusses rooms proper, but only a few get their own chapters. Other rooms she squeezes three-at-a-time into single chapters. The focus on transitional areas is counterintuitive, but it is consistent with her broader aesthetic and even ethical commitments.

When Geoffrey Scott italicizes his claim that human beings transcribe themselves “into terms of architecture” and “transcribe architecture into terms of ourselves,” he assumes there is something very important about this imaginative mingling of bodies and buildings (159). When *The Decoration of Houses* lingers unexpectedly on architectural thresholds, it draws attention to the same “something.” In *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* (1907), Wharton’s second book on spatial design, she locates “the ineffable Italian garden-magic”—a unique and powerful aesthetic experience—in another liminal space. As she narrates a history of Italian Renaissance gardening, Wharton asserts that a major development came in “the architect’s discovery of the means by which nature and art might be fused” in his designs, and she claims that the peculiar “enchantment” of Italian gardens emerges in “the subtle transition from the fixed and formal lines of art to the shifting and irregular lines of nature” (7). As in the actual gardens, such “subtle transition,” or “the blending of different elements,” repeatedly catalyze profound aesthetic experience in Wharton’s fiction.

In an early scene in *The Valley of Decision*, a young Odo wanders about a grove dotted with several chapels, peering in at sculpted scenes of the Passion inside each one. The lifelike quality of these figures turns his casual walk into a religious drama, as though he were “treading the actual stones of Gethsemane and Calvary,” because, the narrator explains, at Odo’s age the “distinction between flesh-and-blood and its plastic counterfeits is not clearly defined” and “the sculptured image is still a mysterious half-sentient thing, denizen of some strange borderland between art and life” (68). This “borderland,” the very sort that casts the Italian garden’s “spell,” stretches its mysterious

terrain through much of *The Valley of Decision* (6).<sup>8</sup> In fact, Odo walks into it in his first tour of the palace gardens at Pianura, which appear “too beautiful to be real” and move him like “the music of the Easter mass” (23). For all his time spent in gardens in later life, “never after did he renew [this] first enchanted impression of mystery and brightness that remained with him as the most vivid emotion of his childhood” (24).

Earlier than this, when sent from home to be raised by a poor family, Odo finds life harsh with his irascible surrogate mother and his sadistic playmates, and his time spent alone in a disused chapel with figures painted on its walls affords Odo his deepest sense of human connection. Odo has a name for each of the figures (“the King, the Knight, the Lady,” etc.), and some he has selected to be his images of living people whom he never sees, like his parents. When he receives word of his father’s death, he mourns for the corresponding figure in the chapel, wishing to “see whether the figure of the knight in the scarlet cloak had vanished from the chapel-wall” (12). But whether or not a painting has a real-world counterpart, together with all the others it forms Odo’s childhood society, for he “somehow felt as though these pale strange people [. . .] were younger and nearer to him than dwellers on the farm” where he lives (5). Moreover, the figure of St. Francis, whom he names “the Friend,” persists in the adult Odo’s memory, deeply influencing his work for social reform.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> William Vance’s designation of *The Valley* as “historical romance,” an “ambiguous” genre that “straddles the worlds of fact and fancy” (169), locates the “borderland” not only at various points in the plot but even in the text’s formal constitution.

<sup>9</sup> The architectural emphasis in *The Valley of Decision* generates many such “borderland” experiences, but *The Fruit of the Tree* also manifests Wharton’s interest in liminal spaces, especially in the character of Justine, whose desire to live both passionately and dutifully makes her imagine the good life as one lived “on the banks, in sight and sound of the great current” or, alternately, as a “house-swallow,” which, having had its “fill of wonders” in flights abroad,

The “strange borderland between art and life” is not only architectural, though; it also runs between reader and text, as Wharton affirms when a young Odo, opening some long neglected books in an archive, “felt the same joyous catching of the breath as when he had stepped out on the garden-terrace at Pianura” (51). In fact, Wharton figures fiction as architecture and vice versa. Of Odo’s favorite frescoed chapel, described above, the narrator claims that it “was indeed as wonderful a story-book as ever fate unrolled before the eyes of a neglected and solitary child” (4). Inversely, in *The Writing of Fiction* Wharton draws a formal distinction between short stories and novels by comparing them to two types of buildings: “the short story is an improvisation, the temporary shelter of a flitting fancy, compared to the four-square and deeply-founded monument which the novel ought to be” (75).<sup>10</sup> In her preface to *The Book of the Homeless*, Wharton describes that book in similar terms, as “a gallant piece of architecture,” and concludes her introduction with an offer of literary hospitality: “So I efface myself from the threshold and ask you to walk in” (xxiv, xxv).

Wharton’s personal touch in this invitation highlights the relationship between her literature-as-architecture metaphor and her concept of sympathy. So does Odo’s “trembl[ing] with delicious sympathy” upon first reading the story of his beloved St. Francis. Odo’s reading constitutes one of the ecstatic “borderland” experiences that *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* introduces and that *The Valley of Decision* repeatedly

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happily returns to domestic warmth—its “familiar corner, and [its] house full of busy humdrum people” (303).

<sup>10</sup> Wharton’s essay “The Vice of Reading” imagines a book as a “gateway to some *paysage choisi* [chosen landscape] of spirit” (102). In *The Decoration of Houses*, we have seen what an essential architectural element Wharton considers doors, or gateways, to be; and if a “chosen landscape” is not a building, Wharton’s *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* demonstrates her tendency to recognize design in, and project design into, landscapes generally.

narrates, but the language describing Odo's reading underscores the moral significance of all these architectural-literary ecstasies: they are a form of sympathy, partaking of the same dynamic relation that sympathy requires between two people.<sup>11</sup> As sympathy consists in a mutual emotional relationship between two parties, so reading consists in "an interchange of thought between writer and reader" that requires a "reciprocal adaptability" ("Vice" 99).

Wharton's essay "The Vice of Reading" commends this give-and-take between text and reader over against what she calls "mechanical" reading, which is driven by an assumption that reading is a virtue and by a corresponding ambition "to keep up with all that is being written" (100). Wharton maintains that "Real reading is reflex action; the born reader reads as unconsciously as he breathes [. . .]" (99). Moreover, training is "wasted" on those who lack an "innate aptitude" for proper reading (100).<sup>12</sup> Wharton's argument with the mechanical reader concerns his "incorrigible self-sufficiency"—or, put otherwise, his "never doubt[ing] his intellectual competency" and his conflation of "zeal for self-improvement" with "brains" (100). In short, Wharton takes issue with the mechanical reader's overweening will, which fails to acknowledge its own limits. This

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<sup>11</sup> In *Fruit*, reading affords Justine an experience similar to Odo's. She gains insight about Amherst "during the silent hours among his books, when she had grown into such close intimacy with his mind" (471). Here, of course, sympathy occurs at one further remove: Justine is not so much sympathizing with the authors as with another reader of the books.

<sup>12</sup> In a somewhat misleading word choice, Wharton also calls mechanical reading "volitional reading," and she argues that "Reading deliberately undertaken [. . .] is no more reading than erudition is culture" (99). Without question, "The Vice of Reading" privileges a reflexive form of reading, which she does not consider a virtue because it is not intentional. We will see below that Wharton relaxes her censure of "volitional reading" later in her career, but even "The Vice of Reading" does not banish intention from reading altogether. Wharton claims, "To read is not a virtue; but to read well is an art, and an art that only the born reader can acquire" (100). To read well, then, is not effortless; it is an "art" to be mastered through work. The changing role of volition in Wharton's concept of reading requires careful examination from this point through the rest of her writing life.



reader she condemns is no figment of her imagination either. Her essay addresses a contemporary change in American reading practices, described in Chapter 1, that recast fiction not as a site of pleasurable dialogue with authors but as a commodity for conspicuous consumption.

In Wharton's early career, this trend of reading for social capital—or “reading up,” as Amy Blair calls it—was marked most clearly by the 1909 publication of Charles W. Eliot's Harvard Classics—or his “Five-Foot Shelf,” so called for the diminutive piece of furniture that would accommodate the series. Purporting to “furnish a liberal education to anyone willing to devote fifteen minutes per day to reading them,” the Harvard Classics compressed literature into an unobtrusive location in one's home and schedule, partitioning books from other parts of the reader's life (Rubin 28). Eliot's fifteen-minutes-a-day plan recalls Wharton's criticism of the reader who maintains “a fixed time for laying in his intellectual stores” and “reads for just so many hours a day,” rather than permitting his reading to form “a continuous undercurrent to all his other occupations” (101). Moreover, the relegation of the Harvard Classics to a shelf intimates Wharton's vision of books conscientiously taxonomized and filed away by a mechanical reader, for whom “books once read are not like growing things that strike root and intertwine branches, but like fossils ticketed and put away in the drawers of a geologist's cabinet” (102). In both of these regards—the temporal and spatial limitation of books—Eliot's series and the trends it exemplifies deprive literature of what Wharton considers its defining quality: dynamism, or the tendency to foster relationships with things in its environment, like ideas, institutions, other books, and, of course, readers.

If a book can be simply relegated to a particular place, time, and function in a reader's life, then the reader does not—cannot—engage in a sympathetic relationship with it. Such a relationship requires mutuality. However, mechanical reading subjects fictional texts and their authors to the reader's self-improvement schemes. The reader, eager to acquire "culture," raids the text in search of that commodity alone, dismissing the author's appeals for a sustained conversation. A sympathetic reading, however, consists in a dialogue, taken up at one's leisure. In such an interaction between reader and author, both parties interrogate one another. The reader may scrutinize and argue with the author, but she expects the author to return the favor. I argue that Wharton's resistance to one-sided, mechanical reading partially accounts for her construction of literature as architecture. "[F]our-square and deeply founded monuments" and "gallant piece[s] of architecture," as she variously imagines literary texts, do not readily yield to unruly inhabitants; the solid contours of these edifices decisively limit and direct the movements of visitors. An architectural literature requires compromises of its readers; that is, it invites them to a sympathetic relationship.

### **Evolution**

The metaphor comparing reading and sympathy is problematic at two levels, though. First, Wharton's account of reading excludes many from the privileges of literary culture—and, by extension, the responsibilities of charity—because she calls reading "an art that only the born reader can acquire" ("Vice" 100). By Wharton's account, if one does not already read (or feel toward others) in the ways that she prescribes, then no amount of practice is likely to make much difference. The practices of reading and sympathy, in their genuine forms, proceed from innate capacities, not from training.

Hence, there are many who should leave to others both the richer, subtler rewards of reading and the duty of feeling with their neighbors. Another problem arises from the class-specificity of Wharton's model. Her mechanical reader reads to be more cultured, to assimilate the values and characteristics of the wealthy; his existence is predicated on a lack. Similarly, the philanthropist, driven by excess of sentiment, lacks the emotional refinement of the well-bred patrician. Apart from the fact that the upper classes, in reality, have no monopoly on sympathy, the classed nature of Wharton's model also excludes the poor from all sympathetic relations because, to Wharton's mind, their poverty deprives them of agency, of any real personhood. Let me explain: while Wharton's rich and poor are alike products of their environments, the poor somehow lack the capacity of the rich to transcend—to recognize and resist—the social and economic forces that shape them. Likewise, if they are vicious, they cannot be faulted for it. The poor are wispy, insubstantial figures. As such, they can no more experience a sympathetic relationship than an author subjected to instrumental reading can converse with an overweening reader because, as good reading requires the recognition of an author's agency, so sympathy requires acknowledgment of another person, an equal. Any denial of the other party's agency turns what might otherwise be a sympathetic relation into a philanthropic one, which is precisely the relation Wharton aims to avoid. It seems, then, given Wharton's class essentialism that deprives the poor of volition, her sympathy cannot extend beyond the upper classes, who alone possess the solid personhood necessary to that emotional relationship.

Wharton's poverty fiction, however, traces an evolution of her parallel models of reading and sympathy. *The Valley of Decision* thematizes sympathy in Odo's

relationships with peers, saints, physical spaces, and art; but while Odo pities the poor and wants to see social and political reforms on their behalf, one cannot—indeed, the book does not—speak of him sympathizing with the poor. A poor family who mistreats their foster child incurs none of Odo’s anger because “they seemed to him no more accountable than cowed hunger-driven animals” (226); they were “but a sickly growth of the decaying social order” (268). Odo’s understanding the poor through these images, which imply an absence of agency, precludes the possibility that he could sympathize with them. Because, by Odo’s account, they lack the capacity for moral decision-making, because their wills are obliterated by their environments, the poor cannot rise to the experience of sympathy.

In *The Fruit of the Tree*, however, Wharton adapts her characterization of the poor. Here they are not fully human, but neither are they harassed animals or social cancers as in *Valley*. In a longer passage ostensibly praising Justine’s sympathy with the mill workers, her description of her relationship with them recalls *The Valley of Decision* while introducing significant new ideas:

“What I really like is to gossip with them, and give them advice about the baby’s cough, and the cheapest way to do their marketing,” she said laughing, as she and Amherst emerged once more into the street. “It’s the same kind of interest I used to feel in my dolls and guinea pigs—a managing, interfering old maid’s interest. I don’t believe I should care a straw for them if I couldn’t dose them and order them about.” (457-48)

Dolls and guinea pigs, then: these images, like those in *Valley*, represent the poor as sub-human. They are playthings for the affluent. These images gesture toward the hierarchical relations fostered by a “philanthropy craze,” relations that serve largely to divert the rich

and, some critics claim, to consolidate their social power.<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, these images of the poor differ substantially from those in *Valley*. A child's pet guinea pig is no brute beast, "cowed and hunger-driven." Like a doll, if it is a plaything, it is also a playmate. Between a child and her pets and dolls exists a potential for intimacy and imaginative identification, in however juvenile a form. Often, the unequal relationships forged with these playmates are, for all their immaturity, the very schools of feeling with the Other. This passage certainly does not signal a new egalitarianism in Wharton, but it marks a significant change from *Valley*, making the poor potential companions to the affluent.

One should also consider Justine's light self-deprecation here because the humor of her self-designation as "a managing, interfering old maid" is that of a maternal figure who overlooks the independence and competency of the people she presumes to advise. Justine is well aware of the gratification she receives from "dos[ing] them and order[ing] them about"; much earlier in the novel she posits that "[p]hilanthropy is the one of the subtlest forms of self-indulgence" (156). Above we noted her response to Bessy's notion that she is undergoing a "craze for philanthropy": "I'm not philanthropic," she replies,

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<sup>13</sup> Jason Puskar reads *Fruit* in the context of an early-twentieth-century "accident problem" in the industrial workplace, in response to which a "maternalist welfare state" emerged to insure greater safety in factory jobs. Male factory workers experienced this female-led push as a threat to their masculinity and an insinuation that they were incapable of managing their own bodies and environments. Puskar implicates Justine and Amherst in this emasculating agenda. Alternately, Kassanoff reads *Fruit* in relation to the economic panic of 1907, which raised questions nationally about the proper management of industry—whether the task belonged to wealthy industrialists or the government. Either way, the affluent hoped that consolidating industrial power in the appropriate hands (certainly not the workers') would secure greater economic stability. Kassanoff interprets John's and Justine's reformist work as a "class-based strategy of social control" that bespeaks Wharton's "deep-seated fears about political and cultural democratization" (69, 63). There is much to commend both Puskar's and Kassanoff's readings, but both disregard the real, albeit not radical, sacrifices that Amherst and Justine make in their service to the mill community. Moreover, in focusing narrowly on *The Fruit of the Tree*, Puskar's and Kassanoff's readings cannot recognize that text's treatment of the poor as a transitional moment in Wharton's career.

claiming that sometimes she so nearly identifies with poor people that “before I know it I’ve slipped into their skins; and then, of course, if anything goes wrong with them, it’s just as if it had gone wrong with me; and I can’t help trying to rescue myself from *their* troubles!” (231) She confesses one might call this “meddling,” except that she genuinely forgets “that the other people aren’t myself” (231). These quotations display Justine’s remarkable capacity for self-critique, and while her comparison of the mill workers to dolls and guinea pigs betrays her sense of class superiority, it also satirizes it. The notion of “slipp[ing] into their skins,” experiencing another’s trouble as one’s own, and losing track of one’s discrete identity in relation to another: these are quintessential marks of Whartonian sympathy. In the context of this novel, Amherst’s classification of Justine’s feeling as “warm personal sympathy” is not to be mistrusted on the basis of that sympathy’s imperfections. Rather, it should be understood as something very close to Wharton’s own ambivalent and evolving conception of sympathy at this time.

Given Wharton’s comparison of sympathy and reading, one would expect that the change in her ideas about the poor from *Valley* to *Fruit* would find an echo in her notions about literature. Indeed, *Fruit* radically revises Wharton’s early doctrine that reading and sympathy emerge not from training but only from innate aptitudes. While giving Bessy a tour of the mills, Amherst feels disappointed by her lukewarm reaction to the spectacle of human suffering; but rather than conclude she cannot feel sympathy, he reminds himself that “the swift apprehension of suffering in others is as much the result of training as the immediate perception of beauty. Both perceptions may be inborn, but if they are not they can be developed only through the discipline of experience” (59-60). I have argued that Wharton’s essentialism on reading and sympathy serves to equalize the relationships

between reader and text/author and between individuals involved in a sympathetic relationship. Could reading or sympathy be trained, then readers and sympathizers may overestimate their agency and forget the solidity of the text or the other person, which demands that a reader/sympathizer subject his intentions to the other's, that he compromise. In the context of Wharton's oeuvre, Amherst's constructivist understanding of reading and sympathy—an implicit doctrine of which he reminds himself, not a conclusion on the basis of new information—marks a relaxation of the author's strictures against utilitarian, or “mechanical,” reading and hierarchical philanthropy. Wharton seems to be reconciling herself to the inevitability of both and even imagining positive outcomes from these less-than-ideal practices.

The plot of *Fruit* registers this authorial struggle to embrace the vagaries of literary reception. From a seasoned perspective in 1936, Wharton can write of this phenomenon with equanimity: “The strangest, and not the least interesting, adventure of any work of the imagination is the inevitable distortion it undergoes in passing from the mind of the writer to that of his readers” (Intro to *House of Mirth*). In *Fruit*, she is learning to consider this “distortion” not only strange but interesting; she is searching out the silver lining.<sup>14</sup> We see this in two crucial misreadings, both motivated by a reader's utilitarian purpose, that the novel dramatizes. The first occurs when Justine, wishing to relieve Bessy's pain and considering euthanasia, turns to Amherst's books for comfort and distraction and interprets the marginalia in a work of Bacon's as Amherst's sanction

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<sup>14</sup> Very early in her career Wharton invites the changes effected in a text by reading: “If the book enters the reader's mind just as it left the writer's—without any of the additions and modifications inevitably produced by contact with a new body of thought—it has been read to no purpose” (99). She expects books, upon reception, to be “diversely moulded by the impact of fresh forms of thought” (99). But here she sounds like an author who has not endured many misreadings—the sort of “distortion[s]” that in *Fruit* she struggles to accept.

for the action she wants to perform. In fact, Amherst does approve her decision in the abstract, but emotionally he is revolted by Justine's decision. Her inferences about Amherst's intentions from his margin notes are a bit right, a bit wrong: her reading is precisely the sort of "distortion" to which Wharton refers. Despite Amherst's recoil from the concrete reality that his second wife euthanized his first, Justine's reasoning and Amherst's intellectual sanction of it strongly suggest that Wharton approves Justine's decision. That she uses a utilitarian misreading to precipitate the central act of the novel, and thus to make her controversial moral argument, implies a dramatic reappraisal of readers' misappropriations. The author, Wharton seems to tell herself, need not fear mechanical readers, for even they can somehow, unwittingly, enact the author's intentions.

We see a radical extension of this principle in the novel's closing scene where Amherst, having discovered Bessy's blueprints for her own lavish pleasure grounds and assumed she meant the project for the mill town, holds a grand opening for the new facilities and invites the mill workers to "find health and refreshment and diversion here" and, even though the company could not afford all of the luxuries the blueprints specified, to "remember the beauty [Bessy] dreamed of giving you, and to let the thought of it make her memory beautiful among you and your children" (627). This misreading of the blueprints infuriates Justine, who knows their real provenance. Her response poses the ultimate challenge to Wharton's new acceptance of mechanical reading: "by what mocking turn of events," she demands, "had a project devised in deliberate defiance of [Amherst's] wishes, and intended to declare his wife's open contempt for them, been transformed into a Utopian vision for the betterment of the Westmore operatives?" (628).



Given Justine's further fears that "this phantom that Amherst's uneasy imagination had evoked"—a selfless and beneficent Bessy—could come between her and Amherst and "rob her of such wedded peace as was hers," she tells herself that "no sane judgment could ask her to sit quiet under this last hallucination" (629, 628). Simply telling Amherst the truth about Bessy's intentions would dispel the illusion and the threat it poses to her own happiness. However, when Amherst learns that Bessy showed Justine the blueprints before and he asks whether Bessy told her anything about "her wishes, her intentions," with pain Justine chooses not to reveal the truth, ostensibly concluding it is less important than Amherst's happiness at this new vision of Bessy.

Here, then, a misreading—more blatant than the novel's first—gives an unforeseen, concrete expression to Amherst's and Justine's charitable disposition toward the mill workers. If the earlier misreading leads Justine to perform the act that Amherst probably would have in her position, then this misreading generates an outcome consistent with Amherst and Justine's vision but unpremeditated and unpredictable. There are consequences for the erroneous interpretation; Justine feels them keenly. However, Wharton seems to regard Amherst's inaccurate new conception of Bessy as a mixed good because it is bound up with the emergence of something very positive in the workers' pleasure house. Justine is Wharton's representative here, bristling at the misappropriation of an author's intentions but accepting the lack of control it witnesses as well as the unexpected good it generates.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Jennie Kassanoff's interpretation of these two misreadings extends her argument that Wharton's "deep-seated fears about political and cultural democratization" drive the text and that John's and Justine's reformist work in the mills constitutes a "class-based strategy of social control" (63, 69). For Kassanoff, these misreadings express a related anxiety about authorial agency that Wharton, unlike John and Justine, has no means of resolving, since she cannot fix interpretation. However, I interpret these misreadings in the context of Wharton's increasing

*The Book of the Homeless* extends and consummates the evolution I have described from *Valley* to *Fruit*. Constructed with the express purpose of raising money for her European refugee hostels and children's homes, this collection of essays, fiction, and other artworks constitutes another development in Wharton's changing conception of the poor and of sympathy and reading. The poor here possess solidity and depth, and not only because they are historical and not fictional figures. Wharton recognizes their three-dimensionality and agency to a degree unprecedented even in *Fruit*. In her introduction to the book, she describes "these poor people" this way: "They are not all King Alberts and Queen Elisabeths, as some idealists apparently expected them to be. Some are hard to help, others unappreciative of what is done for them. But many, many more are grateful, appreciative, and eager to help us to help them" (xxi). Even in *Valley*, Wharton did not romanticize the poor as these "idealists" have, but she also never ascribed ingratitude to them. Here, she dignifies the poor by her lack of sentimentality, baldly admitting that some are grateful and some are not. This description hints at the most remarkable quality of Wharton's portrayal of these poor: her recognition of their agency. Wharton's testimony that the appreciative poor are "eager to help us to help them" is almost shocking. Her aristocratic heritage may well have fostered a *noblesse oblige* that presumed "mother knows best," but this representation of the poor constitutes an admission of dependency, a very public confession that she and her colleagues require direction from the poor about what exactly they need.

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willingness to have her texts—and, as I will show presently, her identity—constituted in dialogue with others. Thus, the misreadings affirm the necessity and even goodness of subjecting one's intentions and one's self to the perceptions and answering intentions of others.

Here, we are miles away from the cancers and quasi-sentient animals that represented the poor in *The Valley*, and we have left not only the dolls and guinea pigs of *Fruit* but even the domestic creatures into whose lives Justine could so easily project herself imaginatively. Certainly, Justine's tendency to slip into others' skins, blurring the boundaries of self and other, exemplifies Whartonian sympathy. However, the image of Justine's dolls reminds us of the hazard implicit in this imaginative projection, namely that the poor can disappear behind her overshadowing fantasies. If dolls have no consciousness apart from that projected on them by children, then Justine's (admittedly lighthearted) metaphor of the poor diminishes their independent subjectivity and invites her flights of fancy, which may or may not correspond to their actual experience.<sup>16</sup> In *The Book of the Homeless*, Wharton recognizes the solidity of the poor in a way that emphasizes difference over sameness—not a difference that impedes sympathy but one that resists simple identification, necessitates rigorous communication, and, most strikingly, elicits humility from those in conventional helping roles.

Here again, as in *Fruit*, a change in Wharton's thoughts on poverty and sympathy corresponds to a shift in her ideas about reading, for *The Book of the Homeless* unapologetically embraces the commodification of literature. Wharton clearly cares for the reading of this work, but most immediately she hopes for sales that will help fund her charities. She even sponsors a stateside auction of manuscripts and other "collectibles" connected to this project; here consumption is the point, not subtle interaction with a text. This is utilitarian reading defined. Indeed, Wharton has embraced a role as the director of

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<sup>16</sup> Rebecca Garden, Jason Puskar, and Jennie Kassanoff all criticize *The Fruit of the Tree* on these grounds. What their arguments lack is not only a sense of Justine's own questioning of her class prejudices, described above, but also a sense of evolution across Wharton's *oeuvre*, which this chapter aims to provide.

these charities and the editor of this fund-raising book that makes her look for all the world like a philanthropist. With *The Book of the Homeless* it may appear that she has abandoned her distinctions between philanthropy and sympathy and set herself up as Lady Bountiful. However, it is important to remember that sympathy is, for Wharton, a broad structure of engagement and not only a means of interacting with the poor. As we have seen in *Valley and Fruit*, sympathy can be understood as the practice of compromise that Wharton considers fundamental to all of life. When we look at Wharton's assimilation of her unwonted role in the World War I charities, we see that sympathy-as-compromise is precisely what she was practicing.

Alan Price, the preeminent scholar of Wharton's wartime work, argues, "The convergence of historical forces that transformed Wharton from an ironic social satirist into a partisan war reporter provides one of the few periods in her life when she was not in control of what happened [ . . .]" (qtd. in Hellman 103, 104). Price adds that for a woman like Wharton, "the loss of control was potentially devastating" (qtd. in Hellman 104). Instead, the war constituted for Wharton a "borderland," like one of those running through her fiction, which compromises the individual's sense of identity but, in doing so, prepares her to engage people and things in a new way—in sympathy, that is. Wharton's movement into a very public charitable work, sustained by the sale of a coffee-table book and other literary collectibles, may have taxed her powers of sympathy as heavily as the poor people whom her hostels and children's homes served. In *The Book of the Homeless*, though, these people have become real enough to relativize her distaste for even the appearance of philanthropy and to separate her from any dogmatism about the nature of reading. As in Odo's ecstasies in reading, Justine's reflections on her

mystical union with Amherst, or Wharton's own tastes of the Italian "garden magic," the author has been "caught up" by the work in which she is engaged, and preexisting categories have grown less definite. The proof that she is no Lady Bountiful lies in her willingness to subject her preferences to the needs of these others displaced by the war. Paradoxically, then, Wharton is at her most sympathetic when she appears most traditionally philanthropic, and her literature is most committed to interpersonal engagement when it seems most utilitarian.

In John Steinbeck's mid-career writing, his ecological vision, informed by his marine biologist friend Ed Ricketts, turns his attention also to liminal spaces, the transformative sites of sympathy in Wharton's fiction. However, in Steinbeck's work, these in-between spaces expand and so fully overwhelm the people and things they once separated that all distinctions between subject and object disappear. When liminality is everywhere, the self is nowhere, and there remain no structures in which sympathy could unfold, no grounds for generative cross-class relationships.

### **Adrift at Sea: Steinbeck's Posthumanist Ethics and Aesthetics**

In June of 1935, the summer of the original publication of *Tortilla Flat*, John Steinbeck wrote to his agent Elizabeth Otis, commenting that, “Hotel clerks here [in Monterey, California] are being instructed to tell guests that there is no Tortilla Flat. The Chamber of Commerce does not like my poor efforts, I guess. But there is one all right, they know it” (*Life in Letters* 111). Since Steinbeck based his novel on collected stories about a real community of *paisanos* in Monterey (Benson 277), he deemed it a “very funny thing” that the local chamber of commerce would deflect the interest of his readers, even “issu[ing] a statement that the book was a lie” (“My Short Novels” 16). Perhaps, Monterey businesspeople considered their interests threatened by the sympathetic portrayal of a poor community whose semi-socialist economy repeatedly upsets capitalist norms. If so, then Monterey’s leading citizens, like many Americans since then, overestimated the social challenge posed by Steinbeck’s fiction of the 1930s and 1940s. With novels like *In Dubious Battle* (1936), *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), Steinbeck established his reputation as one of the United States’s great political authors, who railed against the injustices of capitalism so miserably written on the faces of his fictional migrant workers. While he certainly championed a mode of representing the poor sympathetically, his moral philosophy and narrative practice enervated the affective thrust of his fiction. Of the authors in this project, he is the most heralded as a reformer and perhaps the least deserving of that label.

Preaching a reformist aesthetic in his 1962 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Steinbeck asserted that the “ancient commission of the writer” lies in “exposing our many grievous faults and failures” and “dredging up to the light our dark and dangerous dreams for the purpose of improvement.” So central is the ideal of improvement that, to his mind, “a writer who does not passionately believe in the perfectibility of man, has no dedication nor any membership in literature.” These morally laden aesthetic maxims should not surprise readers familiar with Steinbeck’s late career. *East of Eden* (1952) thematizes a concept of human freedom and responsibility grounded in the Hebrew word *timshol*, which is roughly translated as “Thou mayest.” That novel and his later publications (e.g., *The Winter of Our Discontent* [1961], *Travels with Charley* [1962], *America and Americans* [1966]) express a profound concern with individuals and communities confronting moral dilemmas, free choices that seem to hold nothing less than America’s welfare in the balance. However, most Steinbeck scholars regard this treatment of moral responsibility, residing first in the individual and, by extension, in the community, as a significant development for the author. It departs from a critique of agency he advanced in his middle career between roughly 1935 and 1945. Oddly, though, Steinbeck’s reputation as a reformist writer depends largely on this earlier period, which on closer inspection shows him intensely ambivalent and apparently confused about the nature, capabilities, and responsibilities of the individual. In these years, although Steinbeck’s feeling for the poor ran deep, it was neutralized by a paradoxical blend of distrust toward charitable intervention in the lives of others and toward the very concept of a volitional human subject.

This chapter reads *Tortilla Flat*, *The Sea of Cortez* (1941), and *Cannery Row* (1945) as critical moments in Steinbeck's mid-career development of an anti-reform position in ethics and aesthetics. *Tortilla Flat* critiques the discourse of reform by associating it with a broader institutional discourse (of government, commerce, and education, e.g.) that impinges on human freedom. However, to turn back an imagined reader's reformist impulses toward the novel's poor characters, Steinbeck practices a mode of storytelling that, in narrowly circumscribing the reader's hermeneutic options, itself resembles the confining discourse of reform. Co-authored with his marine-biologist friend Edward Ricketts, *The Sea of Cortez: A Leisurely Journal of Travel and Research* (1941) sets forth in nonfiction a quasi-scientific philosophy that paradoxically critiques reform on the bases of its violence and its impossibility. That is to say, after an intense public response to *The Grapes of Wrath* that soured Steinbeck on political writing, *The Sea of Cortez* deepens Steinbeck's earlier criticism of reform as oppression and simultaneously deconstructs human subjectivity and agency, thus eliminating the very possibility of reform. *Cannery Row* applies this non-teleological philosophy, as Steinbeck and Ricketts call it, in fiction: the results are a topsy-turvy moral landscape whose instability makes basic neighborly care a dubious project and a narrative structure that gives an illusion of significant readerly participation. Incidentally, Steinbeck reverses the account of reading with which this project began, the incarnational model set forth in Rebecca Harding Davis's *Life in the Iron-Mills* (1861). He, too, describes audience participation through reference to Jesus, but he prescribes a response to texts that is abstractly reflective rather than fully embodied, observational rather than interventionist.



## ***Tortilla Flat***

On its surface *Tortilla Flat* bears little resemblance to the texts in this project that are easily labeled “social novels,” like *Life in the Iron-Mills*, *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, or *The Fruit of the Tree*. *Tortilla Flat* presents no sweeping reform initiatives or even a narrator’s meditations on the plight of the poor. Steinbeck’s poor are happy in their insular community outside Monterey. In fact, the novel implies that they are happy *because* they belong to that marginal community. The dearth of charitable institutions and Lady Bountifuls operating in Tortilla Flat does not signal a lack of concern with social reform. Instead, the novel critiques reform by associating it with a particular kind of discourse, an institutional language that prevails within the culture of reform and makes it incompatible with and harmful to the cultures of the poor.

The first page of *Tortilla Flat* begins a project, extending throughout the novel, of distinguishing between and assigning value to different types of discourse. The narrator lends his story a mythic aura by claiming that Danny’s house “was not unlike the Round Table, and Danny’s friends were not unlike the knights of it” (1). However, he does not mean for his narrative to be itself considered myth. In fact, he aims to foreclose the possibility that “sour scholars” of a future time, hearing oral accounts of Danny’s life, would conclude, “There was no Danny nor any group of Danny’s friends, nor any house. Danny was a nature god and his friends primitive symbols of the wind, the sky, the sun” (1). Therefore, the narrator calls his narrative “history,” prescribing that it be interpreted as an account of a real person named Danny and of his actual friends in a community near Monterey, California.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In his biography of Steinbeck, Jackson J. Benson, having traced the disparate sources of Steinbeck’s stories in *Tortilla Flat*, concludes that “[a]ll the major characters in the novel had

However, the basic formal commitments of *Tortilla Flat* appear to change over the course of the novel. The penultimate chapter of the novel suggests that the narrator's conception of his work has shifted dramatically, for in his account of a riotous party held in Danny's honor, the narrator no longer defends his narrative against "sour scholars" who would mythologize a history but instead disparages the "historian [who] may write a cold, dry, fungus-like history of The Party" (162). To such academic accounts, which would reductively explain Danny's revelry as the characteristic behavior of a "dying organism" or a "living organism [that] is attacked," the narrator responds dismissively: "I say, and the people of Tortilla Flat would say, 'To hell with it. That Danny was a man for you!'" (163). Two things are significant in these lines: first, in a departure from the language of the Preface, the narrator positions himself against an "historian" rather than a mythologizing scholar. Secondly, he aligns himself with the *paisano* community's interpretation of Danny's exploits and emphasizes the mythological character of that interpretation:

Where Danny went, a magnificent madness followed. It is passionately averred in Tortilla Flat that Danny alone drank three gallons of wine. It must be remembered, however, that Danny is now a god. In a few years it may be thirty gallons. In twenty it may be plainly remembered that the clouds flamed and spelled DANNY in tremendous letters; that the moon dripped blood; that the wolf of the world bayed prophetically from the mountains of the Milky Way. (163)

This mythologizing operation is the very process that the narrator aimed in the Preface to exclude, the result of which was an interpretation of Danny as a "nature god" and of his friends as "primitive symbols of the wind, the sky, the sun" (1). What, then, accounts for

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their real-life counterparts, although they were not all part of one group, as indicated in the novel, nor did they live in Tortilla Flat" (278). Benson's assertion, far from suggesting that *Tortilla Flat* can be read as a history in the academic sense, does lend a suggestive, extra-textual import to the narrator's claims about his work.

the narrator's shifting formal allegiances, from a preference for history over myth to the opposite position? I contend that the significance of this shift lies not so much in the narrator's ultimate preference for myth but in his rejection of a single epistemological stance over against which he defines both history (in the Preface) and myth (in the penultimate chapter). In other words, the history and myth that the narrator approves both practice a form of storytelling unlike the forms that the novel's fictional scholars prefer.

The narration of Danny's party highlights four oppositions that distinguish these narrative forms from one another. The first of these oppositions involves the position of a storyteller relative to his subject matter. The academic figures condemned in the Preface and the penultimate chapter occupy one side of this opposition, as they interpret the life of Tortilla Flat from outside that community; they maintain a critical distance.<sup>2</sup> Although Steinbeck's narrator cannot claim full membership in the *paisanos*' community, either, he at least stands in closer proximity to it, claiming solidarity with the *paisanos* throughout the text.

The second opposition between the academics' and narrator's discourses involves their comparative self-reflexivity, or how candidly they acknowledge the work of interpretation implicit in the stories they tell. The novel's academics, preserving a critical distance between themselves and the objects of their study, expose the interpretive work essential to mythology, but they imagine their own accounts of historical events as uncomplicated, unmediated presentations of the truth. The academics' positivist epistemology elides their own situatedness, and their language betrays their overconfidence in the stories they tell. The mythologizer of the Preface finds no need to

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<sup>2</sup> The novel's academic figures participate in a broad discursive network encompassing many professions, the entirety of which I label "institutional."

qualify his claims or acknowledge a margin of error, but he confidently asserts, “There *was no* Danny,” and, “Danny *is* a nature god” (1, emphasis mine). Similarly, the “historian” of the penultimate chapter writes down his purportedly objective conclusions “with unshaking hand” (163).<sup>3</sup>

The narrator of Danny’s party, however, embracing the *paisanos*’ mythic account of that event, celebrates the work of interpretation that storytelling necessarily entails. Likewise, Danny and his friends relish the dialogical quality of stories, as Pilon’s response to one narrative indicates: “The story was gradually taking shape. Pilon liked it this way. It ruined a story to have it all come out quickly. The good story lay in half-told things which must be filled in out of the hearer’s own experience” (38). According to the *paisanos*, the “good story” unfolds in a process requiring the audience’s creative engagement. “[R]uined” by immediate revelation and unfinished apart from the hearers’ contributions, the “good story” defers closure and emerges as a product of communal negotiation. Later in the text, when Pilon’s evaluation of an ambivalent narrative departs from these principles, Pablo reiterates the essence of good storytelling:

Pilon complained, “It is not a good story. There are too many meanings and too many lessons in it. Some of those lessons are opposite. There is not a story to take into your head. It proves nothing.”

“I like it,” said Pablo. “I like it because it hasn’t any meaning you can see, and still it does seem to mean something, I can’t tell what.” (139-140)

In this instance, Pilon wants to extract a moral lesson, intact, from the narrative (“to take into [his] head”), rather than negotiating a meaning with the storyteller and the rest of the audience. However, Pablo, faithful to the communal narrative form, embraces the

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<sup>3</sup> The same mode of discourse operates in a “short and juryless trial” that sentences Big Joe to jail (65). The absence of a jury suggests an absence of deliberation, or interpretation, but this ostensible objectivity is no more convincing than that of *Tortilla Flat*’s fictional scholars.

hearer's responsibility of interacting with a story to elicit its meaning/s. He invites the burden of interpretation and shares it with his friends.

The third opposition separating *Tortilla Flat*'s narrative forms concerns the deference with which they approach their subject matter. Throughout the novel a multivalent institutional presence hovers officiously over Tortilla Flat, as in an episode where Pilon and Big Joe Portagee search for buried treasure on St. Andrew's Eve. These subterranean treasures trace a violent history, for "Monterey had been invaded many times, and each time valuables had been hidden in the earth" (66). With this historical commentary in mind, the "treasure" that Pilon and Big Joe unearth, a "good-sized square of concrete" bearing the words "United States Geodetic Survey + 1915 + Elevation 600 Feet," seems an index of one such invasion of Monterey. If a geodetic marker seems too neutral an object to bear this symbolic load, Pilon explains that digging up such a marker earns the offender a "year in jail and two thousand dollar fine," and this consequence points to an expansive institutional network assembled around this stone. Warren French correctly interprets the marker as "evidence of the ubiquity of an incomprehensibly systematic government" and of an "orderly methodical civilization that is closing in on the undisciplined *paisanos*" (55). Indeed, this surveying and codifying bureaucracy, prepared to inflict punishment on the person who resists it, manifests the encroaching tendency of institutional discourse in *Tortilla Flat*.

Returning to the narration of Danny's party and its aftermath, one notices the same invasive quality about the historian's pronouncements on Tortilla Flat and, conversely, the retreating impulse in the narrator's voice. The narrator treats Danny's death in a way that distinguishes his perspective from the vivisecting gazes of the

scholars, as he refuses to represent the private scene at Danny's bedside: "I shall not go into the bedroom with Father Ramon, for Pilon and Pablo and Jesus Maria and Big Joe and Johnny Pom-Pom and Tito Ralph and the Pirate and the dogs were there; and they were Danny's family. The door was, and is, closed. For after all there is pride in men, and some things cannot decently be pried into" (166). The narrator grants neither the reader nor himself access to this most intimate scene. Thus he practices an ethics of narration unlike that of institutional discourse, for he sacrifices the work of representation out of respect for his subject matter, the *paisanos*.

Despite the narrator's deference in this scene, *Tortilla Flat* asserts that storytelling never leaves its subject matter unchanged; the narration reshapes the thing narrated. Danny's party exemplifies this phenomenon that occurs repeatedly in the text, for he is "translated," his body assuming gigantic proportions, precisely at a moment when the text changes its narrative style.<sup>4</sup> The narrative of Danny's party reports that throughout the night the guest of honor "had been rapidly changing his form," and the narrator describes the effects of the "translation" this way: "He had grown huge and terrible. His eyes flared like the headlights of an automobile. There was something fearsome about him. There he stood, in the room of his own house. He held the pine table-leg in his right hand, and even it had grown. Danny challenged the world" (164). The significance of this passage lies in the coincidence of Danny's change in physical form and the text's change in

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<sup>4</sup> In his essay, "*Tortilla Flat*: The Shape of John Steinbeck's Career" (1970), Howard Levant finds Danny's supernatural change at the party "completely arbitrary" and archly concludes that "in composing these final chapters, Steinbeck did not trouble greatly about a harmonious relationship between the structure and the materials within the complete novel" (1093). Levant misreads this scene because he interprets it backward; Levant unsuccessfully searches for something "in Danny's previous, central characterization that justifies the transformation" (1093), instead of recognizing that a change in the narrative (or discursive) form imposes a change on Danny's person.

narrative form, from history to myth. Just before this moment, the narrator describes and even aligns himself in principle with the mythologizing work of the *paisanos*, but when he narrates Danny's "translation," the narrator himself becomes the purveyor of myth. Ceasing merely to describe myth, the text at this point *becomes* myth. Hence, the change in Danny's person occurs, necessarily, at the very moment of change in *Tortilla Flat*'s narrative form. Danny's translation enacts the Foucauldian principle that discourse objectively inscribes subjective identity, even calling into existence new forms of subjectivity.<sup>5</sup> *Tortilla Flat* distinguishes institutional and communal discourses according to the types of identity they foster.

One such "translation" of personal identity occurs in the novel's first scene, when, upon the announcement of America's entrance into World War I, Danny and his friends Pilon and Big Joe march drunkenly into town and shout patriotic sentiments in front of an enlistment station, only to be "silence[d]" by the enlistment officer—and then enlisted into the military themselves (3). The same official silences them and enlists them, as if suppressing one element of the men's identities (expressed in their drunken cheering) and replacing it with new identities. When the official says of Pilon, "I guess we need men like you in the infantry," the text immediately follows this pronouncement with the suggestive footnote, "And Pilon was written so" (3). Thus, Pilon becomes, like his companions, a text—or, perhaps, a subject inscribed by a text. Either way, his identity is "written" by a bureaucratic official and the state institution he represents. Accordingly, it

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<sup>5</sup> In his essay, "What Is an Author?" (1969), Foucault articulates this argument that would guide much of his later work: "[T]he subject," he contends, "must be stripped of its creative role and analysed as a complex and variable function of discourse" (1636). Both *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and Volume 1 *The History of Sexuality* (1976), for example, represent historiographical applications of this principle whereby the subject, relinquishing its Cartesian prerogatives, takes the form assigned to it by prevailing discourses.

should come as little surprise that during Big Joe's tenure in the military, the crimes for which he is court martialed involve his inadequate assimilation of his new identity; the charges against him are as follows: "Being drunk on duty. Striking a sergeant with a kerosene can. *Denying his identity* (he couldn't remember it, so he denied everything). Stealing two gallons of cooked beans, and going A.W.O.L. on the Major's horse" (65, emphasis mine). Fittingly, the most serious of these charges, "Denying his identity," orients all the others from its position at the center of this list. The military, utterly dependent on its members' conformity to their assigned roles, cannot tolerate such a denial as Big Joe's.

Another episode situates the panoptic institutional discourse in a legal sphere. Confronting a Spanish-speaking immigrant who loiters on the street, a Monterey policeman says, "I don't care if I can't understand you. You can't sit in the gutter all day. *We'll find out about you*" (94, emphasis mine). Just as the block of concrete unearthed by Pilon and Big Joe marks a bureaucratic presence that surveys and demarcates government territories, so the policeman's "we" designates an entire institution for which he speaks, an institution committed to collecting information on unclassified and unintelligible persons such as this immigrant—the aim, of course, being to move such persons from society's "gutters" into authorized avenues of productivity.

The same taxonomizing discourse makes itself known in the reform-oriented spheres of education and public health. In the course of telling a story about one *paisano* family, Steinbeck's narrator introduces the bureaucratic presence this way: "At about this time in California it became the stylish thing for school nurses to visit the classes and to catechize the children on intimate details of their home life. In the first grade, Alfredo [a



son in the family] was called to the principal's office, for it was thought that he looked thin" (121). The word "catechize," implying both interrogation and instruction, befits the work of institutionalized discourses in Steinbeck, for these discourses first require subjects to give an account of themselves, and then they instruct those subjects in proper behavior. When Alfredo supplies an unsuitable account of himself, ingenuously reporting that he eats tortillas and beans at all three meals, the principal and a school nurse "trained in child psychology" authorize further investigation into this anomalous case; and a school doctor visits the child's house, where "his scientific interest [is] piqued" by the family's (admittedly strange) method of feeding the children (121, 122). When, after subjecting the children to "every test [he] know[s] of," the doctor confesses that he has "never seen healthier children in [his] life," he also upholds the legitimacy of his medical categories in the only way he can—that is, by situating these children outside the purview of his expertise and beyond the pale of humanity, calling them "little beasts" (122). Thus, the reader finds in this episode the same quality of institutional discourse that can be found in the *paisano* men's encounters with the military and in the Mexican immigrant's confrontation with the police, namely a surveying and classifying impulse that invariably reduces individual subjectivity to the space allotted by existing taxonomic categories.

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech Steinbeck preaches the perfectibility of humankind, contending that any author who does not believe in that doctrine has no place in literature. However, his critique of reform challenges the doctrine, to the point of outright contradiction in his lampoon of the Women's Christian Temperance Union. He describes a meeting of that body this way:

In the neighboring and Methodist village of Pacific Grove the W.C.T.U. met for tea and discussion, listened while a little lady described the vice

and prostitution of Monterey with energy and color. She thought a committee should visit these resorts to see exactly how terrible conditions really were. They had been over the situation so often, and they needed new facts. (34)

The committee is locked in a cycle of appalled observation and inaction. Its members find pleasure in the “energ[etic] and color[ful]” recitation of sins, which they have heard “so often”; and their aim is no longer to reform, if it ever was that, but “to see” and to gather “new facts”—to prolong the titillating litany of vices. The unintentional irony of the passage lies in the designation of Pacific Grove as a “Methodist village” because, of all the Protestant denominations, Methodism is most strongly associated with perfectionism. A Wesleyan doctrine of sanctification asserts that men and women can reach a state of perfection in the present life in which they no longer choose to sin. Hence, Steinbeck’s 1930s critique of the W.C.T.U. members runs counter to, even derides, his 1960s confidence in human perfectibility.

In *Tortilla Flat*, communally negotiated narratives “translate” personal identity just as surely as institutional ones do, but they do so in exactly the opposite fashion, enlarging rather than diminishing the individuals on whom they operate. Danny’s party dramatically illustrates this function because as the narrative form of the text shifts from history to myth, so Danny’s very body, like his reputation in communal memory, grows larger to assume the properly “mythic” proportions. Similarly, the narrator, describing the familiar scene of Danny and his friends telling their stories on the front porch, adds a significant detail that elevates these men, indicating, “The flaming flies made halos about their heads” (130). The *paisanos*’ storytelling lifts them out of the realm of mere humanity: their narratives make them angels. Indeed, the frequency with which the *paisanos*’ stories impel them to acts of charity renders this sanctifying “translation” quite

fitting because often their narratives concern disadvantaged members of the community and strategies for alleviating their plight. Repeatedly, one of Danny's friends tells a story of someone in need, and that narrative moves the whole house to action, as when Jesus Maria's "passionate plea" on behalf of Señora Teresina's hungry family "ignite[s] the hearts of his friends" and they overwhelm her house with pilfered food. Equally instructive is the scene in which Pilon's plan to help the Pirate stirs the friends into "a philanthropic frenzy" and they welcome the lonely man into their home (124, 56). Such communal narratives run counter to the reductive work of institutional narratives in *Tortilla Flat*, affecting not only personal identity but also economic systems.

Oddly, *Tortilla Flat* does not invite its audience to participate in the communal culture of storytelling. It specifies its own interpretation in the Preface; its form is not up for negotiation. Moreover, the text does not act like Jesus Maria's "passionate plea" for charity or like Pilon's appeal for the Pirate. The novel does not aim to generate a "philanthropic frenzy" among readers. Rather, at the moment of the central characters' greatest need—that is, their grief at Danny's bedside—the narrator explicitly bars the reader from entering the room. Whatever sympathetic feelings or intentions the reader may harbor toward Danny and his friends, the reader remains as much of an outsider to the *paisanos'* community as all those scholars and reformers that repeatedly invade and aim to colonize *Tortilla Flat*. Steinbeck will not have his readers doing the same. There is a philanthropy that works, and it is performed entirely within the boundaries of a community, like the *paisanos'* aid to their neighbors.

## *The Sea of Cortez*

*Tortilla Flat* is not so frequently called a novel of reform as *The Grapes of Wrath*, but the latter novel decisively drove Steinbeck away from political writing.<sup>6</sup> The firestorm of criticism engulfing his supposed Communist agenda took a heavy toll and fostered in Steinbeck “not only outrage and extended depression, but a growing repugnance for the whole [migrant labor] topic and everything connected with it” (Benson 423). Jackson Benson writes that, by and large, Steinbeck “adamantly refused to be connected to the migrant problem or to any of the hundreds of other liberal causes that asked for his endorsement” (423). Nearly giving up fiction writing altogether, he turned to science and the intellectual companionship of Ed Ricketts to reorient himself. In the tide pools, he thought, were “things [ . . . ] easier to understand than Stalinist, Hitlerite, Democrat, capitalist confusion, and voodoo,” so it was there that he went to “find a new basic picture” and to “make a new start” (*Letters* 193, 194).

*The Sea of Cortez* articulates much that Steinbeck learned on the collecting expedition that it chronicles and in months of prior collaboration with Ricketts. However, it does not so much narrate an intellectual revolution for Steinbeck as it crystallizes and consummates an existing intellectual trend. The philosophy that emerges in this book synthesizes previously unspoken intuitions, formulates new convictions, and lays a conceptual foundation for the stories, especially *Cannery Row*, through which Steinbeck would eventually resume his old vocation. Here I will focus on two innovations in *The*

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<sup>6</sup> The reformist credentials of *The Grapes of Wrath* are actually somewhat dubious. Discussing Steinbeck’s extensive research for the novel, including experience “in the field,” Jackson Benson writes that the author “didn’t see the [socioeconomic] problem in political terms” but instead “as a matter of attitude” (345). In light of Steinbeck’s sentimental tendencies, this apolitical perspective on even the migrant workers’ plight is not entirely surprising.

*Sea of Cortez* that deeply influence Steinbeck's ethics and, by extension, his relationship with readers of *Cannery Row*. But those innovations are best approached through the ethical posture they commend, an anti-reform position manifested in several of Steinbeck and Ricketts' encounters with Mexican cultures during their expedition.

The authors' discussion of an offshore dredging project helpfully dramatizes their ethical stance. Initially they witness the dredging as a wasteful disruption of an ecosphere and call the project "a true crime against nature and against the immediate welfare of Mexico and the eventual welfare of the whole human species"—and, more simply, "a bad thing" (250, 249). Steinbeck and Ricketts propose two pragmatic initiatives to end this destruction and to manage the area's natural resources more responsibly. However, when they return to this topic in a subsequent chapter, there are no more interventionist strategies on offer, and the writers seem to find any moral judgment untenable. Their earlier condemnation was not rash or reductive. They recognized the complex moral position of the workers, saying, "[The sailors] were good men, but they were caught in a large destructive machine" (249). Later, though, concerning the charge of wastefulness that Steinbeck and Ricketts first levied at the dredging project, the authors reflect somewhat abstrusely, "There is not, nor can there be, any actual waste, but simply varying forms of energy. [. . .] The great organism, Life, takes it all and uses it all" (263). Here they appeal to a wider perspective in which apparently bad events may prove to be like cells in an organism that "must be sickened before others can be well" or like "therapeutic fevers which cause a rush of curative blood to the sickened part" (263). This movement, from condemnation and proposed intervention to suspension of judgment,

marks a passage from what the authors call “teleological thinking” to “non-teleological thinking.”

Steinbeck and Ricketts associate the former style, which they ultimately reject, with “the evaluating of causes and effects, the purposiveness of events”; teleological thinking “considers changes and cures—what ‘should be’” and “presumes the bettering of conditions, often, unfortunately, without achieving more than a most superficial understanding of those conditions” (134). On the other hand, the authors describe their preferred perspective this way:

Non-teleological ideas derive through “is” thinking, associated with natural selection as Darwin seems to have understood it. They imply depth, fundamentalism, and clarity—seeing beyond traditional or personal projections. They consider events as outgrowths and expressions rather than as results; conscious acceptance as a desideratum, and certainly as an all-important prerequisite. Non-teleological thinking concerns itself primarily not with what should be, or could be, or might be, but rather with what actually “is”—attempting at most to answer the already sufficiently difficult questions *what* or *how*, instead of *why*. (135)

One can readily detect the politics, or apoliticism, implicit in this epistemology that ignores questions of “what should be, could be, or might be.” As the authors finally retract their judgment on the Mexican dredging project, so they shrug at the American unemployment problem, naturalizing it as an expression of “the fact that animals produce more offspring than the world can support” (132). Steinbeck and Ricketts assign no blame to the unemployed, but, asserting that a percentage of people will always be without work, the authors do “rejoice that they [the unemployed], rather than we, represent the low extreme, since there must be one” (133).

Steinbeck and Ricketts repeatedly acknowledge that this perspective seems to many “detached, hard-hearted, or even cruel”; but the authors claim that “[n]on-

teleological methods more than any other seem capable of great tenderness,” since those methods dispense with fault-finding and represent the world as a place where “no apologies are required” (146). *The Sea of Cortez* consistently describes this perspective as “wider” than its opposite: “It seems safe to assume that non-teleological is more ‘ultimate’ than teleological reasoning” (141). But that assumption hardly seems “safe” to this reader—either in the sense of being logically justified or of being free from violence. (Safe for whom, one might ask.) It is far from clear how the authors decide from what distance and what angle it is appropriate to view events like the dredging project or the unemployment problem, for surely some vantage points would render these events more and not less insidious than they originally appeared. Ultimately, the writers find it “amusing that at any given point of time we haven’t the slightest idea of what is happening to us” (265).<sup>7</sup> This lightheartedness about human ignorance may well have its place, but the writers give no rationale for thinking that beyond the edges of our knowledge lie only “amusing” boogiemens and not terrors greater than we had imagined. Moreover, Steinbeck and Ricketts’ humor seems to paper over the disturbing matter of their ethical withdrawal.

Having sketched *The Sea of Cortez*’s anti-reform position, I want to describe two conceptual innovations on which that position rests and which shape the reading experience in *Cannery Row*. The first of these is Steinbeck’s practice of minding the un-

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<sup>7</sup> Given the diminution of the human will in this section, it is not surprising that the prose abounds in syntactical structures that elide human actors. Like self-effacing scientists, the writers tell us that from a certain type of observation “a knowledge of the function of war and destruction might emerge”; that “little enough is known about the function of individual pain and suffering,” although “it is suspected of being necessary as a survival mechanism”; and finally that “nothing whatever is known of the group pains of the species” (265). One wonders how the elusive subject of these clauses came to know so much about his ignorance, to be so certain of his uncertainty.

minded, by which I mean attending to overlooked things and people (as he does in his poverty fiction) but also, in a more philosophical register, attributing consciousness (mindedness) to non-human life forms and inanimate matter. Like Edith Wharton before him, Steinbeck rejects the practice of philanthropy as a unilateral relation between affluent benefactor and bereft recipient. In novels like *Tortilla Flat* and *Cannery Row* he makes poor characters his protagonists; traditionally passive objects of charity, here they are the movers of the narrative and the dispensers of kindness and wisdom. Top-down charity is rebuffed by the fullness of Steinbeck's poor. These novels posit a morally bankrupt affluent class whom only the poor can save. But this attention to the overlooked resources of the poor—rational, moral, and spiritual—also reflects the author's philosophical habits.

Steinbeck sees in the non-human natural world an array of forces comparable to that of the human mind and will. In *The Sea of Cortez*, for example, the erratic functioning of the crew's outboard motor (the "Sea-Cow") occasions a half-playful, half-serious meditation on the force in machines:

Recently, industrial civilization has reached its peak of reality and has lunged forward into something that approaches mysticism. In the Sea-Cow factory where steel fingers tighten screws, bend and mold, measure and divide, some curious mathematick has occurred. [. . .] Life has been created. The machine is at last stirred. A soul and a malignant mind have been born. Our Hansen Sea-Cow was not only a living thing but a mean, irritable, contemptible, vengeful, mischievous, hateful living thing. (20)

Like Henry Adams writing about the dynamo, Steinbeck animates the inanimate and minds the un-minded. Jackson Benson argues that this outboard motor "almost becomes the leading character of Steinbeck's narrative" (443). In this respect, *The Sea of Cortez* exemplifies a twentieth-century discursive trend that Robert Chodat describes as the



“gradual displacement of [agency] onto new and varied forms” (4).<sup>8</sup> Chodat finds “a deep suspicion about agency thematized and formalized” in literature of the twentieth century but argues that while the purposive human subject has come under intense scrutiny, the notion of agency has not disappeared but been reapplied to unexpected entities. Though *The Sea of Cortez* and *Cannery Row* are full of skepticism toward the existence of human agency, they repeatedly ascribe willfulness to machines, words, non-human animals, human institutions, and so on. This conceptual move relativizes human agency. In much the same way that the gifts of Steinbeck’s poor to the affluent turn back the affluent’s offers of philanthropy, non-human agents like the “Sea-Cow” push back on the human will. Every agent is constrained by all the others.

The other basis of Steinbeck’s anti-reform position contradicts this one, but the confusion does not seem to trouble Steinbeck, and its pragmatic implications are the same.<sup>9</sup> While at times *The Sea of Cortez* ascribes agency to new entities, at other times it outlines an ecology and philosophy that dissolves human agency by dissolving the boundaries between discrete species or objects, or subject-object relations as such. Steinbeck and Ricketts assert that “[t]he whole taxonomic method in biology is clumsy and unwieldy,” and in *The Sea of Cortez* “the whole idea of definite independent species begins to waver [. . .]” (207). Their critique of taxonomy bears quoting at length:

Our own interest lay in relationships of animal to animal. [. . .] [A]ll life is relational to the point where an Einsteinian relativity seems to emerge.

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<sup>8</sup> I recognize the looseness of the language about consciousness and agency here: having a mind may not mean having a will, too. However, I persist in treating “minded” things as agents because for Steinbeck the conditions of consciousness and agency do seem crucially paired.

<sup>9</sup> As he turned away from the controversy over *The Grapes of Wrath* and toward biological work with Ricketts, Steinbeck rejoiced that this new path offered him “freedom from the necessity of being consistent” (*Letters* 193). He exercises that freedom here.

And then not only the meaning but the feeling about species grows misty. One merges into another, groups melt into ecological groups until the time when what we know as life meets and enters what we think of as non-life: barnacle and rock, rock and earth, earth and tree, tree and rain and air. And the units nestle into the whole and are inseparable from it. Then one can come back to the microscope and the tide pool and the aquarium. But the little animals are found to be changed, no longer set apart and alone. (216)

For Steinbeck and Ricketts, then, “species” are discursive inventions, as are “life” and “non-life”; there are no solid boundaries in nature that separate what we call a crayfish from what we call a shark—or either of them from what we call a rock. Neither do human beings have any privileged ontology in this system, and in *The Sea of Cortez* the dissolution of the human being coincides with a denial of human agency. The authors claim that “[c]onscious thought seems to have little effect on the action or direction of our species” (88), and, while their own terms perpetually shift underneath them, it is clear that they doubt taxonomic ontology and human agency and that these two doubts mutually support one another.

The ethical consequences of these conceptual innovations are dramatic. Steinbeck’s first move, which populates the world with new agents, sanctions a retreat from reform on the basis that (1) the poor are not empty vessels but human beings with gifts liable to reverse the traditional benefactor-beneficiary relationship and (2) reformers are surrounded and constrained by other agents—human and otherwise—and are, therefore, less capable of meaningful intervention than they think. Steinbeck’s second innovation, which dissolves the human being and human agency, not only makes reform impossible—a mere word game—but it also confounds traditional moral philosophy. *The Sea of Cortez* suggests the same thing about good and evil that it does about species and

about life and non-life: they merge into one another and do not possess an independent existence.

Undoubtedly, Steinbeck and Ricketts give expression to important epistemological truths. Their sensitivity to the limitations of culturally situated knowledge provides a necessary corrective to naïve empiricism and ethnocentric moralism. Yet they claim for non-teleological thinking an almost Archimedian quality. They helpfully complicate subject-object relations, but their critique outruns their own important dependence on taxonomic language. If *Cannery Row* was criticized for its “disappointingly cheap philosophy” and “boozy metaphysics,” the critique can aptly be applied backward to *The Sea of Cortez*, from which the novel derives its philosophy.<sup>10</sup> This philosophy suffers from what one reviewer incisively diagnosed as Steinbeck’s “irresistible urge to exaggerate general statements,” a tendency that could be moderated by some “decent restraint and a good sense of proportion” (Longaker 283). Recognizing the limitations of his own vantage point, he aims to erect an intellectual system around that somewhat banal recognition, precipitously discarding notions of critical distance, morality, human agency, and the human *per se*. *Cannery Row* dramatizes the social consequences of these premature renunciations.

### ***Cannery Row***

Jackson Benson reads *Cannery Row* as a “fictional poetic version” of *The Sea of Cortez* written largely out of a sense of “unfinished business” from the nonfictional work, which Steinbeck worried did not adequately represent the non-teleological philosophy he

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<sup>10</sup> The commentary on *Cannery Row*’s “philosophy” appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* in an anonymous review entitled “The Dickensian Flavour,” while George Mayberry published his critique of the novel’s “metaphysics” in his *New Republic* article entitled “Reading and Writing.”

had learned from Ricketts (556). Steinbeck's own words corroborate and enlarge this reading, framing the novel not only as the complete expression of a lingering idea but also as a forward-looking manifesto: "when this work is done I will have finished a cycle of work that has been biting me for many years and it is simply the careful statement of the thesis of work to be done in the future" (*Letters* 230). In short, *Cannery Row* constitutes the philosophical and emotional center of Steinbeck's pre-1960s career; it is, in Benson's words, "a summation of all his conflicts and contradictions, and all that he had learned" (554).

Accordingly, *Cannery Row* extends insights expressed in *Tortilla Flat*, but revises them so deeply as to make the later novel altogether new. *Tortilla Flat* dramatizes the violence of reformist discourse and, therefore, rebuffs a readerly impulse to intervene in the lives of the *paisanos*. *Cannery Row* recapitulates the argument about violence but radicalizes *Tortilla Flat*'s critique of readerly intervention by dismantling the idea of human agency. The later novel more fully expresses a non-teleological philosophy even in its deconstruction of traditional narrative form, and although *Cannery Row*'s unconventional structure makes work for a participatory reader, Steinbeck ultimately claims an authoritative role in the text that dramatically limits the role of the audience.

Among *Cannery Row*'s multiple critiques of reform, the first is that it does violence to the communities it purports to help. This is poignantly suggested by the story of Frankie, who lingers at Doc's laboratory because, as he tells Doc, "You don't hit me or give me a nickel" (52). Frankie explains that at home, where his uncles are often present, "some of them hit me and tell me to get out and some of them give me a nickel and tell me to get out" (52). The syntactical parallelism indicates that his uncles' philanthropy is

no less dismissive than their beatings, while also suggesting the operation of violence even in the giving of a nickel. The text makes the same insinuation while introducing Hazel's character: "Reform schools are supposed to teach viciousness and criminality but Hazel didn't pay enough attention. He came out as innocent of viciousness as he was of fractions and long division" (29). Far from rescuing children from delinquency, the narrator claims, reform schools drive them to it.

*Cannery Row* expresses this critique, familiar from *Tortilla Flat*, in a manner consistent with Steinbeck's evolving philosophy, for it more explicitly grounds its ideas about reformist violence in the argument that, contrary to many reformers' assumption, there is no cultural vacuum among poor communities that needs filling with the gifts of the affluent. In an open, decentered ecology, the affluent reformer holds no privileged subject position. The poor are not the antithesis to his thesis or the negation of his positive. The text underscores this assertion when it questions the designation of the "vacant lot" abutting the so-called Palace Flophouse where Mack and his friends live: "why it is called vacant when it is piled high with boilers, with rusting pipes, with great square timbers, and stacks of five gallon cans, no one can say" (15). The lot next to the men's house, like the lives of those men, is far from empty, even if these spaces are filled with objects, activities, and values that others consider worthless or distasteful.

Another sort of critique is the text's assertion that reform is simply impossible, that it does not lie within the power of human beings. The failure of Doc's first party and Mack's response to it support the text's broad suggestion that human beings cannot fulfill their good intentions for one another or even for themselves. The closest thing to a central conflict in *Cannery Row* is the problem of how to "do something nice for Doc" (26).

Mack and the boys decide to throw Doc a party, but they fail miserably despite extensive preparations—six chapters worth, in fact. Doc does not make it to the surprise party in his honor, and those who do attend make a horrible mess of his lab. Punched by a furious Doc, Mack despairs of his good intentions that have always “turned sour” like this, saying that it does no good for him to apologize because he has “been sorry all [his] life” (120). Failures of goodwill like this one drove away his wife, who “only got hurt from [him]” (120). Defeated, he predicts that, despite hoping to take a lesson from the event, in the end he “won’t learn nothin’” (120). He considers himself incorrigible.<sup>11</sup>

These shipwrecked plans and the resignation with which Mack—and eventually Doc—confront them lie at the heart of Steinbeck’s project in *Cannery Row*, spatially and philosophically. The second party for Doc is successful precisely because Mack and his friends renounce planning for it, realizing that the first time they “forced her” (145). Mack professes that with a good party, “You got to let her creep up on you,” and his statement constitutes a credo broadly applied throughout the novel (145). A contemporary reviewer considered it a “defect” in the novel that “Steinbeck endows [the characters] with no motive power of their own” and that “They do not move but are moved about” (Marshall 281). However, this absence of volition is not the result of an authorial lapse. The text consistently suggests that the deeply flawed characters of *Cannery Row* are not their own masters and can no more reform themselves or one another than they can throw a successful party. Moreover, the novel absolves them of

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<sup>11</sup> Mack’s renunciation sounds much like Steinbeck’s own after his first wife Carol separated from him for the first time. Alone in their home, he wrote to his agent Elizabeth Otis, “I have no plans at all. Always before [in previous conflicts] I have tried to do something about it and that hasn’t worked and this time because I am tired and sad I am doing nothing about it. Perhaps this is wrong. I don’t know” (qtd. in Benson 412).

responsibility and finally exalts their resignation as a virtue. When Mack promises to pay Doc for the damage to his lab, Doc tells him not to bother because he knows Mack will do no such thing but will feel guilty because of that. Two chapters later, Doc praises the men of the Palace Flophouse for being “relaxed” in an age of “ambition and nervousness and covetousness” and for “do[ing] what they want” and “satisfy[ing] their appetites without calling them something else” (129).

Despite Steinbeck’s affection for the “whores, pimps, gamblers, and sons of bitches” who inhabit Cannery Row, a robust strain of anti-humanism animates his critique of reform and its rational, willing agent. The text expresses distrust and even scorn toward the category of the human by repeatedly presenting human beings in symbolic frames that erase the dignity traditionally ascribed to their species. For example, the narrator provides a catalog of the wares in Doc’s laboratory, beginning with “the sponges, tunicates, anemones, the stars and buttlestars,” and so on for several lines (23). In the middle of this list, the narrator indicates dispassionately, “Then there are little unborn humans, some whole and others sliced thin and mounted on slides” (23). With no further comment, the narrator proceeds to the rest of the list, which includes sharks, cats, and frogs. The inconspicuous location of “little unborn humans” amid sea creatures, spiders, and rodents is anything but: the absence of hierarchical taxonomy draws attention to itself, as does the clinical dismemberment of these humans “sliced thin and mounted on slides.”

*Cannery Row* pairs this image with one calculated for dark humor later in the text. The narrator tells the story of humorist Josh Billings’ death near Monterey, after which the embalmer disposes of the man’s internal organs in a gulch behind his house. Shortly

thereafter, a townsman sees a boy going to fish with a liver in his hand for bait and his dog “dragg[ing] yards of intestine at the end of which a stomach dangled” (65). When the man later makes the connection between these organs and Billings’ death, he and some fellow citizens track the boy down and retrieve the organs for burial with the rest of the body, since “Monterey was not a town to let dishonor come to a literary man” (66). Steinbeck surely intended the story as a jibe at Monterey’s disregard for literary men like himself, but the cumulative effect of this episode, the “unborn humans” in Doc’s laboratory, and no less than three suicides in the novel (two in the first twenty pages) is to strip the human of its traditional sanctity, to place it by way of humiliation on a plane with all the other creatures in its environment.

In *Cannery Row*’s animation of the inanimate, it is not only animals, plants, rocks, and machines that acquire life but also formless, disembodied energies and, as I will show later, literary texts. To those amorphous energies first: on the novel’s second page the narrator calls Cannery Row “magical,” and the word effectively evokes the strange “flow and vitality” of the place that exceeds visible and tangible things. The text fairly revels in the play of formless forces on and among its characters, as hinted, for example, by the testimony that the employees of the local brothel are mostly Christian Scientists and by Mack’s invocation of astrology when planning a party for Doc, the depiction of Mary Talbot as a whimsical and benevolent witch, Doc’s lurking superstitions, and the harmonization of his bodily rhythms with the ocean tides. The second party for Doc seems to emerge as a product of such forces. Likewise, once the idea for the party has blossomed, the inhabitants of Cannery Row become ineffably aware of it: “People didn’t get news of the party—the knowledge of it just slowly grew up in them” (152).



In describing Hazel's approach to dialogue, Steinbeck suggests the manner in which these metaphysical dynamics influence the form of his narrative: Hazel "loved to hear conversation but he didn't listen to words—just to the tone of conversation. He asked questions, not to hear the answers but simply to continue the flow" (29). Hazel's enjoyment of a verbal "flow" mirrors the text's seeming delight in the disembodied forces that swirl about Cannery Row, affecting the action as surely as the characters do.<sup>12</sup> Like Hazel the novel subjugates the simple references of "words" to a more holistic concern with "tone," much like Steinbeck emphasizes the relationships in an ecology over, and even to the denial of, the individual species that populate it.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, *Cannery Row* seems to "ask questions" but "not [in order] to hear the answers," not unlike Jesus Maria's story in *Tortilla Flat* that resists didactic interpretation and "hasn't any meaning you can see" but that "still [. . .] does seem to mean something" (139-40). The unconventional structure of the narrative illustrates these qualities of the text best.

In *Cannery Row* Steinbeck deploys a narrative structure reminiscent of *The Grapes of Wrath*, a novel in which he periodically interrupts the main plot line with a chapter that initially seems unrelated to it. In *The Grapes of Wrath* such chapters often metaphorize the primary action of the story, as in the comparison of the turtle and the Okies. The same is sometimes true in *Cannery Row* (witness the comparison of the gopher and Doc), but the narrative structure of the later novel is more complex. While in

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<sup>12</sup> The text hints that Hazel's approach to conversation is owing to his escape from reform school, which should have taught him the importance of taxonomy, definition, and essences and, by extension, the importance of seeking "answers" in conversation. However, his primary interest in conversation's movement and relations—its "flow"—demonstrates his unreformed condition.

<sup>13</sup> Steinbeck shared Hazel's fascination with the sound of words, professing that his own written words "are more made to be spoken than to be read. I have the instincts of a minstrel rather than a scrivener" (*Letters* 19).

*Grapes* these chapters interrupt but ultimately serve the main plot line—the ineluctable movement and empowerment of the migrant workers—in *Cannery Row* these chapters cannot properly be called interruptions because there is hardly a main plot line to speak of, much less a secondary one to accent it.<sup>14</sup> For several chapters in *Grapes*, the turtle chapters comprise a sort of antiphon, but in *Cannery Row* no such repeated image or character appears. The shifting narrative perspective falls sometimes on characters who appear only once and other times on minor but familiar characters. On other occasions the narrator spends a brief chapter philosophizing abstractly. However, no one of these foci dominates, and the shifts in narrative occur consistently throughout the text, so that here variety is the rule and not, as in *Grapes*, the exception. The upshot is a highly episodic novel that complicates traditional conceptions of narrative; lacking a simply discernible trajectory, it can rightly be called a non-teleological novel, giving literary form to Steinbeck's ecological philosophy.

More than a virtuosic demonstration of non-teleological form, geared to elicit admiration, the narrative structure of *Cannery Row* invites readers to participate in the text. To make any sense of the non-linear narrative, readers must supply the thematic linkages between seemingly unrelated episodes. The novel's form also urges participation in Steinbeck's philosophy. The text exerts pressure on the audience's ideological commitments, for the hermeneutic work required of the reader approximates the non-teleological observation modeled in *The Sea of Cortez*, where Steinbeck and Ricketts

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<sup>14</sup> The absence of a clear narrative trajectory contributed to one *New York Times* reviewer's judgment that the novel as a whole was insubstantial: "There just isn't much here, no real characters, no 'story,' no purpose. Instead, with considerable pointless vulgarity and occasional mildly humorous scenes, a series of loosely connected incidents is thrown casually together" (Prescott 277).

write that “It is advisable to look from the tide pool to the stars and then back to the tide pool again” (217). This maxim implies the fundamental unity of all ecological spheres (i.e., tide pool and stars) while accentuating the different impressions yielded by different apertures on the whole. *Cannery Row* expresses the same insights in its first paragraph, when Steinbeck introduces his characters, saying that Cannery Row’s “inhabitants are, as the man once said, ‘whores, pimps, gamblers, and sons of bitches,’ by which he meant Everybody. Had the man looked through another peephole he might have said, ‘Saints and angels and martyrs and holy men,’ and he would have meant the same thing” (1). A primary function of the novel’s non-linear, episodic structure is to place the reader in front of several peepholes, to tilt her gaze toward the tide pool and then the stars and then again the tide pool. The novel’s unconventional, and otherwise inexplicable, shifts in perspective simulate Steinbeck’s own mode of observation, never stopping for long in one place but perpetually integrating his impressions into a holistic vision. *Cannery Row* impels its reader to engage in the same process.

The concept of readerly participation is central to Steinbeck’s aesthetics. An unpublished introduction to the *Viking Portable Steinbeck* explicitly indicates this priority, as Steinbeck subjugates critical “appraisal and evaluation” to the more affective forms of textual engagement that draw readers back to a story repeatedly:

The reader if he likes a story feels largely a participation. The stories we go back to are those in which we have taken part. [. . .] No one has ever read *Treasure Island* or *Robinson Crusoe* objectively. The chief characters in both cases are merely the skin and bones of the reader. The poetical satires of Gulliver have long been forgotten but the stories go on. The message or the teaching of a story almost invariably dies first while the participation persists. (qtd. in DeMott “The Place” 302)

The passage suggests a holistic investment in the text, which is contrasted with the primarily cognitive criticism of literary professionals. Metaphorizing characters as “the skin and bones of the reader” calls to mind Davis’s corporeal aesthetic, which, being grounded in the Incarnation, insists that full participation in *Life in the Iron-Mills* entails embodied service to and presence among the poor. Steinbeck also echoes Wharton’s account of sympathetic reading in asserting that “When a man hears great music, sees great pictures, reads great poetry, he loses his identity in that of the phalanx”—the larger social organism, constituting more than the sum of its parts, to which he belongs (qtd. in DeMott “The Place” 299). He even shares Wharton’s animus toward the impertinent reading that they both think book clubs encourage: when no such club would embrace *East of Eden*, Steinbeck wrote to his publisher, “Do you remember when I argued that the book clubs were bound to be burdened by the prejudices of so many readers? When the reader tells you what to write and publish, you can’t have very good books. Maybe that is our trouble now. Writing for readers instead of ourselves” (qtd. in Benson 716). Nonetheless, the participatory responses that Steinbeck expects from his readers differ in important ways from the commitments that Davis and Wharton solicit from theirs.

Steinbeck’s participation is more passive than Wharton’s. While she imagines an active, tinkering reader whose every interaction with a text involves “additions and modifications” to it, even “distortions,” Steinbeck envisions the reader as less of an agent than the text. He remembers the great books of his formative years as “things that happened to me” (qtd. in DeMott *Steinbeck’s Reading* xx); he approves the representation of *Cannery Row* as “a poisoned cream puff” (Tedlock and Wicker 276); and he describes the reader of “The Chrysanthemums” as the unwitting object of the story’s designs:

Steinbeck says the text is intended “to strike without the reader’s knowledge. I mean he reads it casually and after it is finished feels that something profound has happened to him although he does not know what nor how” (*Life in Letters* 91). Steinbeck’s repeated suggestion that texts happen *to* readers, like a strychnine-laced dessert or a “striking” serpent, frames his notion of audience participation as a fairly ineffectual mode of activity.

Although the mention of a reader’s “skin and bones” evokes the corporeal emphasis in Davis, his aesthetic is a perfect inversion of hers. Steinbeck references the body metaphorically to suggest the reader’s imaginative involvement in the narrative, his or her fictive place inside it. In *Life in the Iron-Mills* the narrator invokes the Incarnation to model the social action, literally embodied, to which she calls her reader upon putting the book down. Steinbeck also cites Jesus’s teaching as a model of audience participation: “Perhaps the best balance of message and participation in all literature is the story of Jesus—for there step by step the mind is opened by association with the man and his suffering to the things he said” (qtd. in DeMott “The Place” 302). For Steinbeck, affective participation leads to cognitive apprehension of a message, and the body is only the medium in which these two processes occur. For Davis, the inverse is true: the reader confronts the message as a call to embodied participation. Charity practiced in the flesh is paramount, while emotion and cognition support this practice. For Davis, Jesus calls an audience to action; for Steinbeck, he calls an audience to reflection.

Next to Wharton’s and Davis’s accounts of readerly engagement, Steinbeck’s “participation” seems like a misnomer. In *Cannery Row* the audience’s main interpretive task consists in following the narrator’s continually shifting perspective and finding

relations between the objects of his observation, which amounts to trying on the non-teleological epistemology that gives birth to Steinbeck's moral quietism. Thus, the reader's charge to "participate" is less like a rallying cry, more like an invitation to "Have a seat...make yourself comfortable." Crucial for understanding Steinbeck's aesthetic is Jackson Benson's insight that "for all [Steinbeck's] general suspicion of academics, he was really a scholar himself" (233). In *Tortilla Flat* Steinbeck repeatedly castigates professional scholars but sometimes borrows their institutional authority to fix interpretation. In *The Sea of Cortez* Steinbeck shares with Ricketts the mantle of scientist and philosopher. And *Cannery Row*, perhaps Steinbeck's most modernist work in terms of form, illustrates Thomas Strychacz's claim that although modernist writers explicitly positioned themselves against a technocratic culture of professionalism in the early twentieth-century, their development of esoteric literary forms reproduced the emergent professions' means of establishing their authority, namely, constructing a language accessible only to the formally initiated.<sup>15</sup>

Specifically, *Cannery Row*'s prefatory chapter presents the narrator and implied reader as scientists, thus inviting the audience to practice non-teleological observation. Attempting to explain how one can "set down alive" the many facets, activities, and

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<sup>15</sup> Steinbeck's relationship with science at mid-career mirrors his relationship to professionalism. Robert Chodat's study of agency identifies a twentieth-century ambivalence toward science and, thus, helps explain Steinbeck's love-hate relationship with the scientific bent of modern scholarship—love for the questioning impulse that gives birth to wonder but hatred toward the reductive materialism that spurns mystery. Chodat concedes the critical commonplace that early-twentieth century and post-war literature reacted against "scientific rationalization and disenchantment," but he argues nonetheless that "the same period that has seen repeated literary attacks on positivism and reductionism has also seen a deep fascination with scientific methods, concepts, and achievements" (17).

characters of Cannery Row, the narrator compares the work of telling his story to the biologist's task of gathering specimens for observation:

When you collect marine animals there are certain flat worms so delicate that they are almost impossible to capture whole, for they break and tatter under the touch. You must let them ooze and crawl of their own will onto a knife blade and then lift them gently into your bottle of sea water. And perhaps that might be the way to write this book—to open the page and to let the stories crawl in by themselves. (2-3)

These metaphors of narrative as organism and of writing as science recapitulate the foundation of Steinbeck's philosophy while setting forth a corresponding ethics of reading. First, they animate the inanimate text; stories become living things. Steinbeck's representation of texts as agents that do things to readers, like poisoning or striking them, has prepared us for this more explicit animation. Next, applying to literature a scientific objective of increasing knowledge through empirical observation, these metaphors place a premium on preserving the "whole[ness]" of the story-specimen. Because the scientist's (or narrator's) "touch" is damaging, his task requires a passive approach that reduces his intervention to a minimum. This metaphor also makes a scientist of the reader: if the product of the narrator's work is a book where stories have "crawl[ed] in by themselves," then the implied role of the reader is to join the narrator in observing those stories with the same measure of delicacy. If anything, the reader's "touch" is more strongly prohibited than the narrator's.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> There is an echo of this metaphor in the description of Doc's laboratory. One paragraph provides a tour of the basement, beginning with the statement, "The basement is the storeroom with shelves, shelves clear to the ceiling loaded with jars of preserved animals" (24). Then the following paragraph describes the library in parallel terms: "The walls are bookcases to the ceiling, boxes of pamphlets and separates, books of all kinds, dictionaries, encyclopedias, poetry, plays" (25). The varied writings on the "bookcases to the ceiling" are framed much like the specimens on the "shelves clear to the ceiling" in the room below.

Steinbeck admires the orphic role. *Cannery Row* declaims on the power of language: “The Word is a symbol and a delight which sucks up men and scenes, trees, plants, factories, and Pekinese. Then the Thing becomes the Word and back to Thing again, but warped and woven into a fantastic pattern” (13). Steinbeck wants to be the speaker of that omnipotent Word. Witness again his resentment of readers “telling you what to write and publish” and his suggestion that “our trouble now” may be in “Writing for readers instead of ourselves.” Steinbeck does not so much crave a dialogue with the reader as an affirmation of his own perspective, nor a wide influence so much as a comprehending coterie. The writer writes, he says, in hopes of eliciting the response, “Yes, that’s the way it is” (qtd. in Benson 4). For audiences that cannot produce this response—like “delicate ladies” and others “insulted by normal events or language”—he has little use (*Letters* 175). “I’ve never wanted to be a popular writer,” he told his publisher, and at times he insisted on his way in a text “no matter what the audience thinks” (*Letters* 175). Steinbeck distanced himself rhetorically from the class of experts that by the 1940s had annexed so much cultural authority for themselves, but the cycle comprised of *Tortilla Flat*, *The Sea of Cortez*, and *Cannery Row* suggests that he desperately “wanted in” to that class—at least, that he wanted a similarly unquestioned authority for himself. He may have denigrated literary scholars as a “pale and emasculated critical priesthood,” but without a doubt he imagined *authors* as priests, and prophets, with whom a proper relationship was characterized not by negotiation but by deference.

Steinbeck’s prohibition against intervention may constitute good science, but it makes for bad ethics, as the text demonstrates almost in spite of itself. In one of *Cannery*



*Row*'s encomiums on Doc, the narrator says of that "fountain of philosophy and science and art" that he "would listen to any kind of nonsense and change it for you to a kind of wisdom" (26). This is charitable work, indeed, when performed well. The best teachers do it habitually. Sadly, though, Doc's conversion of nonsense to wisdom also hints at a fault of Steinbeck's work, namely his penchant for wrapping flabby philosophical thoughts in the glow of revelation. Indeed, *Cannery Row* repeatedly revises biblical language to authorize Steinbeck's non-teleological vision, as when the first line of the Lord's Prayer becomes "Our Father who art in Nature," trading transcendence for immanence (14). Likewise, in his Nobel acceptance speech, he rewrites the Gospel of John's prologue, declaring, "In the end is the Word, and the Word is Man—and the Word is with Men."<sup>17</sup> Propped up by reappropriated scriptures, Steinbeck turns the world's rich variety to an undifferentiated morass; supplants Christian theology with a vague, naturalistic mysticism; and replaces moral obligation with puerile sentimentalism.

The failure of laissez-fair morality is especially apparent through Doc's character, whose freewheeling approach to life earns him universal recognition as a "nice fella" but makes him prone to indifference, selfishness, and violence. Sadly, his relationship with Frankie is hardly less injurious than the boy's relationships at home. Doc certainly exhibits more tolerance than Frankie's uncles, permitting the boy to follow him about and help with various tasks. The text explains that Doc got rid of Frankie's lice, bought him some new clothes, and made him his "slave," and the narrator's use of this last word is telling. It aims at light humor, but it suggests exploitation, too. Despite Doc's occasional

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<sup>17</sup> The prologue to John's Gospel, which identifies Jesus with the divine *logos*, actually begins, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (Jn. 1:1). Steinbeck's revision expresses the conviction, referenced explicitly in his speech, that humankind has taken over a role in the cosmos traditionally attributed to God.

compassion toward Frankie and his overall good-guy reputation in the novel, he fails to care for the boy in two crucial instances.<sup>18</sup> Frankie yearns to win Doc's affection, and once when his attempt to help Doc at a party goes wrong, leaving him devastated, Doc follows him to his hiding place and finds him "whimpering" but leaves without a word or look or touch, having decided "There wasn't a thing in the world he could do" (55). The narrator seems to regard Doc's decision sympathetically, but the truth is that in such situations, even the clumsiest words, looks, and touches can be significant and restorative. Later in the novel when Frankie breaks a store window to get a gift for Doc and the police decide that, with a "mental report" and a "felony" now on Frankie's record, he will need to be "put away," Doc conspicuously fails to intervene again (160). When Frankie explains his behavior by telling Doc, "I love you," Doc seems overwhelmed by the intimacy and the responsibility it entails: he "ran out and got in his car and went collecting" (161). Doc is not heartless; he appears to feel the boy's tragedy keenly. His sensitivity, in fact, is why his inaction on Frankie's behalf seems so strange. However, this tension in Doc's character between sympathetic feeling and ethical withdrawal is not anomalous; it constitutes a foundational problem in Steinbeck's approach to reform.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Edmund Wilson described a posture that characterized both Steinbeck in relation to his low-life characters and also Doc in relation to the inhabitants of Cannery Row. It seems an apt description of Doc's response to Frankie: "A curious and perceptive mind is situated among simple human beings and scrutinizes their activities with the same kind of interest that it finds in the habits of baby octopi, sea anemones, and hermit crabs. It is capable of sentimentalizing about them but it has difficulty convincing itself or us that it accepts them on its own level. It may let them climb all over it, but it always brushes them off" (278).

<sup>19</sup> Citing several scenes like this one as evidence, a trenchant contemporary review in *The Nation* averred that "[i]f proof were needed that sentimentality and cruelty are the two sides of the same coin, it may be found in this book" (Marshall 281).

Doc's carefully guarded independence sometimes comes at the price of others' well-being. A scene concerning drunk driving illustrates this dynamic: having picked up a hitchhiker on a roadtrip, when Doc proposes to stop for some beer, the passenger offers the opinion that "it's not a very good idea to drive under the influence of alcohol" (97). "It's none of my business what you do with your own life," the man says, echoing Doc's own live-and-let-live philosophy, "but in this case you've got an automobile and that can be a murderous weapon in the hands of a drunken driver" (97). Doc promptly instructs the man to get out of the car, threatens to "punch [him] in the nose," and brandishes a monkey wrench to underline the point (97). The text seems to take Doc's side against the hitchhiker's straight-laced moralizing, but many decades removed from the birth of the automobile, having witnessed the consequences of drunk driving over several generations, the contemporary reader can heartily endorse the hitchhiker's message and shudder at Doc's don't-tread-on-me response.

The story of Henri the painter neatly demonstrates the sinister element in Steinbeck's laissez-faire morality. The text characterizes Henri through association with the boat he lives in, perpetually under (re)construction and eternally confined to land. In ten years of living in the boat, Henri "had been married twice and had promoted a number of semi-permanent liaisons" (123). When each woman left him, "he mourned formally for a while": he got drunk and "Sometimes he cried a little all by himself" and read "Rimbaud aloud with a very bad accent" (123). All these gestures, though, were "luxurious stuff and he usually had a wonderful feeling of well-being from it" because Henri "actually felt a sense of relief" in being able once more to "stretch out," "eat what he wanted," and "be free of the endless female biologic functions for a while" (123).

During one such besotted episode he sees a macabre vision in which a “dark handsome young man” cuts the throat of a “golden haired little boy, hardly more than a baby,” the man and baby all the while smiling and laughing (124). Horrified, Henri consults Doc about the meaning of the vision and in that conversation provides a gloss on the moral universe of *Cannery Row*: “You see [the man] doesn’t look like a murderer. He looks nice and the kid looks nice and neither of them give a damn. But he cut that baby’s throat. I saw it” (125).

Henri could just as well be speaking of Doc and Mack and all the characters who live by their non-teleological philosophy—“look[ing] nice” and not “giv[ing] a damn” but haplessly inflicting harm on one another. Actually, that neither the man nor the baby “give a damn” seems to me an explanation of their violence, not, as Henri assumes, a fact that makes it less probable. To Henri, their careless disposition mirrors his own and seems a virtue, but it actually harbors violence. Henri’s perpetual tinkering on his boat and deferral of its maiden voyage may be endearing on one level, but it points toward his unwillingness to commit himself in more significant ways. His marriages and romances fail because he does not care enough about his wives and girlfriends, whose “endless [. . .] biologic functions” annoy him, to sustain a relationship with them. The legacy of his cavalier bohemianism is a series of broken relationships, dramatically reimaged in his gruesome dream. Doc’s legacy in Frankie’s life includes critical instances of abandonment. One thinks, finally, of the novel’s three suicides and wonders if anyone “[gave] a damn” about them.

Steinbeck’s middle career reveals an extreme tension, between reformist zeal and modern skepticism, devolving into a situation where individuals retain deeply humanist

moral inclinations but dare not act on them. This moment, as I suggest in the afterword below, parallels the current one in cultural theory and literary studies, where the Left deploy earnest campaigns against human rights violations in America and abroad even as they seek to articulate a posthumanist ethics and aesthetics. The field is tenuously balanced between those who perceive the arts as resources for political and ethical interventions and those for whom the radical indeterminacy of texts steers them away from intervention. Whether this fragile equilibrium will persist remains to be seen, but the fiction considered here demonstrates modes of surviving, and sometimes thriving, within the tension.

Davis and Wharton in particular develop activist practices that depend in part on countercultural constructions of human subjectivity—its corporeality in Davis and its permeability in Wharton—and also of literary experience—its embodied character in Davis and its dialogical character in Wharton. Perhaps the defining feature of Davis’s and Wharton’s activism is a tolerance for risk, exercised not only in making oneself physically available to the needy (Davis) or mingling one’s identity with another’s (Wharton) but also in constructing fiction whose final form depends on the work of diverse readers. This practice of vulnerability contrasts Steinbeck’s *modus operandi*, encapsulated in Steinbeck’s expressed hope that his writing would “do some good and no harm” (qtd. in Benson 347).<sup>20</sup> This almost creedal phrase betrays Steinbeck’s lingering romance of individual sovereignty, the notion that one could foresee all possible consequences of an action and adjust his behavior to effect only the desired ends, while

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<sup>20</sup> The quote comes from a letter Steinbeck sent to Tom Collins, a manager of a camp of migrant workers who permitted the author to research and report on the conditions there in 1936. Steinbeck and Collins became friends, and the author dedicated *The Grapes of Wrath*, in part, to Collins (“to Tom—who lived it”).

avoiding the hazards. Davis and Wharton assume they have real choices to make as artists and neighbors. That is, they assume that those choices are conditioned by their own constitutions and environments and also that they will be mis/interpreted and answered by their readers and neighbors. Nevertheless, they risk charity as neighbors and artists, opening themselves to abuse and the hazards of unintended consequences but hoping to effect *more* good than harm.

## Literary Agency Then and Now

On November 15, 2011, New York City police officers evicted Occupy Wall Street protesters from Zucotti Park and, in the process, threw away more than five thousand books from the movement's on-site People's Library. While some books were later returned or made available for pickup at a local sanitation facility, the majority were lost or damaged, and journalists and bloggers instantly drew comparisons to the activities of Ray Bradbury's book-destroying firemen in *Fahrenheit 451* (1953), a copy of which was disposed of in the Zucotti Park eviction.<sup>1</sup> This event manifests in the current American moment many of the ideas and energies that framed and pervaded poverty fiction in the Long Progressive Era. To begin with, the Occupy Wall Street movement, like its right-wing counterpart the Tea Party movement, illustrates that the anxious pursuit of agency, especially in relation to objectionable social conditions, defines the United States in the twenty-first century much as it did in the period this project studies. These movements mobilize Americans grasping for agency in a landscape where they feel themselves politically and socially disempowered. Furthermore, the outcry over the destruction of the People's Library situates literature once again, as in the Long Progressive Era, at the center of a struggle for agency, while the journalistic invocation of *Fahrenheit 451* offers us a textual bridge between that earlier period and the present moment.

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<sup>1</sup> One blogger, referring to Mayor Michael Bloomberg's responsibility for the event, called it "Bloomberg's Fahrenheit 451 Moment," while Mathias Christopher at *The Huffington Post* singled out Bradbury's novel for special mention among the library books that were thrown away.

Before building the bridge, though, I note an important difference between these periods: a strain of paranoia runs through the Occupy and Tea Party movements, distinguishing them from the earlier reform campaigns. For Occupiers and Tea Partiers, Wall Street and Big Government, respectively, represent vast networks of power that exert enormous influence over the lives of individuals and communities without their consent. In the paranoid imagination, these inaccessible, tyrannical institutions are hosts to all manner of conspiracies against the freedom and general welfare of the public. The authors in *Reforming Readers* also worried about an emergent class of experts' arrogation of authority over poverty relief and fiction reading, but none of these authors interpreted that redistribution of power in the shrill tones and apocalyptic terms that have become familiar today. It is telling that Rebecca Harding Davis's polemics reached their emotional pinnacle in an essay innocuously entitled "A Grumble" and that Edith Wharton feared the consolidation of power by experts less than she did the violent democratization of power by socialized labor. William Dean Howells inhabited a love-hate relationship with the Progressive reforms that established an American technocracy, and John Steinbeck, whose writing occasionally approached the post-war paranoid style, countered his fears of what would soon be termed the "military-industrial complex" with non-teleological philosophy and fictions of Pacific Coast *bonhomie*.

However, if conspiratorial thinking suffuses parts of the Occupy and Tea Party movements, the movements' very existence testifies to a robust sense of agency among their constituents, who have indeed found ways of making their concerns heard and their influence felt on a national and even global level. In their against-the-odds advocacy, if not their particular aims or their rhetorical tones, these contemporary apostles of agency



resemble Davis and Wharton before them. The linkage between these periods is still more concrete, though. *Fahrenheit 451*, which commentators referenced in criticizing the raid on Zucotti Park, is one of thirty-one books selected by The Big Read, a program of the National Endowment for the Arts that, launched in 2006 to stimulate America's flagging reading habits, improvises on the literary-ethical legacy of the Long Progressive Era.

In 2009, when the NEA's then-chairman Dana Goia publicized new survey data connected to the Big Read initiative, he sounded a note that would have been familiar to Americans in that earlier period: "At a time of immense cultural pessimism," he began, "the NEA is pleased to announce some important good news. Literary reading has risen in the U.S. for the first time in a quarter century" ("More American Adults"). Goia's prefatory phrase ("At a time of immense cultural pessimism") resonates with the narrative of modern decline that *Reforming Readers* has aimed to destabilize and that post-war Americans have radicalized, while his identification of literary reading as a hopeful and constructive practice echoes the sentiments of the four authors I have studied here—especially Davis and Wharton, who imagined reading as a gateway to positive social action. However, as much as Davis, Howells, Wharton, and Steinbeck believed that literature improved its audiences, nowhere in the Long Progressive Era was there a campaign to encourage reading that could rival the scope and organization of the NEA's Big Read project. Goia's confidence that increased reading rates constitute "important good news" in a dark cultural moment begs for some explanation, as does the substantive governmental investment in literary reading practices. With what social goods does reading correlate, such that the prospect of more reading would command federal monies and temper the "cultural pessimism" that frames Goia's announcement? Or, put

otherwise, why would bloggers care more about the loss of Occupiers' books than that of their tents and computers?

Two earlier reports by the NEA during Goia's administration lamented the decline of literary reading among all sectors of the American population and especially among children, a trend that The Big Read aimed to reverse. As indicated by the title of the latter report, *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence* (2007), the authors of these reports considered reading not only a privatized, recreational practice but also an exercise with "demonstrable social, economic, cultural, and civic implications" (*To Read* 3) in fields like education, employment, cultural engagement, and—especially pertinent to *Reforming Readers*—political activity and volunteerism. In the 2000 presidential election, 84% of "Proficient" readers voted, while only 53% of "Below-Basic" readers did (*To Read* 17). In 2002, 43% of literary readers volunteered, while only 16% of non-readers did; and in 2003, 57% of "Proficient" readers volunteered, while only 18% of "Below-Basic" readers did (*To Read* 16). The NEA's reports presented similar statistical data about a variety of reader behaviors, but if voting and volunteering were the only positive practices so strongly correlated with reading, one would understand not only Dana Goia's claim that the abandonment of reading "would constitute a vast cultural impoverishment" but also his assumption in 2009 that *increased* reading rates were "important good news" (*Reading at Risk* vii).

Statistics like the ones above prompt Goia to say that "Regular reading [. . .] seems to awaken a person's social and civic sense" (*To Read* 4). Certainly, his claim corresponds with my sense that poverty fiction of the Long Progressive Era presents a strong linkage between reading and individual agency. I have argued that the fictions of

Rebecca Harding Davis and Edith Wharton exercise readers' volition, priming them for social action. However, the NEA reports make no distinction between types or forms of fiction, as I do, for example, in claiming that William Dean Howells' and John Steinbeck's works operate on readers differently than Davis's and Wharton's works do, even "relaxing [. . .] the moral fibre" in the same way that New York society does in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (296). Perhaps, there are elements of any literary reading experience that do "awaken a person's social and civic sense." Still more likely, there are commonalities among literary readers, voters, and volunteers (e.g., education, class, personality) that help account for correlations among their respective defining activities. Regardless, it remains important to differentiate the manifold ways in which the forms of individual fictional texts act on and respond to readers in the act of reading. Representing the poor as pitiful animals (*The Valley of Decision*) does not urge the same social posture upon readers as does representing the poor as ignorant sages (*Cannery Row*). Neither do readers negotiate a text presented as a biographical outline (*Life in the Iron-Mills*) by the same means that they negotiate one represented as a conversation (*A Hazard of New Fortunes*). These idiosyncrasies of content and form matter for the sorts of attitudes and actions that emerge from various encounters with fiction.

Furthermore, if different texts engender different responses, theoretical commitments about the nature of reading do the same, as indicated, for example, by contemporary and historical disagreement among literary scholars about the relationship between literature and politics. The conflicts between proponents of politically "engaged" literature and advocates of "art for art's sake" derive in no small part from those scholars' different notions of what it means to read well. The former assume a fairly

straightforward linkage between the world of the literary text and the world of a reader's daily experience: readers apply in their lives the ideas, emotions, and attitudes cultivated in their act of reading. Thus, literature becomes a means of catalyzing particular forms of social action. An author constructs a text that fosters specific ideas, emotions, and attitudes about specific institutions, practices, or events, and then she watches as the intended readerly responses find expression in real-world social forums. Of course, there are resistant and aberrant readings, but an author hopes that reading her text generates a particular type of social behavior. Rebecca Harding Davis would have very little objection to this account of reading. Edith Wharton would protest this account quite loudly, but her literature-as-architecture metaphor assumes its basic structure. When an author builds a literary environment, a reader makes choices within it under certain formal constraints, constraints that the author imposes to promote a particular sort of readerly experience.

On the other hand, literary scholars in a Howells-Steinbeck lineage take a deconstructionist perspective on social injustice, textuality, and human subjectivity that prompts them to eschew political readings. In *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, Simon Critchley calls deconstruction a "philosophy of hesitation" that cannot move "from undecidability to the decision, from responsibility to questioning, from deconstruction to critique, from ethics to politics" (236). Indeed, the increasing animation of the poor and of literary texts, combined with the deconstruction of the autonomous self, inclined Howells and Steinbeck to settle deeper in their armchairs, despairing of both their own agency and the prospects for social reform. The same is true of their descendants in literary studies, whose attention to the dignity of the subaltern, the overdetermination of

texts, and the contingency of “the human” nurtures three tendencies, one or two of which may predominate but all of which cooperate in turning back reformist readings: (1) to doubt the very possibility of *choosing* a response to a text, (2) to engage with reformist texts only on an intellectual level (and not to be interpellated in any more holistic way), and (3) to relegate any other levels of response (e.g., affective, corporeal, ethical) to the private sphere. This aloofness is sensible for one who doubts his own agency, and it is consistent for one who deems cultural forms and practices utterly contingent. Reformist readings assume a power of personal choice and a superior cultural vision. Steinbeck, for one, depicts the violence that well-intentioned reform can do to the communities it aims to help. To be uncritically incorporated by a text promoting change in someone else’s life makes one a potential agent of oppression.

Is it possible, then, to embrace Dana Goia’s enthusiasm for literary reading as a socially constructive practice? Differences among literary texts and differences among theories of reading problematize any broad judgments on reading as such. Which text are we reading? And how are we reading it? In the face of these questions, I argue that one can celebrate the NEA’s evidence that more Americans are reading literature. While *Reforming Readers* favors interventionist readings over purely observational ones, I maintain that the types of literature conducing to one or the other response both have a constructive social function, which I will describe at greater length presently. First, though, I want to critique the socially aloof mode of literary scholarship descending from Howells and Steinbeck that threatens Goia’s linkage of reading and social engagement.

Readings of reformist fiction that prioritize cold analysis, while privatizing any emotional, corporeal, and ethical responses, often proceed from a healthy skepticism of

cultural imperialism, of the seductive notion that because someone else's life looks unfulfilled from my vantage point, her life must want reforming. However, Davis and Wharton, whose fiction invites interventionist readings, also recognize the risk of violence in reform, and they embrace it. On what grounds do they do so? I argue that they embrace the risk of violence because they have internalized critiques of social reform, activist reading, and the Cartesian self *more deeply* than Howells and Steinbeck have. In their withdrawal from ethics, Howells and Steinbeck indulge an Enlightenment fantasy of self-determination, maintaining an illusion of ethical control and innocence by refusing to participate in reformist behaviors whose outcomes are uncertain. This stance depends on something like a toddler's sense that if she covers her eyes, the world she can no longer see ceases to exist. Davis and Wharton recognize the inescapability of social injustice and their own involvement in it. There is no moral neutrality, even in withdrawal. Therefore, Davis's and Wharton's texts invite action on behalf of the poor; they encourage the exercise of agency, which does not presume autonomy and a conquering will but affirms the potential for constructive work under the limiting conditions of biology, environment, and, perhaps, metaphysical forces.

Another risk that Davis and Wharton embrace as reformers is the possibility—really, the inevitability—of becoming themselves the reformed. Just as the title of this study casts “Readers” in the acts of reforming *and* being reformed, so Davis's and Wharton's activism causes them to oscillate between the positions of subject and object, the changer and the changed. In this respect, too, they reject the fantasy of self-determination. To them, living means changing, and not only according to one's own intentions. Drawing on the Incarnation, Davis conceives meaningful action as the sort

that makes one vulnerable, like Christ, to violence at the hands of others. Theorizing sympathy, Wharton imagines life's most defining moments as those in which interacting with an Other blurs one's own sense of self and reveals a social interdependence. For both authors, the self emerges in relationship, and its shape bears the impressions of other wills acting on it. The scrupulous detachment that Howells's and Steinbeck's fictions commend seems to result, after all, from too shallow an appropriation of what I have anachronistically called deconstructionist insights. Howells and Steinbeck advertise these insights, but their faith in withdrawal and the possibility of doing no harm indicates that their illusions of individual sovereignty remain intact.

A post-war novel concerned with reclaiming agency from a totalitarian state that outlaws books, *Fahrenheit 451* seems a natural selection for The Big Read project. It thematizes the sort of risk that Davis and Wharton commend to "reforming readers." Having decided to subvert the state from his position within the repressive government, Guy Montag leans on his friend Faber's counsel, piped to him through an earpiece. When Montag hesitates to confront Beatty, the fire chief, Faber advises him, "I know. I know. You're afraid of making mistakes. Don't be. Mistakes can be profited by" (104). Bradbury returns to the theme after Montag stumbles upon a community of literate exiles from the state, who memorize books verbatim in hopes of helping to rebuild civilization after the repressive state collapses under its own weight. Looking at these men's faces, however, he anticipates "a brightness, a resolve, a triumph over tomorrow that hardly seemed to be there" (154). Though Montag "expected their faces to burn and glitter with the knowledge they carried," these men "weren't at all certain that the things they carried in their heads might make every future dawn glow with a purer light [. . .]" (154). Indeed,

“they were sure of nothing save that the books were on file behind their quiet eyes, the books were waiting, with their pages uncut, for the customers who might come by in later years [ . . . ]” (155). This humble confidence in the books, however, sustains the men, who want nothing more. “Ask no guarantees,” the leader counsels Montag, and continues, “ask for no security, there never was such an animal. And if there were, it would be related to the great sloth which hangs upside down in a tree all day every day, sleeping its life away” (157). The message resonates with Davis’s and Wharton’s theories of agency, which preach commitment in the absence of certainty.

Having located a more authentically deconstructionist ethic in intervention than in withdrawal, let us return to the problem of literature that itself promotes withdrawal. Why would the NEA celebrate the reading of such work? The Big Read initiative did not scruple over such literature, and neither does *Reforming Readers*, ultimately, because both projects promote a kind of reading that circumscribes self-indulgent passivity; to be more precise, they encourage reading that is holistic and communal. The Big Read’s website offers the following statement about the work that literature performs on readers: “A great book combines enlightenment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity” (“Fahrenheit 451 Preface”).<sup>2</sup> These sentences describe a holistic engagement of the reader. If “enchantment” denotes the sort of full-bodied experience by which readers of Davis and Wharton are drawn out of themselves and into the lives of others, then “enlightenment” denotes the sort of cognitive discoveries that Howells and Steinbeck offer their readers concerning the limitations of the human will. “A great book” offers both of these readerly experiences, and, if the two seem

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<sup>2</sup> These sentences appear as part of the Big Read’s preface to each of its selected books.



incompatible, literature also “awakens our imagination” to effect a reconciliation and “enlarges our humanity” beyond the necessity of choosing one or the other.<sup>3</sup> Holistic reading shuttles continuously between enlightenment and enchantment, mind and body, observation and intervention. The poles in these binaries are not strictly opposed but mutually constitutive. In the case of novels like *A Hazard of New Fortunes* and *Cannery Row*, which draw the reader mostly toward the first term in each of these polarities, holistic reading becomes resistant reading, pulling in the opposite direction to keep mind in conversation with body and to keep observation the partner of intervention.

Reading that finds expression in constructive social action must be communal as well as holistic. The Big Read promotes such collective reading in that the project’s primary work consists in sponsoring one-month events in selected communities across the country, each of which reads a single book together. Communities apply to participate in these programs that include “a kick-off event to launch the program locally, ideally attended by the mayor and other local luminaries; major events devoted specifically to the [chosen] book (panel discussions, author reading, and the like); events using the book as a point of departure (film screenings, theatrical readings, and so forth); and book discussions in diverse locations and aimed at a wide range of audiences” (“About the Big Read”). Reading in such a context not only encourages the holism described above, by bringing many individual reading experiences into conversation, but it also militates against passive reading. A participating community has already invested substantial energy in applying to The Big Read and planning events for the month-long program, and

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<sup>3</sup> With humanism on the academic chopping block for the last forty years, the notion of “enlarging our humanity” seems dubious. But Davis’s and Wharton’s poverty fiction suggests that humanism and the idea of the human are richer, subtler conceptual resources than recent academics have acknowledged and ought not to be abandoned.

this investment encourages a real commitment to the work of reading that follows. Moreover, the events themselves require readers to expend the energy of traveling somewhere to talk, think, feel, and act in response to the text. Finally, the sharing of one's private reading experiences in public discussions emphasizes the processual and social character of reading; one becomes more acutely attuned to the temporal evolution of a reading experience and more obviously accountable to others for her readerly responses. Such a process entails a honing and an intensification of individual readings and, perhaps, new forms of social interaction emerging in and through the exchange of those readings.

*Fahrenheit 451* offers a striking image of this holistic and communal relation to books in the band of exiles that Montag joins at the novel's end. Having committed many books to memory, but lacking the physical artifacts, these men represent *themselves* as the books. The leader of the men, Granger, tells Montag, "*I am Plato's Republic*" (151); and since only Montag and a man named Harris know Ecclesiastes, Granger tells the protagonist, "If anything should happen to Harris, *you* are the Book of Ecclesiastes" (151). The text proceeds to identify other exiles as the embodiments of particular authors' works—Swift, Darwin, Einstein, Gandhi, and so on. Thus, *Fahrenheit* constructs an image of radically holistic reading, where the whole person is not only incorporated in the reading experience but even merges with the text. The men have become "dust jackets for books"; they are "bums on the outside, libraries inside" (153). Moreover, this situation makes the men's continuing relation to books a thoroughly social one, as engaging a book not only involves but *is* engaging another person. They also locate their personal salvation and that of civilization in literary community. Granger attests that

“When we were separate individuals, all we had was rage,” but formed into a strategic “network,” the men have purpose and a gift to offer a post-apocalyptic world. Indeed, *Fahrenheit* ultimately turns even its apocalypticism to purposes of global restoration, as the narrative’s last page has Montag contemplating the book of Revelation’s depiction of the New Jerusalem: “*And on either side of the river was there a tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month; And the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations*” (165). Seeming to play on the association of “leaves” and pages, Bradbury invokes a sacred text to pronounce hope—even for subjects of hyper-modern, totalitarian regimes—in holistic, communal reading.

*Fahrenheit 451*’s deep entanglement of books with bodies and communities makes the destruction of the Occupy Wall Street People’s Library seem all the more desolating and goes some distance toward explaining the public fixation on that feature of the November 15<sup>th</sup> eviction. But that this novel found a place in the movement’s library is no more surprising than its selection to The Big Read project. Its dramatization of human agency under the most constraining conditions, exercised through reading, makes it a potentially liberating text even for the paranoid and a gateway to an even earlier historical moment—the subject of *Reforming Readers*—when social and aesthetic constraints could as well be invitations as impediments to action.

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