Unhappy Consciousness: Recognition and Reification in Victorian Fiction

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Unhappy Consciousness is a study of recognition scenes in the Victorian novel and their relation to Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism. Victorian recognition scenes often show a hero’s self-discovery as a retrospective identification with things. When, for example, in Henry James’s The Portrait of a Lady, Isabel Archer learns the truth about her marriage: “She saw, in the crude light of that revelation... the dry staring fact that she had been an applied handled hung-up tool, as senseless and convenient as mere shaped wood and iron.” The retrospective discovery of identity in Victorian novels is often figured as a catastrophic falling-apart of a stable self that is also an economic object or instrument: a bank check, a debt, a forgery, an inheritance, or an accumulated principal.

Recognition scenes cannot be considered in the light of a timeless “master plot” or the classical poetics of Aristotelian anagnorisis, but need to be interpreted in terms of historical forms of social misrecognition (such as Marx’s analysis of fetishism). Unhappy Consciousness contends that, if we are going to talk about nineteenth century things, we will have to take into account the novelistic misrecognition of the self, insofar as the heroes misrecognize themselves in forms of commodity fetishism. The thing is so often the subject herself insofar as “barred,” dispersed among retrospective or delayed object identifications. I respond to the historical contextualization in Victorian cultural studies of “commodity culture,” insisting that the economic structure of the commodity is not only a topic for realist notation, but makes up the inner logic of the novel form. Unhappy Consciousness urges a return to questions of novel theory which were perhaps set aside.
during New Historicism, arguing for a particularly novelistic mode of “objectification” (the form of the hero’s activity) seen in interaction with the historical mode of objectification found in the capitalist value-form.

I advance this argument through studies of several canonical Victorian works. Chapter One looks at the tension in Charles Dickens’s *Little Dorrit* between the ideological closure attained in the “family romance” plot of buried wills and restored parents, and the dead-end of interpretation and retrospection found in the plot of financial crisis and stock swindles. Chapter Two argues that, in Anthony Trollope’s *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, the tautological nature of interest rate is not confined to the urban financial plot but is displaced and affectively diffused over the provincial mystery plot. Chapter Three is a study of the Sherlock Holmes stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, in which I read the detective as an exaggerated portrait of the subjective effects of capitalist alienation, a monad whose only intervention in the world is to link predictive results with opaque processes, to “produce” recognition scenes (the solutions to each case) as a salable commodity. He is a machine for retrospection who has no personal past. In Chapter Four, I read Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* as a critique of the fetishizing of autonomous consciousness, using Marx’s definition of fetishism as the misrecognition of a social form as the content of a thing. Isabel’s mistake is to misconstrue the structure of the male gaze that constitutes her “freedom” as the inherent property of her individuality—until it is unmasked as a trap. As so often in the Victorian novel, fetishism is a mode of self-knowledge.
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“Like one who dreams he is being harmed,
And even as he dreams, wishes it may be a dream,
So that he longs for what is, as if it were not...”
—Dante, *Inferno* XXX
Introduction

The concept of reification originates in the writings of Karl Marx, but to see what it entails, I want to look not into the pages of Capital, but to the recognition scene in Charles Dickens’s Great Expectations.

Just prior to narrating the discovery of his benefactor’s identity—and the attendant dashing of his most cherished self-deceptions—Pip anticipates:

I pass on, unhindered, to the event that had impended over me for longer yet... In the Eastern story, the heavy slab that was to fall on the bed of state in the flush of conquest was slowly wrought out of the quarry, the tunnel for the rope to hold it in its place was slowly carried through the leagues of rock, the slab was slowly raised and fitted in the roof, the rope was rove to it and slowly taken through the miles of hollow to the great iron ring. All being made ready with much labor, and the hour come, the sultan was aroused in the dead of the night, and the sharpened axe that was to sever the rope from the great iron ring was put into his hand, and he struck with it, and the rope parted and rushed away, and the ceiling fell. So in my case; all the work, near and afar, that tended to the end, had been accomplished; and in an instant the blow was struck, and the roof of my stronghold dropped upon me.¹

The recognition scene that follows discloses to Pip: an unlooked-for intimacy with another person—the convict Abel Magwitch, his benefactor and “second father”; the vanity of his aspirations in love; and his shameful, willful blindness to the meanings of the past. Hardly anything touching on Pip’s inner being is not overturned by Magwitch’s arrival: “All the truth of my position came flashing on me; and its disappointments, dangers, disgraces, consequences of all kinds, rushed in in such a multitude that I was borne down by them and had to struggle for every breath I drew.”²

And yet this knowledge, which penetrates to the core of Pip’s self, is described in terms of an impersonal, in fact a mechanical process: a matter of ropes and pulleys and stones. The “Eastern story” tells of enormous distances (“miles of hollow”) through which an inexorable, rigged

² Ibid., 303.
apparatus slams down the massive fact of the stone slab. The emotional and interpersonal knowledge to come is rendered as an external, objective inevitability, removed from any subjectivity, interpretation, or engagement with others. And where is Pip amidst so much hauling and quarrying? He is nowhere to be found in this picture, until finally the slab drops and obliterates him. But the recognition scene that is being described in this fable—Magwitch’s revelation—tells a different story, that Pip cannot be separated from the long ramifications of the past or taken out of the picture. He is, so to speak, dispersed or buried all along the way. When he sees, in the person of the weather-beaten and grimy sheep-farmer, the hitherto-concealed source of his own income and genteel position, he also sees himself as a thing, produced and bought behind his back. Magwitch, oblivious to Pip’s horrified reaction, exults in Pip as a particularly valuable commodity: “If I ain’t a gentleman, nor yet ain’t got no learning, I’m the owner of such. All on you owns stock and land; which on you owns a brought-up London gentleman?”

Pip himself is shown to be, in the clerk Wemmick’s expression, only so much “portable property.”

This is a study of the dialectic between recognition scenes and reification in Victorian fiction. In the two scenes above, the recognition that Pip’s expectations are bound up in Magwitch, this figure of uninvited otherness, is figured in terms of an impersonal process of ropes and slabs taking place far from consciousness, and as an equally-removed and unconscious commodity-production. In short, it is impossible to separate the aesthetic category “recognition scene” from the thingly abstractions of capitalism. Both recognition and reification are structures of concealment, whether it be the discovery of madwomen in attics, the unmasking of Red-headed Leagues, and the re-parenting of orphans, on one hand, or the mystifications of finance and the “hidden abode” of industrial labor, on the other. They interfere with one another, their logics

3 Ibid., 306.
override and interpenetrate. What is concealed or repressed by reification—the social relations obscured by the commodity form—return in recognition as formal, narrative distortions.

Reification has long been a topic of literary studies, especially of the Victorian novel—albeit often under the heading of “commodity fetishism”—in such diverse settings as material culture, affect studies, “thing theory,” New Historicism, and ideology critique. These studies have been characterized by a contextualist method where the economic is heterogenous to the literary, so much material to be worked upon by art—depicted, thematized, and domesticated by mimesis. A phenomenon like reification would then belong to the real, external order of imitated things. Alternately, as in the work of Mary Poovey, the economic is seen as not heterogenous, but rather continuous with the literary; realism participates, together with the “genre” of paper money, in the discursive framing and assembling of the economic as representable. In either case, the economic is recruited into textuality and linguistic representation. However, reification has not been studied as an aesthetic category in its own right, as having a temporal or narrative dimension. But the themes and consequences of recognition—identity, narrative and ideological closure, teleology, subjectivity—are also what is at stake in reification.

Reification is itself a misrecognition, a mode of “misrepresentation,” under which subjective and intersubjective social structures appear as an alien, opposing objectivity. Far from being a (more or less regrettable) occurrence available for novelistic representation, reification is rather the (historical, class-mediated) framework of that representation. But a representation that is at the same time a structure of repression—or a representation by repression.

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The connection between recognition and reification is already implicit in the key Marxist analysis of reification, Georg Lukács’s essay “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat.” At the center of Lukács’s deduction of the proletariat as the “subject of history”\(^6\) from “the riddle of commodity-structure”\(^7\) is a remarkable moment of recognition, whereby “in the commodity the worker recognizes himself and his own relations with capital.”\(^8\) This recognition depends on both an objective and a subjective conception of reification. On one hand, reification is a mode of subjectivity, which “stamps its imprint upon the whole consciousness of man”\(^9\) and appears as “the necessary, immediate reality of every person living in capitalist society.”\(^10\) On the other hand, for the proletarian, in his consciousness and “in his social existence the worker is immediately placed wholly on the side of the object,”\(^11\) giving rise to “the split between subjectivity and objectivity induced in man by the compulsion to objectify himself as a commodity.”\(^12\) In other words, the worker must become self-conscious in that very location where he is an unconscious, produced thing: his economic position as a commodity.

Following this recognition scene, we might read Lukács’s analysis of reification to be itself a “theory of the novel,” as it provides an implicit theory of subjectivity, of repression, of ethics, and of immediacy and representation. If reification posits an objective world of material exchange, autonomous processes, and thingly values independent of and impenetrable by the subject, then recognition (exemplified by the proletarian class consciousness that is the “self-consciousness of the commodity”\(^13\)) is the collapse of this separation.

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\(^7\) Ibid., 83.

\(^8\) Ibid., 168.

\(^9\) Ibid., 100.

\(^10\) Ibid., 197.

\(^11\) Ibid., 167.

\(^12\) Ibid., 168.

\(^13\) Ibid., 168.
By contrast, the classical theories of the novel are dependent upon (or are theorizations of) a reified subjectivity. In Ian Watt’s *The Rise of the Novel*, this separation of the self and the world, subject and object, is seen as innate to realism: “the basic terms of [novelistic] inquiry have been dictated by the narrative equivalent of dualism” along the lines of Cartesian ontology.¹⁴ In Lukács’s own *The Theory of the Novel*, the novelistic subject follows the dualist model: the historical disintegration of the unified epic vision resolves itself into the stark novelistic opposition between “soul” and “world.”¹⁵ Such a dualism, holding asunder the hero or narrator from an indifferent external world, is the starting point for what might be considered as the main line of the nineteenth-century European novel, which is continually taking up the questions, “What is my place in the world? How can I make my inner life into an external reality?” This is the situation of Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*, Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*, Pierre Bezukhov in *War and Peace*, as well as of the heroes in the prototypical *Bildungsromane* of Goethe, Balzac, and Stendhal. The answer almost always involves the lowering or adjusting of one’s expectations; the difficulty is to wedge one’s life into its eventually limited niche, to “find one’s place.”

Against this, recognition scenes would seem to contend that one’s “place” in the world is not a substantial given, a question of the right fit within an external order, but a structural illusion that collapses under the weight of desire. This opens up some specifically “novelistic” ways of thinking about reification: about the immanence of meaning in realist representation, the *telos* of a life-story, and the alterity of the social world. Recognition thus becomes a fulcrum by which to motivate the question that Lukács identifies as “the dissonance special to the novel,” namely “the

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refusal of the immanence of being to enter into empirical life.”¹⁶

In recognition scenes, “who I am” turns out to have preceded the self’s appearance in the object-world, as the disavowed or opaque organization of one’s desires. The meaning of this de-centered subject is found within this framework of external reality as unrecognized appearance, what cannot be perceived “straight on.” Where Pip... or Oedipus, or Jane Eyre, or Luke Skywalker, sees him or herself mirrored in the outside world—intended by Miss Havisham for Estella, savior of Thebes, mistress of Thornhill, revenger of his father’s death—are all untenable, impossible places. In such recognition scenes, one finds that one is that very blindspot. The traces or clues one previously ignored, come to speak the loudest. Identity resides in what seemed the most other: a convict’s graces, or an enemy’s outreached hand. The foreign city turns out to be your home. The attic turns out to hold the Mrs. Rochester you thought you were.

Reification and recognition together, read together as structures of subjectivity, contest the picture of the mind and world proposed by classical novel theory, the realist model of representation, historicist constructions of context and discourse, as well as the “formalist” isolation of narratological questions. But reification and recognition cannot be separated out into a hierarchy or into distinct spheres—the language of allegory, representation, homology, reflection. In the dialectic between them, we can only retroactively posit two positive, conflicting forces—not real conditions and their representation, but a relation of interference and contestation. Not mimesis, but a mutual contamination and blind groping, soliciting and counter-soliciting. But perhaps this is all less clear than starting to define the two logics separately, as though they were not constantly crowding in on one another.

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Aristotle, in his Poetics, defines recognition (anagnorisis) as “a change from ignorance to

¹⁶ Ibid., 71.
knowledge,””\(^\text{17}\) and cites the *Oedipus* of Sophocles as the highest achievement in tragedy because the recognition there “arises from the internal structure of the plot””\(^\text{18}\) and is “coincident with a Reversal of the Situation.””\(^\text{19}\) Now, Aristotle’s definitions have a way of turning into prescriptions, or even hierarchies of categories, and the *Poetics* is especially valuable in indicating where recognition scenes might go awry or fall flat. So, we hear that recognition should not proceed from signs or tokens, or spontaneous declaration, but should spring from immanent causes, “by a turn of incident.””\(^\text{20}\) All these delineations remain in force for the present study. On one hand, recognition should emerge out of (only) that which we have already seen—a kind of aesthetic Ockham’s razor, enjoining the dramatist not to unnecessarily multiply entities. So, no *deus ex machina*, no late-introduced clues. On the other hand, recognition should illuminate what we have seen—something (the truth) should appear where we didn’t see it before. The knowledge to be gained is not just coming upon some new fact (this would be plain old cognition, *gnosis*), but in a sense must be an undoing: a reversal within knowledge, not mere additional information. Aristotle treats as a separate question the “irreparable deed (perpetrated) in ignorance,” under the heading of “the circumstances which strike us as terrible or pitiful.””\(^\text{21}\) But this question of knowing and not-knowing will be essential to our sense of recognition. Ignorance (*agnoia*) is not a simple starting-place, neither the opposite of knowledge nor its lack.

Let us take another look at the *Oedipus*, if possible without Aristotelian glasses on. To begin: does Oedipus move “from knowledge to ignorance,” as the *Poetics* defines recognition? After all, he comes onstage marked out as one who *knows*. Having answered the sphinx’s riddle, Oedipus knows what man is, when so many others did not. At least, he knows intellectually,


\(^{18}\) Ibid., Chapter X.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., Chapter XI.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., Chapter XVI.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., Chapter XIV.
definitionally. In the same way, he is well-apprised of his horrific fate from oracles. His story is not one of benighted unawareness, but precisely of factual or oracular knowledge, knowledge that is useless to him because it remains either descriptive or prophetic. The course of the drama is to bring home to Oedipus how he has already lived this knowledge, unaware. Hegel describes the tragic hero thus: “The agent finds himself... in the opposition of knowing and not knowing... For the knowledge [of oracles] is, in its very principle, directly not knowledge, because consciousness in acting is inherently this opposition.”

At the beginning of the play, Oedipus sets out to investigate the cause of the plague in Thebes, vowing to expel the murderer of Laius. He asserts that he can play detective here unbiased, “as one that is a stranger to the story as stranger to the deed.” But the question he approaches as one alien to himself, turns out to be his own story; moreover, his very being is enmeshed in what is most abhorrent to himself, and which he had sought to distance himself from by leaving Corinth. Everything at the beginning of the play that is repudiated as the utmost contamination and fled from—and everything that appears as having arisen externally, as a “case” to solve—all of this is precisely where Oedipus will find himself, outside of himself. In other words, where Oedipus is “unknowing” or “unconscious” [lelethenai, lelethas], there he is befouling himself, there is the truth he is looking for. Recognition is self-recognition in otherness.

The principle of recognition in the play is stated by Creon: “That which is sought is found; the unheeded thing escapes.” This means first of all that truth, however unrecognized, leads a life—is ongoing—even in its misprision. Recognition supersedes an existing interpretation, it

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24 Ibid., line 366.
25 Ibid., line 415.
26 Ibid., lines 110-11.
does not step into a vacuum. The old meanings and identities are also a container for that which emerges and overturns them. That is, the “false” organization not only includes (as “unheeded”) the nodes of a latent truth, but itself was minimally coherent, operational. Oedipus’s ignorance is itself a structure, and one that goes, however limply. As Martin Heidegger remarks, the initial, fleeting appearance of Oedipus as “savior and lord of the state” is “not just Oedipus’s subjective view of himself, but that within which the appearing of his Dasein happens.”

Recognition takes place within the sway of “false” interpretations whose falsity lies not in their covering-up or excluding the arrangement of true identities, but rather in being the existence of these identities in their unconscious, unheeded state. Truth before its recognition is still pressing, as it were, from the other side—it is not an absolutely passive substrate. Nor is falsehood a mere smoke-screen or inaccurate assessment.

Recognition retroactively illuminates the past, not only substituting a new identity for an old, but also sifting the grains of truth in the existing account. A number of inert or floating details suddenly snap into place, as for instance the protagonist’s own name (in Greek, “swollen foot”). What was previously a mere biographical given, Oedipus’s lameness, is now integrated into an appalling explanation (his ankles were pierced by his parents before they exposed him on a hillside), which is in turn granted all the power of tragic repetition (his being thus cast out to die as a child is then echoed in his banishment from Thebes at the play’s conclusion). This aspect of retroactive significance, or illumination, compels a kind of virtual “re-reading,” summoning up a train of neglected or ambiguous statements that only subsequently can be heard correctly and placed in a new light, e.g., the more oracular statements by Tiresias.

“The unheeded thing escapes” also means that recognition arises from the overlooked, the

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excessive, the fortuitous—in the case of the oracle, even from the ambiguous and slippery. One might call this the aleatory or non-teleological aspect of recognition. The truth inheres in what is marginal and unorganized, outside of the structured coherence of the initial situation. What gives so much power to the recognition springing from “the incidents themselves” is the apparent contingency of this immanence—how much depends, for instance, on the identity of the messenger from Corinth. Tragedies are often described as mousetraps, inexorable downfalls needing only to be set in motion. But if there is something like “iron necessity,” that of the Oedipus is more like gossamer.

Oedipus no sooner discerns the identity of his prophesied fate with his present life than that life collapses, like the disturbance of a reflection in the water. Recognition is not a reconciliation: he cannot linger in this new-found identity. What Oedipus recognizes is nothing but his own vanishing and dissolution. The chorus wails, “O generations of men, how I count you as equal with those who live not at all”: his very being is annulled in the moment of finding itself. What is recognized is not some essential identity, but rather his own dissolution, so that in Oedipus at Colonus, Oedipus can speak of no longer being. To know his past is to know how illusory and fleeting was his ideal image of himself. But this hubris is not a mere over-confidence or pridefulness, it is something actively mirrored in the fragility of the initial appearances.

To summarize the preceding:

-Recognition is not a move from ignorance to knowledge; the reversal locates knowing within not-knowing, and vice versa.

-Recognition is a self-recognition in otherness, an identity found in the object-world.

-Truth is not a passive latency, but has a life in concealment. Falsehood equally is not an impotent, illusory non-being.

28 Aristotle, Poetics, Chapter XVI.
29 Sophocles, Oedipus Rex, lines 1186-8.
30 Sophocles, Oedipus at Colonus, in Works I, line 393.
-Recognition rewrites the past, illuminating a retroactive significance.

-Recognition hinges on contingency.

-The discovery of identity is equally the collapse of one’s “place” in the world.

This reading of Oedipus owes a great deal to psychoanalysis—though not to Freud’s own reading of Sophocles’s play in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. As Terence Cave points out in his study of recognition scenes, for all the importance of Oedipus to Freud, the Sophoclean recognition scene seems not to play much of a role in Freud’s poetics.\(^{31}\) Cave looks to fill in this oversight with analyses of Freud’s writings on Hoffman (“The Uncanny”) and Jensen (“Delusion and Dreams in Jensen’s *Gradiva*”). By contrast, “my” Freud is the case history on the “Wolf Man,” and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*—see especially Chapter Four for an analysis of the “recognition scenes” in those clinical and theoretical texts. The way I will be talking about recognition also draws on the Lacanian ideas (though not always the Lacanian terminology) of a “barred subject,” of *aphanisis*, separation, and the “mirror stage.”

After Aristotle, the most important philosopher of recognition must be Hegel—however, *not* with reference to the influential “Independence and Dependence of Self-Consciousness: Lordship and Bondage” chapter in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. This, however, is *not* the Hegelian recognition I want to draw upon. Although this “master-slave” dialectic is explicitly concerned with recognition [*Anerkennen*], it is of a particular sort. The life or death confrontation that yields self-consciousness in Hegel’s parable, has as its goal not illumination or the overturning of past interpretations, but rather mutual *acknowledgement*, the aim of being recognized as...\(^{32}\) The whole scene is more reminiscent of Oedipus confronting Laius on the

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\(^{32}\) Hegel, *Phenomenology of Mind*, 231.
road and refusing to yield, than of the later discovery of what he has done.\textsuperscript{33} Neither will Hegel’s own theory of tragedy go very far in helping to define recognition. As Cave notes, “\textit{anagnorisis} [does] not arise in the categories Hegel prefers,”\textsuperscript{34} most obviously in his preference for the \textit{Antigone} over the \textit{Oedipus}.

But Hegel does have an idea of recognition which we can use, in the \textit{Phenomenology of Spirit}’s figure of the “unhappy consciousness.” The entire length of the \textit{Phenomenology} is the story of subjectivity’s self-recognition in the external world (of sensory experience, of scientific fact, of religious and political institutions). Far from starting with some identical Subject-Object that variously incarnates itself throughout history, or rigging the game by a teleological sleight of hand, Hegel shows the repeated failure of consciousness to close the gap separating it from objectivity. Each section of the book takes up the attempt again at an expanded level: the actor (Consciousness, then Self-consciousness, then Reason, then Spirit) throws its arms around broader and broader swaths of experience and claims it as “mine!” before contradictions break apart this unity and recognition collapses. But this is \textit{not} because objectivity remains unreachable, transcendental, absolute, noumenal, etc. etc., as in Kant’s idea of the “thing-in-itself.” Spirit (consciousness, subjectivity), rather, \textit{is} this non-identity of the absolute with itself. Spirit’s failures in this regard are not mere obstacles that might have been overcome with more gumption or a different approach, instead this continual splitting (without “reconciliation”) makes up the very life and history of consciousness. Further, consciousness is not to be taken in a psychological sense: consciousness’s efforts to clutch itself from phenomena take the \textit{form} of law, ethical life, religion, the economy, sovereignty, art... (Another way to put this is that law,

\textsuperscript{33} The emphasis on recognition as acknowledgement comes from Alexandre Kojève’s interpretation of the \textit{Phenomenology}, and extends to the “look” in Sartre’s \textit{Being and Nothingness}, and to Habermasian accounts of intersubjectivity, such as Axel Honneth’s \textit{The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflict}.

\textsuperscript{34} Cave, \textit{Recognitions}, 156.
religion, and so on are themselves treated as cognitive scaffoldings.)

The *Phenomenology* demonstrates over and over how metaphysics sets up a “beyond” cut off from subjective experience—for instance Plato’s forms, or Kant’s noumena—thereby putting something back behind objectivity such that consciousness can never recognize itself there. Hegel’s argument (mostly in the *Science of Logic*) is that what is “beyond appearance” has to show up *as beyond* within appearance, and that this disturbance (reflected into appearance) is already the sought-for essence. In a famous image, Hegel dismisses the idea that there is anything going on in the “Holy of Holies,” that there is some great mystery in the locked room: “It is manifest that behind the so-called curtain, which is to hide the inner world, there is nothing to be seen unless we ourselves go behind there, as much in order that we may thereby see, as that there may be something behind there which can be seen.” Recognition does not come about by subjectivity staying on this side of things, gingerly eyeing appearances.

Now, the figure of consciousness most defeated by the illusion of the beyond in the *Phenomenology* is the “unhappy consciousness”: the Christian soul unable to leap into direct communion with the Godhead, but who bestows an unsurpassable permanence on the vale of tears confronting him or her.

Instead of grasping the real nature consciousness merely feels, and has fallen back upon itself. Since, in thus attaining itself, consciousness cannot keep itself at a distance as this opposite, it has merely laid hold of what is unessential instead of having seized true reality. Thus, just as, on one side, when striving to find itself in the essentially real, it only lays hold of its own divided state of existence, so, too, on the other side, it cannot grasp that other [the essence] as particular or as concrete. That “other” cannot be found where it is sought; for it is meant to be just a “beyond,” that which can not be found.

What the unhappy consciousness does not understand is twofold, first that in its holding-together-in-thought the empirical particularity (its own meager worldly existence) with the

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36 Ibid., 258.
“essential” (divine object of devotion and feeling), it has already found what it is looking for; second that its very “desiring and toiling,” the lived “process of canceling and enjoying the alien external reality,—existence in the form of independent things” is again this “unattainable” self-unity. In other words, the unhappy consciousness misperceives its own essence (as self-consciousness) as an unreachable transcendent God on one hand, and (as productive activity) as mere unsignifying materiality on the other.

Where is recognition here? Unhappy consciousness finds what it is looking for, but without realizing that this is so. In Hegel’s presentation, this “consciousness... can only come upon the grave of its life”—and only for the philosophical observer, “for us or per se” has it “found itself.”

This is, strictly speaking, a case of dramatic irony—the recognition scene in Hegel is pushed back into an infinite horizon. The important point here is that recognition is not necessarily the psychological awareness of a character; in Hegel’s sense, recognition is more like a structure, or a state of affairs. Hence, the final sequence of the Phenomenology, “Absolute Knowing,” is not to be construed as a giant light-bulb going off over the head of Substance, but rather as a set of conditions and practical relationships. This, too, is recognition.

To revisit the features drawn from my reading of the Oedipus, now as applied to Hegel’s “unhappy consciousness”: Recognition is not a move from ignorance to knowledge; the reversal locates knowing within not-knowing, and vice versa. The unhappy consciousness is frustrated and pitiful not because there is some positive knowledge “out there” which it cannot obtain—the unchangeable essence, the veiled presence of the absolute—but because the actual experience of the absolute which it has, through working and being part of a

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37 Ibid., 259.
38 Ibid., 258.
39 Ibid., 259
world, it passes off as the truth of its thought-object.

Recognition is a self-recognition in otherness, an identity found in the object-world. The unhappy consciousness prefers its disunion and fretfulness to “that confirmation of its own existence which it would receive through work and enjoyment... in other words, it must consciously nullify this certification of its own being” in worldly things.⁴⁰

Truth is not a passive latency, but has a life in concealment. Falsehood equally is not an impotent, illusory non-being. Hegel is the philosopher of reality: the idea will not be denied the right of actually existing, of dissolving reality as it stands. So, the same misperception does not merely break down over and over again—its “truth” has to become a force itself. In this case, the absolute wins out over consciousness, which “could ensure its self-renunciation and self-abandonment solely by... real and vital sacrifice” of its freedom. The result and next starting point is then an asceticism that sees the self as the instrument of universal will.⁴¹

Recognition rewrites the past, illuminating a retroactive significance. The subsequent stage of asceticism, in which the sought-for identity is “recognized” structurally (in the institution of the priesthood) recasts the meaning of work and enjoyment, which originally it overlooked. After the conversion experience and renunciation, past satisfactions takes on the meaning of sin.

Recognition hinges on contingency. There is insufficient space (or justification) here to go into the role of Christ in Hegel’s philosophy, but this is where he first shows up in the Phenomenology: as the “unchangeable which has form and shape,”⁴² i.e. as the utterly contingent universal. The subsequent “recognition” of the self in the otherness of the collective Holy Spirit turns upon this contingency.

The discovery of identity is equally the collapse of one’s “place” in the world. In its search,

⁴⁰ Ibid., 258.
⁴¹ Ibid., 266.
⁴² Ibid., 255.
“consciousness has found out by experience that the grave of its actual unchangeable Being has no concrete actuality.” The ideal self-image projected out into things offers no solidity or shelter.

Recognition, as I have been sketching its outlines, is less a matter of scenes—for instance, the kind of concluding unmasking that runs from Anne Radcliffe to *Scooby Doo*—than of a temporal structure in which the “other side” of things (sheep-farming in Australia, long unsolved murders in Thebes, the worldly subsistence of unessential consciousness) turns out to have been one’s own history. My point is not that we should give up recognition scenes, but that recognition is, so to speak, at issue even where there is not the expected éclat of astonished discovery.

I take this “expanded” idea of recognition to be what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar are getting at in their famous reading of *Jane Eyre*. It is simply not the case that, in this recognition scene, Jane comes to the understanding of how her desires are implied in the repugnant ravings of the madwoman, although Bertha is “[in a sense] Jane’s own secret self,” “the ‘bad animal’ who was first locked up in the red-room [and] still lurking somewhere, behind a dark door.” This is, in Hegel-speak, an in-itself that is only for-us, i.e. for the symbolic matrix. The Gothic illumination, the pulling back of the curtain to reveal the madwoman in the attic, requires a detour, through the Realist supplement of the St. John Rivers plot, in order for Jane to “process” Bertha’s appearance without recognizing herself therein. The recognition has to be read as unfolding, being “worked through,” not as being a succinct flash of knowledge.

Victorian fiction is also bestrewn with recognition scenes that are “too much”: overly coincidental, far-fetched, unnaturalistic, even to the point of disrupting a realism that ought to

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43 Ibid., 258.
know better. It might appear that I am trying to define this well-known feature out of existence. It is true that not every Victorian recognition scene, taken in the broadest sense, will coincide with all the characteristics I have been outlining. (But the same could be said for Aristotle’s definition, which includes a ranking of what recognitions work best and what is contrived and tedious.) But recognition is still at issue even where it is not repeating the Oedipus model point-by-point.

Indeed, recognition in Victorian fiction is always the site of an interference, as it were a “jamming” by reification. Reification shows up instead of recognition, discernible wherever recognition is incomplete, attenuated, disjointed. (But this “block” is also internal to recognition, which needs a minimal obstacle to work at all.) In the novel, this obstacle is the social form of value, carried over as a narrative and epistemological form.

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The term “reification” appears perhaps five times across the three volumes of Marx’s Capital, taking up considerably less space than the analysis of lesser-known topics such as the increasing organic composition of capital, differential rent, or the eighteenth-century distinction between fixed and circulating capital. Whereas associated words like “fetishism” and “alienation” are extensively discussed in Marx’s 1844 manuscripts, “reification” [Versachlichung or Verdinglichung] first comes into use only in the specifically economic writings of the late 1850s, the Grundrisse and The Critique of Political Economy. It is only in Georg Lukács’s 1922 essay, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” that the concept assumes a central place.

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46 I don’t write about any Victorian sensation novels in this study, but these would be the more elaborate and disbelief-suspending of recognition scenes. In terms of reification, the “unconsciousness” of the crime committed in The Moonstone, while the “tracking” character of the narrative in The Woman in White, its plot being almost entirely belated observation, are starting points suggesting that sensation fiction could also be read in this way.
in Marxist thinking, especially as subsequently thematized by the Frankfurt School.\textsuperscript{47}

Perhaps reification can best be explicated through the series of dialectical paradoxes it engenders. To begin with, reification describes \textit{both} an epistemological framework \textit{and} an objective social process,\textsuperscript{48} the universalization of the commodity form in capitalism. Reification is therefore neither a perceptual error (misguided \textquotedblleft false consciousness\textquotedblright) nor an empirical fact available for sociological description. Indeed, the subjective structure, the cognitive modality, is not in the head of the subject but is \textit{in} the economic process, more specifically in the value-form of the commodity. At the same time, commodification does not only stand for the accumulation of material goods, but just as much for the reign of abstractions (like \textquoteleft value\textquoteright and its attendant metaphysics). This reversal of subjective and objective, thought and thing, abstraction and materiality, recurs through all of the paradoxes of reification, which we will now take in their turn.

\textbf{\textit{“Personification of things, reification of persons”}}

In \textit{Capital}, \textquotedblleft reification\textquotedblright only appears as part of a set formula: \textquoteleft personification of things and reification of persons.\textquoteright\textsuperscript{49} The social domination of the bourgeoisie (in economic form, the

\textsuperscript{47} The trajectory of the concept of reification is traced by Gillian Rose in \textit{The Melancholy Science} (London: Macmillan Press, 1978), 27-51. Rose cautions against conflating reification with either commodity fetishism or alienation. This confusion of terminology, she argues, has prevented Marxism from extending the critique of reification to the value-form as a social form (27), or to the theory of surplus value, class formation, power, or the state (28). See also my Conclusion, for further consideration of Adorno.

\textsuperscript{48} This definition goes along with two recent studies, Timothy Bewes, \textit{Reification, or the Anxiety of Late Capitalism} (London: Verso, 2002), and Axel Honneth, \textit{Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), up to a point. While these authors also see reification as a structure of consciousness, this is quickly reduced to cultural or hermeneutic questions divorced from the commodity structure, as \textquoteleft identity thinking\textquoteright (Bewes 6) or \textquoteleft a false framework for interpretation, an ontological veil concealing the fact of an underlying genuine form of human existence\textquoteright (Honneth 32). In these post-Marxist descriptions, undoing reification looks like a spirited jolt out of positivism or the lifting of a veil. In Lukács\textquoteright s essay, undoing reification takes the form of self-recognition in the otherness of the commodity. Reification remains a problem of class consciousness, i.e. of consciousness as the self-mediation of objectivity, i.e. the goal of abolishing reification is therefore not to restore non-identity thinking or a primordial reciprocity—it is to abolish a form of social domination that takes the phenomenal form of equivalent exchange.

\textsuperscript{49} \textit{“Personifizierung der Sachen und Versachlichung der Personen.”} Karl Marx, \textit{Capital} volume I, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1977), 209. Marx uses the two German words interchangeably within the iterations of this formula, hence: the \textquoteleft personification and representative, the reified form of the \textquoteleft social productive forces of
expropriation of surplus value from workers) takes place in the medium of the equivalent exchange of commodities: the sale of the worker’s sole commodity, labor-power, as wage labor. Thus, the antagonism between classes is mystified by its appearance under the form of a relationship between things (the sale of labor to capital). In contrast to the direct, even violent domination of feudal or colonial exploitation, capitalist accumulation is mediated by the commodity form, i.e. by the sociality of objects.\textsuperscript{51}

This domination is founded on the commodity-form itself and the definition of value as a objectified quantity of abstract labor. The formal, quantitative equality of the value-form is the mask of the social antagonisms which constitute it: the “impersonal and abstract social forms” commodity and capital “do not simply veil what traditionally has been deemed the ‘real’ social relations of capitalism, that is, class relations; they are the real relations of capitalist society.”\textsuperscript{52}

Class domination is the commodity-form, is capital.

Reification is therefore the concealment, the obscuring, of one set of determinations—the reproduction of the working class as exploited labor power, as a “peculiar race of commodity owners”; hence the ever-renewed separation of worker from means of production—by the labor’ or the productive forces of social labor” [als Personifikation und Repräsentant, verdinglichte Gestalt der „gesellschaftlichen Produktivkräfte der Arbeit“] (I, 1056); “personification of things and reification of the relations of production” [Personifizierung der Sachen und Versachlichung der Produktionsverhältnisse] in Marx, Capital, volume III, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1991), 969; “the reification of social relations” [die Verdinglichung der gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisse] conjures up “the bewitched, distorted and upside-down world haunted by Monsieur le Capital and Madame la Terre, who are at the same time social characters and mere things” [als soziale Charaktere und zugleich unmittelbar als bloße Dinge] (III, 969).

\textsuperscript{50} On the other side of the paradox, there is the “personification of things”—most famously the table who “stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities... stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will.” (Marx, Capital I, 164-5). And in capitalist production, personification occurs when “past labor in its objectified and lifeless form” (raw material) is transformed into new means of production, thus “an animated monster which begins to ‘work,’ “as if its body were by love possessed.”’ (Marx, Capital I, 302.) But capital’s apparent spontaneous self-reproduction, too, appears as its own self-contained, innate activity: capital is thus personified, “at the same time [a] social character and [a] mere thing.” (Marx, Capital III, 969.) In wage labor, the structural exploitation of the worker is as mystified as any scholastic doctrine of the Holy Trinity; the accumulation of capital appears as a social relationship between the capitalist’s investments on one hand and the purchased commodity labor-power on the other.

\textsuperscript{51} Marx, Capital I, 170.

abstract determinations of value that make up the commodity form. All of the existential moments of labor disappear into the undifferentiated medium of price. Class domination is concealed by the objective form (the commodity) of the value abstraction. But at the same time, the concept reification means that capitalist domination is this form—it does not lie concealed by the mists of religion or politics, but is hidden in its very material appearance.

In reification, the process of capital and the social rifts of class are condensed into object form. We see this paradox again in Marx’s famous definition of “commodity fetishism,” where the constitutive sociality of value is essentially obliterated by its mode of appearance: “Value is a relation between persons... concealed beneath a material shell.” Fetishism of commodities is not—it can hardly be said enough—to be equated with the untoward consumer preference for commodities evinced in modern society, as Pushkin is said to have had a “foot fetish.” Rather, Marx stresses that commodity fetishism is “inseparable from the production of commodities.” For commodity production is production and surplus-production only secondarily of textbooks, pharmaceuticals, long-range missiles—the capitalist’s “aim is to produce not only a use-value, but a commodity; not only use-value, but value; and not just value, but also surplus-value.” That is, the particular commodity itself is meaningless, and is at once hypostatization and mystification of the socially-constituted category surplus-labor.

53 “The equality of the kinds of human labor takes on a physical form in the equal objectivity of the products of labor as values; the measure of the expenditure of human labor-power by its duration takes on the form of the magnitude of the value of the products of labor; and finally the relationships between the producers, within which the social characteristics of their labors are manifested, take on the form of a social relation between the products of labor.

The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men’s own labor as objective characteristics of the products of labor themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things.” Marx, Capital I, 164-5.

54 Ibid., 167n.

55 Ibid., 165. My emphasis.

56 Ibid., 293. A more vulgar version of this thought: The “worker cares as much about the crappy shit he has to make as does the capitalist who employs him, and who also couldn’t give a damn about the junk.” Karl Marx, Grundrisse, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1973), 273.
But reification does not overlap entirely with the commodity fetish—the “objectification” of abstract labor in the value-form of the commodity. Reification can also and especially be found in more advanced forms of *capital*, e.g. interest, “fictional capital,” or rent. The mystification of surplus-value by reification runs all the way through *Capital*; it does not lose its force when we leave behind the purchase of individual use-values like coats and bibles. The entire process of capitalist production (the realization of workers’ surplus labor as surplus-value) therefore appears as an *impersonal* interaction between raw materials, machines, the arrangement of the factory, and production costs (wages, overhead, regulatory fines, various *faux frais*). That is to say, the capitalist production of surplus-value looks like it results entirely from the fact of *capital itself*, how it is laid out and itself set in motion—or even to the inner profundities of financial capital to itself, e.g. the vicissitudes of interest. What is thereby concealed, subtracted, mystified is the origin of surplus value in the exploitation of labor: the capitalist’s purchase of the commodity “labor power” and its employment in the valorization process—all this appears to be the relationship of *capital* to itself.

Here is where one paradox turns into another, for the material connotations of “reification” we had been dealing with pertained to graspable, material things and the practical, concrete

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57 Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*, 154. See also my remarks on alienation, below.
58 Lukács in his 1967 preface to *History and Class Consciousness* renounces a “fundamental and crude error” committed in the book’s vocabulary, namely that it “equates alienation with objectification” (xxiv). Evidently embarrassed by the popularity of “alienation,” he distances his argument from any “unmasking of alienation by philosophy [then] in the air” and alienation’s close proximity to “an eternal ‘condition humaine’” (xxiv). These self-repudiations by Lukács are too involved in post-Stalinist position-taking, 1960s debates on humanism, and German vocabulary, to be altogether clear to me. However, it is my understanding that Lukács makes no such confusion in the original text, understanding perfectly well that alienation is an abstraction (in value-form) opposed to the particular objectification of labor in use-value.
59 “[I]n connection with the most simple categories of the capitalist mode production and commodity production in general, in connection with commodities and money, [there already appears] the mystifying character that transforms the social relations for which the material elements of wealth serve as bearers in the course of production into properties of these things themselves (commodities), still more explicitly transforming the relation of production itself into a thing (money). All forms of society are subject to this distortion, in so far as they involve commodity production and monetary circulation. In the capitalist mode of production, however, where capital is the dominant category and forms the specific relation of production, this bewitched and distorted world develops much further.” Marx, *Capital* III, 965-6.
production and purchase of those things. But Marx’s point also turns into its opposite: the more abstract and immaterial capital becomes (as in finance), the more mystified the appropriation of surplus value, the more reification.

**Reification as Abstraction**

Marx calls reification “this religion of everyday life,” and it is precisely its metaphysical dimensions that I want to look at, i.e. how it reconfigures the experiences of consciousness and belonging to a world. The key point here is that abstraction does not mean “subjectivity” (as in “abstract thought”); in capitalism abstraction is a property of material (social) reality. “Abstraction [is] not the exclusive property of the mind, but arises in commodity exchange... The form of commodity is abstract and abstractness governs its whole orbit.” That is, abstractness is not only the abrupt reduction of social relations to the physical object, money or commodity—capitalist social relations already consist in a “*real abstraction,*” “which is purely social in character, arising in the spatio-temporal sphere of human interactions.”

Reification, far from describing the world of capitalism as an enormous heap of mass-produced *stuff,* instead confronts consciousness with “a reality cocooned by... concepts,” The metabolism of capitalist society in every aspect proceeds *as if* quantified, abstract, socially necessary labor were the “substance” of value. We see this most clearly in the commodity fetish, which is *as if* exchange-value inhered in things themselves as a natural property. (Think of the listing of calories next to the prices of popcorn and soda at the movie theater; 300 calories and $5.99 are presented as two reflections or measures of the same substance.)

Lukács traces this abstraction to the very core of commodity production:

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60 Ibid., 969.
62 Ibid., 20.
63 Ibid., 129.
Thus the universality of the commodity form is responsible both objectively and subjectively for the abstraction of the human labor incorporated in commodities… In so far as the commodity form facilitates the equal exchange of qualitatively different objects, it can only exist if that formal equality is in fact recognized… This formal equality of human labor in the abstract is not only the common factor to which the various commodities are reduced; it also becomes the real principle governing the actual production of commodities.64

The apparently autonomous self-reproduction of capital appears as a number of laws and determinations, e.g. the causality of supply and demand, turning “a rigid and immobile face towards the individual.”65 The resulting organization of cognition is what Lukács calls “the contemplative nature of man under capitalism.”66 “Contemplative,” J.M. Bernstein notes, does not “signify in Lukács’s theory a psychological property of individuals. The contemplative stance is a categorial appearance for of (individual) social existence in capitalist social formations… Contemplation, then, denotes a form of external relatedness… categorial contemplation is a historically produced and derived mode of relatedness to the world.”67

Objective Misrecognition

We have met such a figure of removed “contemplation” before: Hegel’s Unhappy Consciousness. I mentioned above that the acknowledgment of the “Master-Slave” dialectic could not serve as the basis for an analysis of recognition. In the same way, most Marxist attention to Hegel has focused on that same “Master-Slave” moment, as key to the concept of alienation. However, I also want to locate reification (as distinct from alienation68) in the

64 Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, 87.
65 Ibid., 97.
66 Ibid.
68 The confusion seems to come from Marx’s 1844 economic and philosophical manuscripts, published in Early Writings, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin, 1992). “Alienation,” in the 1844 manuscripts, describes the estrangement of the worker from the product of his labor, i.e. the “externalization” of “species-being” (328), but never the thingly character of exploitation. In fact, pointedly the opposite: the young Marx considers that “Man’s estrangement... is realized and expressed only in man’s relationship to other men” (330). In Capital, the term disappears under a vocabulary of “expropriation,” “the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production,” in other words “primitive accumulation” (Capital I, 874-5). See also the
Unhappy Consciousness; i.e. in the next chapter over. As Judith Butler has pointed out, the Unhappy Consciousness, far from being alienated, “clings or attaches to itself,” stubbornly persisting (however negatively) in its selfhood and embodiment. In Kojève’s description of the Unhappy Consciousness, we can see reification as fundamentally a structural (in this case: theological) misrecognition of the subject within an indifferent, absolute substance: “The religious man lives, since he acts; but he does not take his action into account, and he thinks only of his nullity and his death. He does not know that the world he lives in is his world, that it is the result of his action; he believes that it is the work of God and [his present existence] remains sin and woe.”

Both in reification and the Unhappy Consciousness, the work of reality is at an insuperable remove from the contemplative and divided consciousness. The organization of objectivity nowhere reflects back the real determination of consciousness by and within this organization. The “work of God” is identical here with the work of capital, where value appears as the actor, the “hero with a thousand faces,” rather than as a structural misrecognition of abstractly-dominated labor:

The independent form, i.e. the monetary form, which the value of commodities assumes in simple circulation, does nothing but mediate the exchange of commodities, and it vanishes in the final result of the movement. On the other hand, in the circulation M-C-M both the money and the commodity function only as different modes of existence of value itself, the money as the general mode of existence, the commodity as its particular or, so to speak, disguised mode. It is constantly changing from one form into the other, without becoming lost in the movement; it thus becomes transformed into an automatic subject. If we pin down the specific forms of appearance assumed in turn by self-valorizing value in the course of its life, we reach the following elucidation: capital is money, capital is commodities. In truth, however, value is here the subject of a process in

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which, while constantly assuming the form in turn of money and commodities, it changes its own magnitude, throws off surplus-value from itself considered as original value, and thus valorizes itself independently. For the movement in the course of which it adds surplus-value is its own movement, its valorization is therefore self-valorization. By virtue of being value, it has acquired the occult ability to add value to itself. It brings forth living offspring, or at least lays golden eggs.

As the dominant subject of this process, in which it alternately assumes and loses the form of money and the form of commodities, but preserves and expands itself through all these changes, value requires above all an independent form by means of which its identity with itself may be asserted. Only in the shape of money does it possess this form.72

We can see how, as Gillian Rose writes, “in the historically-specific case of commodity producing society…substance is ((mis)-represented as) subject, how necessary illusion arises out of productive activity.”73

**Consciousness is “in” the thing**

For this reason, recognition is possible starting from reification. This is Lukács’s revolutionary wager in *History and Class Consciousness*: that “the worker can only become conscious of his existence in society when he becomes aware of himself as a commodity.” This revolutionary recognition depends on seeing the proletarian “consciousness [as] the self-consciousness of the commodity,” in other words, the consciousness of the unthinking, produced commodity-thing. But the dialectical reverse is also true: the commodity abstraction functions *in place of consciousness* and independent of it. The formal, quantitative abstract equivalence of values is not a mental operation, but a social one: “It is not people who originate these abstractions but their actions”74 (20). In other words, reification is not a subjective perception of the commodity structure, but as cognitive modalities, representation, abstraction, the concept of immutable value-substance, are immanent in the value-form itself. We can hold all of these thoughts in our hand, as a coin. I can carry all of this thoughts behind my posterior, in my wallet.

72 Marx, *Capital I*, 255.
Reification is not our external perspective on commodity-exchange, nor an illusion intervening between our consciousness and commodities, but rather is in the commodity, in its very movement. Reification is “an antithesis, immanent in the commodity.”

**Reification is most advanced where it is least material**

It is important not to over-“localize” reification as the fetishism pertaining to the consumer good. As a cognitive modality, reification does not attach to only certain acts like buying and selling, and then retreat or cease applying. In capitalist social formations, the consumption needs of a community, the division of labor and labor’s modes of cooperation and productivity, the class means of appropriating necessary and surplus labor, the minimal exigencies for reproducing itself as a society—are all routed through commodity exchange and the (demand for) expansion of capitalist production and increased consumption. Thus, the complex metabolism of an entire society with all its immense ramifications are arrived at through things, i.e. “goes on behind the backs of the producers,” not in the minds of social agents but in their practical, unconscious activity. This unconsciousness is most pronounced when it becomes automatic, as for instance in calculations of interest, exchange rate, inflation, tax schedules, etc.—all the regulating mechanisms of the extraction and distribution of surplus value which appear as mere procedural algorithms.

Along these lines, perhaps the most concrete examples of reification I can give are the several ways I use it in the succeeding chapters of this study. In Chapter One, I look at the two recognition scenes in Dickens’s *Little Dorrit*, one pertaining to the Gothic family romance plot, and the other to the collapse of a financial empire. Reification here is the non-appearance of

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75 Marx, *Capital* I, 209.
76 “The commodity can only be understood in its undistorted essence when it becomes the universal category of society as a whole.” Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 86.
77 Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 135.
crisis as such, the way that a chain of hidden causes which Dickens so elaborately paints in the Gothic recognition plot, is unavailable to him in explaining a financial crash. Crisis is a kind of noumenal thing-in-itself, devoid of content and incapable of appearance. In contrast to the moral closure of the other recognition plot, crisis is both outside of the circuit of moral explanations, and yet empty and abstract compared to the rich ramifications of that recognition.

In Chapter Two, on Trollope’s Last Chronicle of Barset, I analyze the fetishistic form of interest announced in phrases like “Money’s about seven now,” where capital simply sheds interest out of its own greenhouse fecundity. This fetishism and its fundamental mystification, however, do not stay in its place (the financial market of London’s City), but are displaced onto the provinces of Barsetshire and into the enormously attenuated mystery plot concerning Reverend Crawley and a mislaid check (presumed stolen).

Chapter Three, on the Sherlock Holmes stories, looks at the contrast between the empiricist posturing of the detective as the relation of a reasoning, contemplative subject towards an objectivity that is figured as inessential, atemporal, and void of concept. This contrast plays out in a narrative logic vitiated by external flashbacks, arbitrariness, and indifference to temporality.

Chapter Four, on James’s The Portrait of a Lady, locates reification in the unconscious framing and determinations of consciousness, especially the autonomous and transcendental subject of Jamesian self-consciousness. James’s understanding of consciousness is not as determining but as determined. Isabel’s ensnarement is just in overlooking her intensely framed and situated consciousness (her interpellation by the inheritance that Ralph Touchett engineers for her, to observe her) as an unbounded, idealist ego. Her “fall” is not a mistaken judgment, but is the very condition of consciousness. What appear as the inner workings of an autonomous
self-consciousness are already articulated and “at work” outside of that interiority.

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To make explicit the political analogy I am relying upon here: The proletariat is nowhere given to appearance; there is only a disparate, heterogeneous, split “working class”—no longer recognizable by a belonging to the industrial site, and obscured under discourses (and existential threats) of immigration, urban ghettoization, a predatory financial industry, debt, and new modes of surplus-value extraction. This “inexistent” proletariat must unmake the determinations of its being, which are at the same time the causes of its obscuring and dispersal. Recognition is a self-recognition in otherness that is also a negation—the proletariat annuls its own placement in class society. Reification constitutes this “otherness”—the repression of the value-extraction that reproduces the working class (but does not “make” a proletariat).

I said above that recognition scenes are not allegories for de-reification. What I meant was that recognition scenes in these works of high realism are not a figural abolition (i.e. in effigy) of capitalist-owned commodity production. If recognition and reification are intertwined as I have been arguing here, this connection was unknown to these authors. This does not mean, however, that they were unconcerned with grasping and representing reification as it appeared to them. In a sense, this is all that realism does. One can hardly read a novel by Trollope, Eliot, Dickens, Hardy, the Brontës, James, without feeling that, in Marx’s words, “no other nexus [remains] between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous ‘cash payment.’” [The bourgeoisie] has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation” (“Manifesto” 70). This is the world that Wuthering Heights, The Mill on the Floss, Bleak House draw in such detail; this is what realism shows us. “Cash payment,” “egotistical calculation,” “self-interest”—we might find
these charges verbatim in a Dickens novel. This is the *ideological* appearance of reification, open as much to condemnation from Christian morality as from proletarian class-consciousness. And it might be that recognition scenes are an allegory for de-reification in *this* sense.

However, the thematization of reification available to these authors (as “commercialization,” alienation, a Kierkegaardian critique of the “public,” as bureaucracy, self-interest or its opposite utilitarianism, or “instrumentality”) is not to be confused with reification as the *unconscious* penetration of the commodity-structure into rationality and the very modes of subjectivity. For reification has been applied and extended to sociological phenomena and ideological characterizations, for example: “consumer society,” “instrumental reason,” “treating persons like objects”—even some of the terms Lukács incorporates from Weber, like “rationalization.” Lukács also describes a memorable litany of examples of reification: the fragmentation and dehumanization of the industrial worker, the conscientious dedication of the bureaucrat, the partial, technical refinement of the artistic virtuoso, the journalist’s lack of convictions, the methodologism of modern science, and the “realism” of revisionist or gradualist social democracy. It is easy to think that reification is just the sum of *things like this*. (And in that case reification would seemingly have been exhausted as a topic by the nineteenth-century novel.)

On the contrary, reification is itself the condition of appearance for such sociological notations as “consumer society” or “instrumental reason.” Reified consciousness is the scaffolding within which such observations can show up at all. Reification in the latter sense is *not a content for realist representation*—indeed, realism itself is founded on the reified cognitive modality of the representational “world picture,” in Heidegger’s phrase. There seems to be a continual blurring and re-drawing of the line between critique and containment, since recognition scenes as *forms* get drawn into the contestation and extension of reification (*also* as form).
In Franco Moretti’s “sociology of forms”—a project more continuous than otherwise with Moretti’s subsequent “quantitative turn”—the aesthetic sphere is a “system of consent,” whose “function” is to “make individuals feel ‘at ease’ in the world they happen to live in, to reconcile them in a pleasant and imperceptible way to its prevailing cultural norms.” Aesthetics, but particularly literature as a rhetorical form, responds to the antinomies of capitalist society with a message and an image of “compromise.” “Literature is the ‘middle’ term par excellence, and its ‘educational,’ ‘realistic’ function consists precisely in training us without our being aware of it for an unending task of mediation and conciliation.” In a memorable image, Moretti allegorizes aesthetics as what pacifies a soul (the passive and desensitized consumer of culture) who is being borne away in the clutches of a harpy (representing a barbarous and deadening capitalist hegemony). Here we can recognize in vivid outline the “culture industry” argument propounded by the Frankfurt School.

From the title and constant reference of this work, it could be assumed that for *Unhappy Consciousness*, too, “compromise” is the order of the day. After all, does the Unhappy Consciousness not conclude with the moment of explicit mediation and conciliation in Hegel, namely the priestly intercession between the soul and the eternal? In that case, recognition would serve for Moretti as another “incessant attempt to annul that separation [of capitalist society and moral freedom] and remedy it.” Recognition scenes would defuse certain energies by fitting them into a safe “cultural” harness.

Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious* offers an interpretation of cultural production

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79 Ibid., 27.
80 Ibid., 34.
81 Ibid., 40.
82 Ibid., 30-1.
that is at once “functionalist” and “Utopian.” In the first approach, culture is seen to offer "substantial incentives... for ideological adherence," while in the second approach, Jameson produces the textual matrixes wherein one can discern “the anticipation of the logic of a collectivity which has not yet come into being,” i.e. the projection of a classless society.

If I can project this distinction onto the problem of recognition and reification, the “functionalist" result of recognition scenes would be to secure a distracted compliance via the imaginary reconciliations and redemptions of narrative closure. The final scene of Return of the Jedi is a wonderful example, where the Oedipal antagonism between Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader is transformed into a ghostly party vibe, where even the spectral image of a now-redeemed Anakin Skywalker can chuckle at the follies of the gentle Ewoks. And the Utopian perspective is built in here, too, as the family romance and duel-to-the-death implied by recognition give way to the teamwork of the Rebel Alliance as they detonate the Death Star, as well as the aforementioned primitive communism of the Ewok village.

But here is the crucial difference between “recognition” and “recognition scenes,” in ideological terms (in a moment, I will address the consequences for novel theory). To briefly recur to Hegel: the Unhappy Consciousness presents two figures of “recognition”—1) the impossible religious union with the Absolute, with its compensatory satisfactions of devotional, ritual feeling, which can be taken as elaborating a “fantasy” and ideology of transcendent identity; and 2) the mis-recognized, actual “desire, work, and enjoyment” of temporal, laboring existence, which comprises the “substance” perpetually disavowed by the Hegelian subject. The recognition in 1) is a displaced enjoyment that is never consummated, while escaping from the social “real”; meanwhile, the recognition in 2) would renounce the satisfactions of the “beyond,” in effect paying for self-consciousness by the subtraction of religious jouissance.

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83 Hegel, Phenomenology of Mind, 257.
But Jameson does not seem to have accounted for this distinction. The Utopian “incentives” of ideological production are always a fantasy of collective reconciliation; but this is what recognition 2) gives up on and does without. As Jameson says elsewhere, “jouissance... involves that demand for recognition by the Other, which in the very nature of things (in the very nature of language?) can never be fulfilled.” So the ideological function of jouissance in aesthetics can no longer be appealed to in recognition 2), where the Other is no longer the sought-for interlocutor. Recognition 2) is a loss, the abandonment of whatever had been projected as “behind the curtain,” indeed a destitution. It is hard to see the ideological incentive or functionalist version of this figure. In renouncing its “substance” of enjoyment that psychoanalysis locates in fantasy, i.e. in recognition 1), recognition 2) also annuls itself as a subject.

Another possibility is Mary Poovey’s argument, that realist literature has a pedagogical task of naturalizing new financial instruments and economic arrangements for a wary public; anxieties about capitalist forms are taken up in order to be imaginatively worked through and domesticated. (Poovey has written about The Last Chronicle of Barset and Little Dorrit specifically along these lines.)

The above models have an advantage over familiar, naive characterizations of literature—as escapism, as “pure” aesthetics, as engines of catharsis, as propaganda, as ideological deception, or as a mirror reflection—in acknowledging that novels have to pay for the illusions they deliver, so to speak. Satisfaction, identification, or a displaced wish-fulfillment at one level is purchased by harsh truths and a reality-principle elsewhere. There are no clear-cut victories. Only in utter trash like the works of Ayn Rand, or in works of fantasy, does an abstract principle win out in the world. The novel is the scene of the perpetual, crushing defeat of the

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ideal. (Pending the analyses of the succeeding chapters, I am thinking of something like Madame Bovary, Jude the Obscure, Lost Illusions, The Golden Bowl, Wuthering Heights, or Anna Karenina.) No one has captured this better than Lukács, in dictum, “Ironic is the objectivity of the novel.”

Recognition scenes have a capacity for harmony, for restoring a lost balance. The concluding recognition scene of Tom Jones, for instance, puts everything back in order, socially and sexually. But does recognition “save” reification? Is recognition even the capsule that makes reification go down smooth? As we will see, the most reified of recognition scenes are for that reason especially ragged, incoherent—not smooth. I am loath to endorse any idea of an organic, harmonious synthesis, and I do not see in the Victorian novels any recognition to which reification is not still clinging. Even in our locus classicus, the blind abyss of exile that swallows Oedipus warns against equating recognition with reconciliation.

Finally, Victorian recognition scenes are neither “utopian” (future-oriented) nor “safe” (compromised, anxiety-assuaging), because recognition reveals the utter lack of a safety net—the risk already run and lost, the (oblivious) destitution of long standing. Reification itself, by populating objectivity with categories, rule-governed processes, and social atoms, can seem warm by comparison to the emotional nudity of a Wotan, a Jane Eyre, a Michael Henchard, at the moment of recognition. This would argue the inversion, I think, of the usual “ideological” role of literature. Before the abyss of recognition, reification begins to look like the glossy covering, the little bit of satisfaction proffered by literary form. To go behind the veil, to enter the locked room, might be what reification is—not obstructing, but guarding against.
Chapter One

Recognition or Reification?: Capitalist Crisis and Subjectivity in *Little Dorrit*

“These things were here and but the beholder wanting”—G.M. Hopkins

Dickens’s novels are unthinkable without their elaborate revelations and overturning of identities. The recognitions that crowd the endings of his novels do not concern merely external, objective enigmas; they reveal the deepest truths of subjectivity. What is recognized by the protagonist is the way that “who I am” has preceded him or her all along. Behind the mystery of Nemo and Tulkinghorne’s deaths in *Bleak House* lie hidden the social void in which Esther is born and the various submerged ways she is implicated within an entire pre-existing urban labyrinth. In *Great Expectations*, it is as though every coincidence, every improbable connection that comes to light, is addressed to divesting Pip of his autonomy and the place he has imagined as being prepared for him. Instead of stepping into the expectations he has built into certainties, what Pip arrives at through the disclosure of his benefactor’s identity is only the sum of his disillusionments—the revealed concatenation of false hopes and disappointments, of ties dissolved and betrayed. So, in *Great Expectations’* recognition scene, we find the retroactive re-writing of events in light of their repressed, newly illuminated meaning:

> For an hour or more, I remained too stunned to think; and it was not until I began to think, that I began fully to know how wrecked I was, and how the ship in which I had sailed was gone to pieces.
> Miss Havisham’s intentions towards me, all a mere dream; Estella not designed for me; I only suffered in Satis House as a convenience, a sting for the greedy relations, a model with a mechanical heart to practice on when no other practice was at hand; those were the first smarts I had. But, sharpest and deepest pain of all,—it was for the convict, guilty of I knew not what crimes, and liable to be taken out of those rooms where I sat thinking, and hanged at the Old Bailey door, that I had deserted Joe.85

Everything falls into place, as it were, not only in the present of recognition but also retrospectively—what had been latent or free-floating suddenly snaps into a new connection. The

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observer finds his or her own meaning within the framework of external reality as what cannot be perceived “straight on” and has gone unrecognized (or even been ignored, disavowed) in appearance. In other words, the “locked room” of Dickensian mystery contains only the truth of the protagonist who shows up at first as an investigator from the outside.

For Dickens, the logic of recognition presumes an ultimate knowability: the truth of subjectivity requires a detour through otherness. The wager of the recognition plot is this final identity of the subjective “inside” of the hero’s interiority with the seething realist “outside” of metropolitan London. But, as we shall see, the epistemological abyss of capitalist crisis refuses and obstructs this recognition, remaining intractably other, and holding subjectivity apart from a realist totality.

Especially in the late, sprawling urban novels (starting with his virtual invention of English detective fiction in *Bleak House*), recognition is closely bound up with Dickens’s use of mystery. It is well known that Dickens’s mystery novels are at the same time novels of social criticism. But how and why does Dickens use mystery to totalize the historical “outside” under realist representation? In Viktor Shklovsky’s study of *Little Dorrit*, the extra-literary social world is devoured by the mystery novel as only so much fresh meat: “The mystery novel allows [Dickens] to interpolate into the work large chunks of everyday life, which, while serving the purpose of impeding the action, feel the pressure of the plot and are therefore perceived as a part of the artistic whole. Thus are the descriptions of the debtors’ prison, the Circumlocution Office, and Bleeding Heart Yard incorporated into *Little Dorrit*. That is why the mystery novel was used as a ‘social novel.’”

In another classic essay, George Orwell takes the opposite approach to this problem, dissolving Dickensian form, the “awful Victorian ‘plot’” into a number of characteristic moral-political positions—essentially producing an abstract *Weltanschauung* that stands outside

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and above its (regrettable) formal instantiations.\textsuperscript{87} “As soon as [Dickens] tries to bring his characters into action, the melodrama begins. He cannot make the action revolve round their ordinary occupations; hence the crossword puzzle of coincidences, intrigues, murders, disguises, buried wills, long-lost brothers, etc. etc.”\textsuperscript{88}

If Shklovsky has the outside world devoured by the novel’s formal operations, and Orwell sees plot subsumed under morality, the more recent Foucauldian reading of D.A. Miller argues that Dickensian mystery is itself an ideological operation intent on disallowing any “outside” of its workings. Miller contends that the mystery plot of \textit{Bleak House} is simultaneously played-off against and caught up within the novel’s system of ideological and subjectivizing effects.\textsuperscript{89} The Dickensian plot of mystery and detection is called forth by the text’s criticism of Chancery, as by a desire for a localizable form of power and interpretive closure.\textsuperscript{90} It is easy to draw parallels here with \textit{Little Dorrit}, where the Circumlocution Office would play Chancery’s role as an unlocalizable yet ubiquitous disciplinary grid whose logic is internalized by its subjects, while being opposed by the topic of a carceral space (the Marshalsea) whose initially-confined operations somehow also fail to “stay put.” But in \textit{Bleak House}, the only candidate for an “outside” of the Chancery-Police binary (and of the complementary hermeneutic projects they set to work) is bourgeois domesticity—strictly speaking, just another “inside”: the confines of a comfortable home and one’s own readerly interiority, enclosures equally constituted by power’s network of effects.\textsuperscript{91}

In short, Dickens’s social criticism takes the form of mystery because it is a criticism of mystery, of institutions and organizations that produce mystery, i.e. that have the specific kind of

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\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 47.
\textsuperscript{89} D.A. Miller, \textit{The Novel and the Police} (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1988), 75, 81, 97.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 69.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 104.
\end{flushleft}
distorting effect upon consciousness I will call a “not.wanting-to-know.” For, if capitalist crisis will present a problem for realism, one knows very well what a mystery in a Dickens novel can represent: illegitimate children, suppressed wills, murder, disguises, blackmail, and deceit. In a word: secrecy—keeping in mind that what is secret is always known... by someone. And these conditions for mystery, abstracted into moral terms and extended through thematic ramification, are the foremost objects of Dickens’s social criticism in *Little Dorrit*. This novel’s criticism of everything that obstructs or conceals knowledge receives its best elaboration in Amanda Anderson’s Habermasian reading93 of the topic of omniscience in *Little Dorrit*, which becomes an extended plea for intersubjective transparency and meditation on subjective detachment, and just as much a sustained assault on secrecy, mistrust, obstruction and barriers of all kinds—especially the cynicism of those characters who try to leverage partial knowledge (through blackmail in Rigaud’s case, spying in Miss Wade’s, and the lazily-sustained lies of le beau monde in Gowan’s) for personal advantage. However, as with Miller’s criticism, which was limited to power’s techniques of constituting and penetrating the bourgeois subject, Anderson’s account of *Little Dorrit* is likewise confined to subjective questions of transparency, rationality, self-cultivation, and comprehension—in short, of an observing and detached consciousness.94

However, *Little Dorrit* presents us with an “outside” that does not fall within bourgeois interiority, rational communication, nor the power grid of the hermeneutics of the subject. This external space is the irrationality of capitalist crisis, embodied in the novel by the ruin of Mr. Merdle. Drawing on Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness*, I argue that crises of capitalism represent, for bourgeois consciousness, a structural blindspot, an economic analogue to Kant’s

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92 A “not knowing” that was in fact a “not wanting to know.” Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria*, trans. James Strachey with Anna Freud (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 269-70. See also 117n.


94 Ibid., 90.
“thing-in-itself”—separated from the plane and structure of the bourgeois subject by an unbridgeable epistemological remove, and thus incapable of being “internalized” or made a topic of recognition. This is not to say that *Little Dorrit*’s representation of Merdle succeeds in representing crisis where bourgeois political economy fails; it is rather that crisis is found in the text only as having bypassed the (ideological, experiential) framework that excludes its appearance *per se* (i.e. the financial crash in the novel is not shown as systemic to the market, but as a freak “criminal” glitch therein). But this economic logic shows up only insofar as it is unthematised, where Dickens’s presentation is truncated: precisely in the vicissitudes of the recognition plot.

Dickens’s social criticism, when faced with material that cannot be rendered transparent by a concluding recognition scene where all is brought to light, banishes this opaque material (capitalist crisis) to a discrete narrative space where recognition occurs only as abbreviated or inert. That is, the reified logic of the economic is kept separate from the full unfolding of Dickensian recognition. On one hand, then, recognition: the demolitions of the boundaries of the subject, the indictment of forms of consciousness which are closed to themselves and to others, the ultimate rationality of discordant social reality. On the other hand, escaping this closed loop and unable to be articulated by a coherent recognition (i.e. there is no subjectivity to *find itself* there): capitalist crisis—the immanent contradictions of the capitalist mode of production, which exceed the rational production and conscious intentions of the bourgeois subject—as discerned by the cognitive boundaries of the Merdle plot.

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From his first appearance, *Little Dorrit*’s daydreaming protagonist already seems to have been defeated by the world. Having returned to England after twenty years abroad, Arthur
Clennam encounters the harsh world of his upbringing with weary eyes, and finds that he has “no will” to face it. How does this world look?

It always affected his imagination as wrathful, mysterious, and sad; and his imagination was sufficiently impressible to see the whole neighborhood under some dark tinge of its sad shadow. As he went along, upon a dreary night, the dim streets by which he went, seemed all depositories of oppressive secrets. The deserted counting-houses, with their secrets of books and papers locked up in chests and safes; the banking-houses, with their secrets of strong rooms and wells, the keys of which were in a very few secret pockets and a very few secret breasts; the secrets of all the dispersed grinders in the vast mill, among whom there were doubtless plunderers, forgers, and trust-betrayers of many sorts, whom the light of any day that dawned might reveal; he could have fancied that these things, in hiding, imparted a heaviness to the air. The shadow thickening and thickening as church-vaults, where the people who had hoarded and secreted in iron coffers were in turn similarly hoarded, not yet at rest from doing harm; and then of the secrets of the river, as it rolled its turbid tide between two frowning wildernesses of secrets... (542)

The drama of the entire novel might be thought of as Arthur Clennam’s struggle to keep his head above these shadowy depths of secrets and enclosure, while the plot drags him through a “turbid tide” of concealment. Upon his return, Arthur begins to suspect that William Dorrit’s imprisonment for debt might somehow be traceable to the firm of Clennam & Co, but the current of suspicion ends up encompassing “plunderers, forgers, and trust-betrayers”—nor is it lacking in “iron coffers” and “papers locked up in chests.” Along the way, all manner of petty fictions, shameful pretenses, and outright deceit enjoin Arthur to turn a blind eye to this proliferation of secrets and cover-ups.

In his reverie, Arthur imagines all of these images as locking him out, as secrets kept from him—a projection of the exclusion he has already felt from his own mother upon returning home. But the course of the novel works to lock him in, to bring him to the heart of all these secrets by imprisoning him in the Marshalsea, where the “shadow of the wall” falls “dark upon him” (735). In short, the novel takes this early vision of a terrifying night-world, which confronts Arthur as a padlocked door marked “Do Not Enter,” and places him on the other side of that

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opaque front—where his fortune, the true story of his birth, and his life’s love unfold. The “truth” of Arthur Clennam in fact lies out there, behind all of these imposing doors and closed shutters—behind objectivity—as the empty place with respect to which he is always displaced.

For Arthur Clennam, then, this locking-away of the truth has a temporal and objective aspect: the truth about his mother, the background of Mr. Dorrit’s debts, the nature of Merdle’s speculations, Rigaud’s identity and game, and even Little Dorrit’s love for himself—all of these secrets are hidden from him early on, and (with the exception of the last) their revelation falls upon him like the stone block in Great Expectations’s “Eastern story.” (It should be noted that Arthur is to learn about his birth mother only “in time to come”; after Mrs. Clennam has died, he is “to know all that was of import to himself” from Little Dorrit, “but he should never know what concerned her, only” (812); i.e. Arthur is never to know the story of Gilbert Clennam’s repressed will, which Amy asks him to burn unread. I will return to this point later on.)

But what if the truth could be locked away from oneself?—not in a closed vault, but within one’s own consciousness? But what if the truth could be locked away from oneself?—not in a closed vault, but within one’s own consciousness? If Arthur’s story posits a knowledge cut off from subjectivity and masked by external obstacles, then Mr. Dorrit’s story is that of the collapse of a subjective partition set up within himself, dividing his gentility from knowledge of the reality of the debtors’ prison. “While he spoke, he was opening and shutting his hands like valves; so conscious all the time of that touch of shame, that he shrank before his own knowledge of his meaning” (226). Knowledge here is not a mystery kept by others, but rather something kept at a distance by oneself, and skirted around or obscured by pretense and “prison mendicity.” It is as though we were always looking into the other side of what he is not saying, reading under erasure the too-guilty phrase that is being set aside: “[T]here were two
undercurrents, side by side, pervading all his discourse and all his manner” (642).

Mr. Dorrit’s suppression and avoidance, even within himself, of the Marshalsea past and of Amy’s sacrifices and devotion, can be expressed in a phrase from Freud’s *Studies on Hysteria*: “the strange state of mind in which one knows and does not know a thing at the same time.”96

This mental process is ubiquitous in *Little Dorrit*, and forms the basis and motivation of Dickens’s criticism of society. In contrast to this not-wanting-to-know, Arthur Clennam’s earnest petitioning of the Circumlocution Office, and his recurrent suspicions about Clennam & Co.’s responsibility for Mr. Dorrit’s debt—in short, his determination to get to the bottom of the injustices and mysteries that confront him—can be summarized in one phrase: the insistent “I want to know” with which he dogs the Barnacle bureaucracy (113). The novel’s other moral paragons are Mr. Pancks, for his “fortune telling” (freeing Mr. Dorrit and his family from the Marshalsea by tracking down an inheritance); John Chivery, for magnanimously passing along to his rival, Arthur, the painful revelation that Little Dorrit loves him; and of course, Little Dorrit herself, who is incapable of dissimulation, who deplores the deceptions of pride, and who never confuses her filial duty with the denying of her past—as her siblings do and as her father urges her to, instructing her to “obliterate” all recollection or suggestion of the Marshalsea.97

But then not wanting to know is bound up with the most hateful symbol in the novel, the Prison. As seen above, the “Father of the Marshalsea,” thoroughly tainted by the prison atmosphere, is also the character most obviously avoiding knowledge of what is the case: Mr. Dorrit is “an illustration of the axiom that there are no such stone-blind men as those who will

97 “‘There is a—hum—a topic,’ said Mr. Dorrit, looking all about the ceiling of the room, and never at the attentive, uncomplainingly shocked face, ‘a painful topic, a series of events which I wish—ha—to obliterate. This is understood by your sister, who has already remonstrated with you in my presence; it is understood by your brother; it is understood by—ha hum—every one of delicacy and sensitiveness, except yourself—ha—I am sorry to say, except yourself. You, Amy—hum—you alone and only you—constantly revive the topic, though not in words’” 478.
not see” (280). And when Mrs. Clennam is at her worst, she also invokes imprisonment as her justification for refusing to make amends for past wrongs, but also for refusing to hear about it or be reminded (as her dying husband intended her to be): “[L]ook at me, in prison, and in bonds here. I endure without murmuring, because it is appointed that I shall so make reparation for my sins. Reparation! Is there none in this room? Has there been none here this fifteen years?” (50, my emphasis). Mrs. Clennam herself also confirms Freud’s hypothesis that ignorance is to some degree volitional: “[If] I am also shut up from the knowledge of some things that I may prefer to avoid knowing, why should you… grudge me that relief?” (184). One of the novel’s great insights is that the “imprisoned” person, by refusing to acknowledge the past, by willfully not-knowing, does far more damage in this state than in the original fault for which they are condemned. In Dickens’s moral world, wrongs are ultimately and importantly reparable. Mr. Dorrit’s debt, therefore, and Mrs. Clennam’s suppression of Arthur’s mother—these errors are not, in the last analysis, as damning as the consequences of their repression, as the repugnant false pride which refuses to engage the past honestly. The “prison” motif, as virtually every critic of the novel has noticed, is both a social and a psychological critique98—but one must see in this motif or symbol not only “imprisoning states of mind” (Wilson) in their various forms, but the important way that the prison (even as a symbol) shapes knowledge. After all, the essential knowledge pertaining to being-imprisoned—one’s guilt—is one thing that cannot be kept out by prison walls. In the symbolic continuation of the metaphor, e.g., Mrs. Clennam’s self-

98 “The prison is the world of ‘the mind-forged manacles’; it is Society with a big S, as well as the society we all have to live in; it is Mrs. Clennam’s will and self-deception (figured also in her arthritic immobilization and her wheeled chair); it is Henry Gowan’s ego; it is Pancks’s ‘What business have I in the present world, except to stick to business? No business’; it is for the great Merdle the Chief Butler’s eye; it is life in our civilization as Clennam… registers it.” F.R. and Q.D. Leavis, Dickens the Novelist (New York: Pantheon, 1970), 222-3. Edmund Wilson has said much the same thing about “imprisoning states of mind” in his essay on Dickens, but makes this useful distinction: “The implication is that, prison for prison, a simple incarceration is an excellent school of character compared to the dungeons of Puritan theology, of modern business, of money-ruled Society, or of the poor people of Bleeding Heart Yard who are swindled and bled by all of these.” The Wound and the Bow (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1997), 46.
confinement to her room, the prison is not just a limitation or narrowing, a “mind-forged manacle” (Leavis), but a form of willed ignorance, an internal prohibition on knowledge that carries on (in mental life) the function of isolation carried out in prison by the physical barriers against outside stimuli and escape. However, both in the real prison and in the imaginative one, these barriers are insufficient to keep unhappy knowledge safe in its desired place. Just as the quintessential prison-escape films, John Sturges’ *The Great Escape* and Jean Renoir’s *La Grande illusion*, take as their heroes men whose spirits are so strong that “no prison can hold them in,” the lesson of the prison motif in *Little Dorrit* is, there is no prison wall strong enough to keep knowledge of the past out.

What the standard interpretation of the motif therefore misses is precisely the retreat from knowledge embodied in the prison symbol—a retreat which in the novel is necessarily destined to fail, since the utmost internal distancing (repression, “not wanting to know”) still involves a dynamic interplay of returns (the mystery plot and its revelations) and the immanent expression of that knowledge that one would be “shut up” from. The Prison is also the transitive motif by which Dickens extends his criticism of consciousness and reality-denying. Whenever in the novel we hear that some place is “like the Marshalsea,” we are prepared to hear next of some odious collective deception and consoling fraud. Thus, Venice (seen here as an existential trap on par with *Great Expectations*’s Satis House) is described as “a superior sort of Marshalsea,” dominated by “feigning” and persons who “rarely knew their own minds” (511).

Knowing and not-wanting-to-know are not only psychological and narrative organizations—recognition and its possibility is even subjected to a kind of historical necessity. Indeed, what are the physical locations of this mystery, as it is introduced to the reader through Arthur’s suspicions and “starts of fancy”? There are two: the dark, isolated house, and the prison where
souls are locked away forever. Both these edifices, the Marshalsea Prison and the Clennam home, physically cease to exist. We are in the Gothic. Now, it is a common enough motif in Hollywood versions of the Gothic that some structure collapse in flames while the credits roll: this can be found in both Frankenstein (1931) and Bride of Frankenstein (1935), Rebecca (1940), and The Fall of the House of Usher (1960).

In Little Dorrit, it is the Clennam house which is given such a climactic and rubble-filled scene of collapse:

In one swift instant, the old house was before them, with the man lying smoking in the window; another thundering sound, and it heaved, surged outward, opened asunder in fifty places, collapsed, and fell. Deafened by the noise, stifled, choked, and blinded by the dust, they hid their faces and stood rooted to the spot. The dust storm, driving between them and the placid sky, parted for a moment and showed them the stars. As they looked up, wildly crying for help, the great pile of chimneys which was then alone left standing, like a tower in a whirlwind, rocked, broke, and hailed itself down upon the heap of ruin, as if every tumbling fragment were intent on burying the crushed wretch deeper. (794)

The point here is that the house falls for obvious generic reasons which are also “historical”—just as realism both supersedes and incorporates the Gothic, the high capitalist period which Little Dorrit depicts in the person of Merdle coexists (for a time!) with the smaller, earlier mode represented by Clennam & Co. However, as with all social structures which outlive their usefulness under capitalism, it may be said of Clennam & Co.: “It has to be annihilated; it is annihilated.”99

It is true that Dickens does not physically destroy the Marshalsea in the same manner—leaving this, you could say, to the hand of time. In any case, between the historical setting of the novel and its writing, the Marshalsea was abolished (1842) and subsequently dismantled. The classic account of Dickens’ obsession with prisons, starting from Sketches by Boz and running through the novels, is of course Edmund Wilson’s essay, “Dickens: The Two Scrooges.” Wilson

99 Marx, Capital I, 928.
regards the treatment of the Marshalsea in *Little Dorrit* as Dickens trying “once for all to get the prison out of his system.” Although in *this* novel we don’t have the pleasure of seeing a prison destroyed, one does not need to look far to find Dickens destroying prisons with the same literal bluntness as the House of Clennam is subjected to above: Wilson notes “the satisfaction [Dickens] obviously feels in demolishing the sinister old prison” in *Barnaby Rudge*, and one of the most famous scenes in all of Dickens must be the storming of the Bastille in *A Tale of Two Cities*. The first time Dickens introduces the Marshalsea, he writes: “It had stood there many years before, and it remained there some years afterwards; but it is gone now, and the world is none the worse without it” (56). In the Preface, the peaceful destruction of the prison is gone into in more detail, in a passage far too good not to give entire:

Some of my readers may have an interest in being informed whether or no any portions of the Marshalsea Prison are yet standing. I myself did not know, until I was approaching the end of this story, when I went to look. I found the outer front courtyard, often mentioned here, metamorphosed into a butter shop; and I then almost gave up every brick of the jail for lost. Wandering, however, down a certain adjacent ‘Angel Court, leading to Bermondsey,’ I came to ‘Marshalsea Place’: the houses in which I recognized, not only as the great block of the former prison, but as preserving the rooms that arose in my mind’s-eye when I became Little Dorrit’s biographer. The smallest boy I ever conversed with, carrying the largest baby I ever saw, offered a supernaturally intelligent explanation of the locality in its old uses, and was very nearly correct. How this young Newton (for such I judge him to be) came by his information, I don’t know; he was a quarter of a century too young to know anything about it of himself. I pointed to the window of the room where Little Dorrit was born, and where her father lived so long, and asked him what was the name of the lodger who tenanted that apartment at present? He said, ‘Tom Pythick.’ I asked him who was Tom Pythick? and he said, ‘Joe Pythick’s uncle.’

A little further on, I found the older and smaller wall, which used to enclose the pent-up inner prison where nobody was put, except for ceremony. Whosoever goes into Marshalsea Place, turning out of Angel Court, leading to Bermondsey, will find his feet on the very paving-stones of the extinct Marshalsea jail; will see its narrow yard to the right and to the left, very little altered if at all, except that the walls were lowered when the place got free; will look upon rooms in which the debtors lived; will stand among the crowding ghosts of many miserable years. (xvii-xviii)

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100 Wilson, *The Wound and the Bow*, 43.
Psychologically—knowing that Dickens’ father was imprisoned here for debt—this obviously feels like Dickens “mastering” the trauma, what Wilson calls “getting it out of his system.” *It can’t hurt you anymore... it is only a butter shop now.* On the other hand, “ghosts” are not as easily dispelled as brick walls are taken down, and the knowledge of the Marshalsea persists “supernaturally” while the palimpsest of the city still retains “the very paving-stones” of the jail.

The outdatedness and antiquity of these two milieus determines the sort of mystery (i.e. knowledge) which is possible there. The Gothic atmosphere attaching to these places, and Dickens’ pleasure in their physical demolition, are strictly compatible with a plot which illuminates individual wrongs, false claims of maternity, blackmail, and long-buried secrets which find a way to the surface.

But in expanding this criticism of the prison mentality, echoing it across the vast chamber of the novel, Dickens imperceptibly relocates the social criticism of mystery—embodied in the bad institutions of the Circumlocution Office and the Marshalsea—onto the plane of a subjective moral epistemology: criticism of a thinking that denies reality, with the moral evaluation that this necessarily distorts “the good.” The novel’s most subtle and corrosive practitioner of this distortion, of a consciousness that holds together a knowledge irreconcilable with its utterances, is Henry Gowan, who cynically trashes everyone in his acquaintance before concluding that, “notwithstanding,” so and so was the “best fellow who ever lived,” with the effect that, “while he seemed to be scrupulously finding good in most men, he did in reality lower it where it was, and set it up where it was not; but that was its only disagreeable or dangerous feature” (204-5). The key word here is “notwithstanding.” Nearly every character and every milieu has referred their truth over to the keeping of some notwithstanding. This unreality—the acceptance everywhere of obvious falsity—is seen by Dickens to be so infectious that it penetrates to even the most
likeable characters in the novel: Flora Casby in her “mermaid condition,” where she lapses into giddy romantic blabbering “as if she really believed it” (286) and Pet Meagles, who “conceals all of [Gowan’s] faults… even from herself” after she marries him (552). Reality has a very slight hold on the minds of *Little Dorrit*’s population. But at this point, Dickens’s criticism is no longer assailing objective social mysteries (debts whose origins are buried in red tape, concealed wills, the erasure of class origins) but instead attacking divided consciousness, metaphorically extended from the Prison symbolism to represent a widespread subjective distortion.

We can see now how mystery in Dickens always leads back to the self-disciplined bourgeois subject (Miller), the detached-insightful cosmopolitan consciousness (Anderson), and the banalities of moralizing judgment (Orwell). As social criticism, Dickensian mystery is only conducted, so to speak, along channels of recognition—of full-knowledge, of consciousness and repression, of transparency and coming-to-light. Counterintuitively, perhaps, “repression” is an indication of full knowledge—what is repressed is at the same time fully preserved.\(^1\) To be very schematic: what is repressed leads to mystery, what is mysterious can be fully known, what is fully-known is given in advance (teleologically) to be illuminated in the concluding recognition—namely, the truth of the subject-protagonist, i.e. the full knowledge of the consciousness that we began with on the “outside” of all this pre-existing secrecy. To quote the film *The Red Shoes*: “Not even the best magician in the world can produce a rabbit out of a hat if there is not already a rabbit in the hat.” What is produced out of the Dickensian mystery plot is always this same subjective truth (identity) which was initially put there, in order to then present it as the antidote to what has been criticized all through the mystery’s windings. At the same

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\(^1\) Thus, in Freud’s theory of the unconscious, we not only have the concepts of dream-distortion, displacement, and repression—all manners of psychic obsfuscation—but as a necessary correlate, also the hypothesis of complete and indelible knowledge: “In mental life nothing which has once been formed can perish… Everything is somehow preserved and...in suitable circumstances… can once more be brought to light.” *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1989), 16-7, my emphasis.
time, however, this full knowledge is also knowledge of that subject’s symbolic impossibility, of his or her “emptiness”—Esther Summerson’s effacement by disease especially, but also Pip’s being “wrecked... gone to pieces” when he touches the truth; in this case, the reduction of Arthur’s personal history. It is a mark of Dickens’s moral courage that his subject of ethical knowledge, in pursuing the truth of his world’s organization, recovers not an ideological plenitude or substantiality but his own historical dissolution.

In recognition, a character finds his or her identity at the point—mute a moment before—where it was not. When, in the conclusion of Little Dorrit, Rigaud, Affery, and Mrs. Clennam reassemble the true history of Arthur’s birth and Gilbert Clennam’s will, this concealed truth once recognized can be seen in retrospect to have been present all along, not as a passive trace but as pushing from the other side of the text. Affery’s dreams, the cause of the noises heard in the Clennam house, the meaning of the cryptic “Do Not Forget,” Rigaud’s apparent recognition of Flintwich while meeting him for the first time—all of these questions, which are left hanging for hundreds of pages, also reveal the contour of the full knowledge of which they are aspects. I proceed then to a closer look at the temporal structure of Little Dorrit’s (fairly contorted) recognition scene.

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Dickens keeps his mysteries before the reader rather like the performance of a chess prodigy who is playing a dozen games at once—making only one move at a time, but with the endgame of each already clearly envisioned. Flashes of mystery appear from the beginning, only to be left in suspension for hundreds of pages. So, the main doubt overhanging Arthur Clennam’s return is whether Clennam & Co. "had unhappily wronged any one, and made no reparation" (48). From the very beginning of these suspicions, and after having met Little Dorrit in his mother’s room,
Arthur begins to connect her, and subsequently her family, with these initial doubts about his mother:

Influenced by his predominant idea, he even fell into a habit of discussing with himself the possibility of her being in some way associated with it. At last he resolved to watch Little Dorrit and know more of her story. (56)

What if his mother had an old reason she well knew for softening to this poor girl! What if the prisoner now sleeping quietly—Heaven grant it!—by the light of the great Day of judgment should trace back his fall to her. What if any act of hers and of his father’s, should have even remotely brought the grey heads of those two brothers so low!

A swift thought shot into his mind. In that long imprisonment here, and in her own long confinement to her room, did his mother find a balance to be struck? I admit that I was accessory to that man’s captivity. I have suffered for it in kind. He has decayed in his prison; I in mine. I have paid the penalty. (89)

Alone again, Clennam became a prey to his old doubts in reference to his mother and Little Dorrit, and revolved the old thoughts and suspicions. (274)

As with the characteristic tics, epithets, or catchphrases which accompany Dickens’s minor characters in their every appearance, these doubts recur periodically but, after their first full statement, do not develop. Thus, once Clennam has seen the Dorrit family in the Marshalsea, he wonders if William Dorrit’s debt could be traced back to his own parents; the very next time the thought recurs, it is already an “old doubt.” The mystery has thus been set in motion... but a particularly Dickensian sort of recurrent motion—more a leitmotiv than a suspenseful development. (True, the mystery eventually takes on a more complete shape, with false solutions and exculpations, even detectives of a sort in Rigaud and Pancks, but the repeated picking-up of this thread is also a repeated dropping of it.)

Several of the novel’s mysteries are continually resurfacing in this way—e.g., the noises in the Clennam house, and the "D.N.F." inscription on Mr. Clennam’s watch. Others are left strikingly unelaborated: the appearance of Mr. Flintwich’s doppelganger (with an iron box!) in Affery’s dream, or Miss Wade’s nighttime meeting with Rigaud. These latter questions are set
before us but are then left untouched until the conclusion takes up all of these strands once again for a final ordering.

The recognition scene—the series of revelations that illuminates all of these questions, retroactively aligning all the pertinent information and producing a coherent image of the past—will be found in the chapter “Closing In” (volume II, chapter 30). It is crucial to note that the cumulative facts now exposed were not previously the knowledge of any one person. In other words, there is not some Über-Subject whose knowledge preexists recognition as the inverse of the objective totality—rather, the secret is assembled by the very investigation. Rigaud has only the partial knowledge of the lost will which he obtained from Flintwinch’s twin brother in Belgium; Affery has only the fragmentary and delirious data of her “dreams” (what she calls her observations so as to keep them unreal); Flintwinch and Mrs. Clennam do not know the afterlife of the incriminating information, as it passes from Flintwinch to his brother to Rigaud to Miss Wade; Arthur has only his suspicions and confused observations upon his return; etc. Hence the need for the (somewhat implausible) piecing-together of the whole story by Rigaud, Flintwinch, Affery, and Mrs. Clennam in her room, with interruptions and corrections divided between all the characters.

This four-way retrospection takes up a dozen pages of the novel and cannot be conveniently reproduced here. The main outline of the revelations are as follows: Mrs. Clennam, after she married Arthur’s father, discovers that he has a lovechild with another woman, a singer. This affair was to have been quashed by his marriage, which is mandated by a domineering uncle, Gilbert Clennam. When Mrs. Clennam finds out, she adopts Arthur as her own, and secrets his mother away under the protection of Flintwinch’s brother Ephraim. However, upon his deathbed, Gilbert Clennam relents towards this fallen woman, willing her one thousand guineas, and also
“a thousand guineas to the youngest daughter her patron might have at fifty, or (if he had none) brother’s youngest daughter, on her coming of age” (779). This patron is Frederick Dorrit, the brother is William Dorrit, and the would-be recipient of this benefaction is of course Little Dorrit. But Mrs. Clennam suppresses this will, and refuses to make any reparations except the smallest approach of hiring out Little Dorrit for needlework.

Rigaud is blackmailing Mrs. Clennam with this information, which he has acquired in acquiring the iron box (containing the suppressed will) from Flintwich’s twin brother Ephraim in Antwerp, Flintwich having removed the box from the house in order to have something to hold over Mrs. Clennam’s head, in about the same way. But the fate of this iron box is more curious still. Rigaud has left it in safe-keeping with Miss Wade, by whom he has been employed to spy on Mr. and Mrs. Gowan in Italy—Henry Gowan being Miss Wade’s former love. The endpoint of all this is that when Tattycoram breaks from Miss Wade and returns to the Meagleses, she brings back this iron box with her (810).

So what are the specific mechanisms of recognition? 1) *The new revelations act like a sifting mechanism.* Some details leap into connection with each other, while others are shown to be meaningless or even red herrings. Arthur’s suspicion that Clennam & Co. is responsible for William Dorrit’s debt is shown to be mistaken—the will that Mrs. Clennam suppresses crazily zig-zags from Frederick Dorrit (Arthur’s mother’s musical patron) to Little Dorrit without actually touching her father. On the other hand, the "neutral" aspects of Mrs. Clennam’s relation to Little Dorrit now make an ominous chain of significance. When, early in the novel, Arthur hears that Little Dorrit has been employed to do needlework for Mrs. Clennam, he traces this link and finds it to be a fortuitous connection that came about through several intermediaries—Mr. Plornish, Mr. Pancks, and Mr. Casby—as though it were the mere chance of Little Dorrit’s name
being passed along that found her work (86, 140). But this scene brings to light that Mrs. Clennam wished to make small reparation (for her conscience at least) by hiring this specific girl whom she has injured (without Amy knowing it) by blocking her from an inheritance. The longer circuit (with its three “buffers”) and the element of chance in connecting these characters are now shown to be false, as Mrs. Clennam dissembling her motives and covering her tracks. In other words, some earlier material falls outside the explanation, and other material is reconfigured and cemented in being recognized.

2) What is illuminated was there all along, but as a silent determinant; its effects precede its appearance. When Miss Wade takes Tattycoram away from the Meagleses, encouraging her in her rebelliousness, this at first appears as motivated by... what? The young girl’s headstrong nature, the magnetic bitterness of Miss Wade, the deep condescension inherent to Tattycoram’s position as Pet Meagles’ maid. All of this is true—in a way—but what cannot be suspected at the moment of Tattycoram’s running away is that Miss Wade has any personal hostility towards the Meagleses (whom she has just met on their travels, as much by coincidence as their meeting Arthur Clennam). This, nonetheless, is the case: Miss Wade is burning with hatred of Pet Meagles, the wife of Henry Gowan, whom we learn in her "History of a Self-Tormentor" to be Miss Wade’s former lover. She is not in Marseilles at all by chance, but because she is following—tracking—her rival. And it is for this same motive of revenge that she exercises her influence over Tattycoram. But we see all of this before we understand its causes; what is to-be-known is not inert or dormant but instead active and determining prior to its being pronounced and incorporated in the recognition.

3) Recognition points beyond itself. Recall the scene where Mrs. Clennam chastises Flintwich for being "needlessly significant" to Arthur (180). It may be that a close reading of this passage
here would be less useful than a digression on some recent criticism. For it seems to me that Dickens’s procedure of recognition is identical with what has been criticized as the philosophical or critical "hermeneutics of suspicion" in essays by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick\(^{103}\) (who psychologizes it as "paranoid reading") and by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus\(^{104}\) (as "symptomatic reading"). It should be apparent from my discussion (in detail below) of crisis as a blind-spot in the phenomenal and ideological texture of bourgeois experience, that (with Freud, against Foucault) I am very much interested in reconstituting what the text cannot pronounce. It is just that this itself is not much; it is certainly not *Little Dorrit*’s hidden "meaning." The point here is to see literary form (in this case, the mystery plot) not as something to historicize, to reduce to some other content, but rather as the key to the shape of historical consciousness: in other words, form as the key to another form. This principle is amply rendered in Dickens’s mysteries, in the non-identity of the present moment with its own meanings, in the ubiquity of what is "needlessly significant."

4) Lastly, these explanations are explanations. What is recognized and revealed refers to what is before us, what is already there. I think we have all had the experience of “asking what something is”—in a foreign country, at a restaurant, buying a computer—and having the answer come back as some equally unhelpful foreign or technical term. Novels can be like this sometimes. The unmasking of the Gothic elements in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*, or the real identity of Tom Jones’ mother in Fielding’s novel, both bring in a great deal of additional, confusing backstory so as to clear that up. Many of the Sherlock Holmes stories work this way, not least *A Study in Scarlet*—at the end of the investigation, the detective merely produces before us a stranger we have never seen before and clasps handcuffs on him. The case is solved... but


only insofar as there is a new and equally unknown name and face to put to a crime. In this sense an “arrest” also arrests the temporality of interpretation. But in *Little Dorrit*, the explanations do not just brand a new identity on the forehead of textual objects—*everything* about Mrs. Clennam “snaps into place” when we learn what she has done, as when we read Miss Wade’s history. The explanation does more than put a label to the past; it invests the free-floating positivity of the past with a signifying order “tied to” an element immanent within it but never given.

Recognition requires that there be something already there all along to be recognized. I have been insisting that this something-to-be-illuminated in *Little Dorrit* is the truth of the consciousness confronting these mysteries, i.e. the very vantage point *from which* we encounter the novel’s gloomy secrets is finally the point *on which* our gaze is fixed in the conclusion. If this sounds circular, it is. As Lionel Trilling puts it, the concluding revelation, “the secret of [Arthur Clennam’s] birth, of his being really a child of love and art” is itself the starting point for his “ethical will” to unconceal these very facts.¹⁰⁵ This unconcealment, however, bears a bitter cost. If Arthur’s being always-already “out of place” leads him to this illumination, the full knowledge arrived at is paradoxically a kind of subjective destitution—the erosion of his (toxic familial) foundations. The beauty of the novel lies, of course, in conceiving this destitution as liberating: what was alienating for the subject was just this initial perspective that generated its consistency.

Now, this same circularity also holds for Dickens’s social criticism: the (moral) teleology of the mystery procedure means that there is no “outside” to this observing bourgeois consciousness—exposure is built into its initial coordinates such that its itinerary aims (indirectly) only at itself. That there is a mystery plot and illumination *at all* is a guarantee that what is being criticized is ultimately knowable—and so belongs to the domain of the moral subject. In Dickens’s mysteries, in illumination, in his criticism and moral perspective—the entire matrix of his

treatment of consciousness and knowledge—we never leave this domain of the subject’s return-to-self and the internal opposition of knowledge/repression.

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Everything changes when we turn away from the Gothic sites of Clennam & Co. and the Marshalsea, to the modern spheres of bureaucracy (the Circumlocution Office) and high capitalist finance (Mr. Merdle). Here, one searches in vain for an immanent or teleological recognition.

Recall that the major event in the novel, the freeing of William Dorrit from debt, which divides *Little Dorrit* in two parts, “Poverty” and “Riches,” is a *false solution*, a red herring, which appears to exculpate Mrs. Clennam from Arthur’s suspicions. The initial explanation of how Dorrit ended up in the Marshalsea in the first place is a masterpiece of confusion:

The affairs of this debtor were perplexed by a partnership, of which he knew no more than that he had invested money in it; by legal matters of assignment and settlement, conveyance here and conveyance there, suspicion of unlawful preference of creditors in this direction, and of mysterious spirited away in that; and as nobody upon the face of the earth could be more incapable of explaining any single item in this heap of confusion than the debtor himself, nothing comprehensible could be made of his case. To question him in detail… was only to put the case out at compound interest of incomprehensibility. (59).

To summarize, there is a known result, Dorrit’s debt; and a known cause, a failed and legally dubious business partnership. Of the connections between cause and effect, though, an affirmation of quantity—a “heap” of confusion—is deemed to be so mystifying as to ward off any investigation, clarification, or specification. As things stand here, though, Dorrit’s being-in-debt is an ontological given, unknowable in detail other than the present outcome. As to details, remedies, lines of causality, actors, motives, etc., these are all so abstractly swept over that the debt appears as an inert fact of life, not indeed as a consequence of any thing at all. The debt is clearly a “mystery,” but it is never material for a mystery *plot*, or for illumination of any kind—
this is really all we learn about it. As a reader of *Bleak House* will already have been led to suspect, even if this hopelessly complicated legal-financial mess is capable of being terminated, it is incapable of being *resolved*. That is, if in said novel the suit Jarndyce & Jarndyce concludes, it is not because any light has been shed on the matter of rightful inheritance. The funds and property have merely been spent on litigation costs and thereby exhausted. In the same way, even though Dorrit is eventually freed from debtors’ prison, and this due to Pancks’ investigation, there is never any clarification of this initial situation, of the components and particulars of the debt. Dorrit’s original debt is of a convoluted unknowable nature, while his later freedom is due to an inheritance of the more “knowable” wealth in landed property. The critical “solution” is obvious—the mysterious inheritance is the only way to cut the Gordian knot of incomprehensible bureaucratic debt; a pure fairy tale of economic regression.

Dorrit’s debt is caught up in the Circumlocution Office in much the same way as Jarndyce & Jarndyce is caught up in Chancery. As Ferdinand Barnacle narrates Dorrit’s paying off of the debt, “When the fairy had appeared and he wanted to pay us off, Egad we had got into such an exemplary state of checking and counter-checking, signing and counter-signing, that it was six months before we knew how to take the money” (565).

Not only the flourishing of this artificial bureaucratic superstructure, but also the unknowability of the constitution and specifics of Dorrit’s debt is a product of the unholy junction of bureaucracy with finance capital—the Circumlocution Office and its representatives the Barnacle family are also deeply caught up in Merdle’s speculations and projects.

The mystery begun in Volume I, Chapter 21, “Mr. Merdle’s Complaint,” consists only in the following: that the great financier has a “deep-seated recondite complaint” that is not apparently physiological; he “suppose[s] himself unwell without reason” (253). The cause of this
mysterious illness, it turns out, is that Mr. Merdle’s speculations are more or less fraudulent shells, strung along by forgery and the ruination of new and ever-larger investments. After having drawn in the principals of Mr. Dorrit, Arthur Clennam, and Mr. Pancks, and “numbers of men in every profession and trade [who] would be blighted by his insolvency” (710), Mr. Merdle’s schemes finally catch up to him. Before he can be found out as a bankrupt, he commits a gory suicide.

Compared to the elaborate and prolonged, even theatrical, recognition Dickens builds to in the mysteries around Mrs. Clennam—which in some editions is supplemented with a clarifying appendix—the truth about Mr. Merdle that surfaces after his suicide is described in a dialogical manner as though “overheard,” or narrated by *fama* itself, starkly denuded of any journalistic detail or realistic specificity.

As the whispers became louder, which they did from that time every minute, they became more threatening. He had sprung from nothing, by no natural growth or process that any one could account for; ... he had been taken up by all sorts of people, in quite an unaccountable manner; he had never had any money of his own, his ventures had been utterly reckless, and his expenditure had been most enormous... [T]he late Mr. Merdle’s complaint had been, simply, Forgery and Robbery... [He] was simply the greatest Forger and the greatest Thief that ever cheated the gallows. (709-10).

But what exactly is explained by any of this—that the criminal has “sprung from nothing,” and by “no... process that anyone could account for;” that still further matters are “unaccountable,” and that his crime had been “simply, Forgery and Robbery,” that Merdle is—again “simply”—the “greatest Forger and the greatest Thief,” etc.? This debriefing, completely drained of specifics as it is, raises more questions than it answers. What exactly did Merdle forge? Was he engaged in illegal activities all along, or only belatedly, in order to cover some unforeseen loss in a reactive chain? How were the massive projects he has supposedly been undertaking kept from too-close scrutiny this whole time? In other words, one can switch out what is to be explained (“a
deep-seated recondite complaint”) for its explanation (“Forgery and Robbery”) and not advance one inch in clarifying any of the Merdle story. Nor did we ever in the first place know much about Merdle’s investments, which are from first to last equally vague: “[N]obody knew with the least precision what Mr. Merdle’s business was, except that it was to coin money” (394)—which is almost “Forgery” already! The mystery’s “solution,” we find, only ever refers back to the single, reiterated question that indicated there being a mystery at all. The whole revelation is pinned to this affective mirroring of the unaccountability of capitalist profit, but without overturning or amplifying any interpretation of the original question.

Instead of illuminating “Mr. Merdle’s complaint,” Dickens merely puts a name to it. Instead of recognition, a nominal swap. (No explanatory appendix here!) If one takes this passage and flips back through the earlier sections of the book, applying the explanation retroactively to the points where Mr. Merdle’s unease and illness appear... nothing happens for interpretation, except this one-to-one substitution. Whereas every line of dialogue between Mrs. Clennam and Arthur can be reinterpreted in the new light of his not being her son, or every chance appearance of Miss Wade reinterpreted in the light of her obsession with Henry Gowan and hatred of Pet Meagles—all the passages dealing with Mr. Merdle read the same backwards as forwards.

Furthermore, there is no full knowledge in the plot of finance capitalism, nor in the plot of debt and the bureaucracy of the Circumlocution Office, as there was in the recognition of the family romance. Rather than knowledge or explanation of anything that transpired, we only have the two words “Forgery and Robbery,” which are as inert and external to what came before as a deus ex machina. Not only is there no full knowledge here, but as a result there is no light shed on the subject who confronts this process. That is, the objective “secret” of Merdle’s financial

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106 “[A]ll nations characterized by the capitalist mode of production are periodically seized by fits of giddiness in which they try to accomplish the money-making without the mediation of the production process.” Karl Marx, *Capital*, volume II, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1992), 137.
crime remains objective. Another way to say this: its temporal effects only run forward. Arthur Clennam ends up in debtor’s prison because of Merdle’s ruin, to be sure, but the thematic circularity that this avails the novel belongs to an entirely other dimension. Just as Little Dorrit is the “vanishing-point” (733) of Arthur’s story, he has to return to the Marshalsea as the existential symbol of the defeat of his will, a will that Arthur learns was always bound up in her: “When I first gathered myself together... and set something like purpose before my jaded eyes, whom had I before me[?]” (720). And this has nothing to do with the revelation of Merdle’s crime except in the way of a device that removes the financial disparity between the lovers. Arthur’s imprisonment for debt lacks any inner connection with Merdle’s fraud, while by contrast there is such a connection in the case of the suppressed will, which seems to confirm Arthur’s love choice—approving Little Dorrit, as it were, from beyond the grave.

The objectivity and externality of this financial crimes plot (how it touches on Arthur Clennam’s plot only mechanistically and tangentially, at a sole point), and how bare is the knowledge held back by the “secret” of Merdle’s complaint indicate that we have left behind the series of terms centering on the knowing subject seen in the recognition scene, especially the reversals of consciousness in Dickens’s mystery-procedure. But this departure from recognition and mystery already points beyond Merdle’s “forgery” as the object of any social criticism. As Mary Poovey points out, forgery plays an ambiguous role in the novel, “figur[ing] only briefly,” while “the details of the financier’s crimes remain vague, and the effects of the speculation he inspires are registered in a moral vocabulary that obscures his actual crimes.” In fact, forgery shows up only on this one page (after Merdle has committed suicide and he is found to be

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107 Garrett Stewart has an interesting reading of this passage: “This whole moment of narrowed but totalized ‘perspective’ is prototypical in its shift of scale and orientation. Even in providing a graphic or painterly mastertrope for its own implied narratology of closure, the novel’s summary gesture invites the less-settled narratography of contradiction in process.” “Dickens and the Narratography of Closure,” Critical Inquiry 34, no. 3 (2008), 538-9.

108 Mary Poovey, Genres of the Credit Economy (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2008), 375.
bankrupt); most of the discourse around Merdle is instead about speculation and capital investments.\(^{109}\)

Speculation is thereby placed in a dialectic with forgery—legitimate finance can apparently slide into gross illegality and fraud; what is criticized under the heading of “speculation” includes in advance a moral and practical judgment borne out by the revelation of spectacular (though vague) financial crimes. The point here is not to decide whether Dickens’s “real” target was speculation *per se* (apparently-fictional capital and its very real volatility) or instead only the criminal financier type represented by his contemporary model for Mr. Merdle, the Irish banker John Sadleir, and the other “originals” Dickens suggests in his preface.\(^{110}\) It is rather that this apparent undecidability, the way that “forgery” overlaps with “speculation” in Dickens’s rhetoric and in the outcome of the plot, is not just a conflation of the two terms. What we are dealing with here is a blind-spot within Victorian (and not only Victorian) ideology, an inability to perceive crises in capitalism, or to represent crisis as something given for social experience. To put this blind-spot in dialectical terms, the analytical problem of such a gap or rupture in economic appearance—the shuttling between “forgery” and “speculation,” the way that we can’t pin down the object of Dickens’s criticism here—is itself the phenomenal structure of a third term: crisis.\(^{111}\) In other words, capitalist crisis can only show up as something other-than-itself, e.g., as

\(^{109}\) “[Merdle] was in everything good, from banking to building... He was in the City, necessarily. He was Chairman of this, Trustee of that, President of the other” (247). He is “the chief projector, establisher, and manager” of “his wonderful Bank” (558); he personally “invests” Mr. Dorrit’s principal, and it is clearly possible for Mr. Pancks and Arthur Clennam to privately invest in Merdle’s (unnamed) projects, neglecting Daniel Doyce’s one “prejudice... against speculating” (673).

\(^{110}\) “If I might make so bold as to defend that extravagant conception, Mr. Merdle, I would hint that it originated after the Railroad-share epoch, in the times of a certain Irish bank, and of one or two other equally laudable enterprises. If I were to plead anything in mitigation of the preposterous fancy that a bad design will sometimes claim to be a good and an expressly religious design, it would be the curious coincidence that it has been brought to its climax in these pages, in the days of the public examination of late Directors of a Royal British Bank” (xvii).

\(^{111}\) “The world trade crises must be regarded as the real concentration and forcible adjustment of all the contradictions of bourgeois economy... [The] more abstract forms [of these contradictions] are recurring and are contained in the more concrete forms.” Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1978), 2:510.
forgery or a localized panic. Karl Marx describes the way that illegality, profit, and the responsibility for a commercial fall-out are thus linked together in a desperate chain: “In every stock-jobbing swindle everyone knows that some time or other the crash must come, but everyone hopes that it may fall on the head of his neighbor, after he himself has caught the shower of gold and placed it in secure hands. *Après moi le déluge!* is the watchword of every capitalist and every capitalist nation.”\(^{112}\) A “crash” (capitalist crisis) *always appears as* mere contingency, a kind of high-stakes game of musical chairs. But this element of chance and the undecidability of the immediate cause of a crisis are themselves the essential determinations of crisis. The naivete of positivism in bourgeois economics is to expect crisis in capitalism to show up “as itself,” whereas it is in the untimely and inconvenient nature of crises to arrive uninvited and under a false name. A useful analogue here might be made to Edgar Allan Poe’s “Masque of the Red Death.”

Crisis is in this sense both included and excluded from *Little Dorrit*. Included, because the historical material that Dickens is appropriating (the crisis of 1857 and the numerous contemporary fallouts that he cites in the preface) certainly bears within it the structure of appearance of crisis, i.e. its “extravagant” manifestations in forgery, public scapegoating, and the vilification of finance *qua* “fictional capital.” Excluded, because crisis *per se* falls outside of the moral topology of the novelistic subject and outside of the circuit of recognition. The series of crises which slammed the economy of Victorian England\(^ {113}\)—and Marx notes that, “It will be remembered that the year 1857 [year of publication of *Little Dorrit*] brought one of the great crises with which the industrial cycle periodically ends”\(^ {114}\)—appears to Dickens only as a number of extraordinary fallouts (i.e. exceptions to the rule) from white-collar crimes such as

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\(^{112}\) Marx, *Capital* I, 381.

\(^{113}\) See Marx, *Capital* I, 583-4, 587, for an exhaustive list of economic crises in Britain.

\(^{114}\) Marx, *Capital* I, 822.
embezzlement, fraud, and forgery.

Whereas *Little Dorrit’s* dialectic of self-consciousness here consists of the drama of Arthur Clennam unmasking his familial and social constitution—the de-founding of the subject—but along a series that leads back only to a concluding ethical freedom. Nothing “escapes” this circuit of switching perspectives. In recognition, the repressed or secret contents of consciousness (the mystery) eventually line up for the knowing subject as his own ontological presuppositions; what is illuminated is Arthur’s truth from within what confronts him as an objective unknown. The absence of any such recognition or subject in the Merdle plot points to the divorce of crisis from this sphere of the subject’s (self) knowledge, its exclusion from the horizon of knowable experiences of bourgeois rationality. If the bourgeois subject views “rational knowledge as the product of mind,”\(^\text{115}\) then crisis—the *irrationality* of the total economic process in capitalism—cannot be sighted, so to speak, in the categories of ideological experience. Hence Marx’s repeated appropriation, in his economic writings, of Hegel’s phenomenological distinction that dialectics is what occurs “behind the back of consciousness.”\(^\text{116}\)

The reason for this is that, on one hand, under capitalism, “The life of industry becomes a series of periods of moderate activity, prosperity, over-production, crisis and stagnation,”\(^\text{117}\) and on the other hand, that this inevitable cycle of boom and bust appears as *external* to the constant and “eternal” laws of bourgeois political economy: “Under free competition, the immanent laws of capitalist production confront the individual capitalist as a coercive force external to him.”\(^\text{118}\)

In Dickens’s plots of recognition, the contradictions in objectivity (the gaps in what Peter

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\(^\text{115}\) Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 111.
\(^\text{116}\) Hegel, *Phenomenology of Mind*, 56.
\(^\text{117}\) Marx, *Capital* I, 580.
\(^\text{118}\) Ibid., 381.
Brooks calls the “official narrative” transcend their mute givenness to reveal a fragile conceptual identity with the hero’s own subjectivity, bridging the space between the self and the world, essentially annexing objective reality to rational cognizance. In capitalist crisis, no such unifying immanent meaning is forthcoming or recognized. Where crisis would be in the novel, one finds only mute incoherence, an economic disaster that is somehow simultaneously a non-occurrence: it is not a “possible object of experience” for bourgeois consciousness. Crisis is the eruptive and irrational return, within the objective framework of political economy, of the reified “laws” of capitalist production and accumulation. Crisis is not “reified.” It is, so to speak, the return of the repressed of reification.

The impenetrability, the absence of any objective content in the Merdle mystery—no precipitating cause, no internal connection between the outcome and the lead-up, no specifics of any document forged, no accomplices, and altogether a cryptic and distracted character upon whom no light is shed by the revelation—is the direct translation into plot of the kind of knowledge which bourgeois society is capable of attaining about economic crisis, or of “coining money” through finance. This knowledge which is limited by the partial, specializing rationality which comes to dominate in the capitalist mode of production. Georg Lukács is the poet of this phenomenon:

[I]t is the very success with which the economy is totally rationalized and transformed into an abstract and mathematically orientated system of formal “laws” that creates the methodological barrier to understanding the phenomenon of crisis. In moments of crisis the qualitative existence of the “things” that lead their lives beyond the purview of economics as misunderstood and neglected things-in-themselves, as use-values, suddenly becomes the decisive factor. (Suddenly, that is, for reified, rational thought.) Or rather: these “laws” fail to function and the reified mind is unable to perceive a pattern in this “chaos.”

Crisis is in this analysis the irrational, uncognizable analogue of Immanuel Kant’s thing-in-itself,

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120 Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 105.
to which pure reason cannot penetrate—the transcendental object lacking any verifiable content, existing independently of the knowing subject, hence outside of a possible self-recognition.

In other words, the raw historical material of the 1857 crisis is inaccessible to the representational practices of Dickensian form—it being understood that the “blind spot” in the latter is here detectable only against the background of the former. If recognition “invests the free-floating positivity of the past with a signifying order tied to an element immanent within it but never given,” such a conceptual anchor or knot is precisely what is lacking in political economy when it comes to crises in capitalism. Because the concept of use-value (to say nothing of class-struggle or overproduction) is foreclosed, as it were, from notional appearance, the empirical is deprived of the term that would make it cohere even at the level of description. Thus, instead of crisis being a result of identifiable tendencies, traceable backward in time, i.e., a topic of recognition—it is instead for political economy a non-existent, more a tear in the fabric of economic reality than an occurrence in itself.

Reification and recognition, though shown here to be mutually exclusive, are intertwined. Reification overdetermines recognition, outside of representation. Not only Aristotle’s anagnorisis, not only the genre of mystery and the threading of plots in the multi-plot novel, but the very space of novelistic subjectivity—all are articulated outside the literary, in historical processes. Subjectivity is not limited to the epistemological space of character or narrator, but is decentered, for as basic a mode of subjectivity as self-recognition takes place only in terms already bound up in the concrete.

These forms are already operated within—preceded by—the processes of the capitalist mode of production, i.e. they are not matters of mimesis (see above, crisis as “bypassing” representation). To historicize novelistic modes in this way, then, means not treating form as a
container for outside historical incident, nor as a grammar or apparatus that translates history into literature, preserving it through a kind of reversible no-loss process called “form.” Rather, as I have been trying to suggest, what we can read in a novel like *Little Dorrit* is the way that form is already inherent to the historical material itself.
Chapter Two

Tautology and Displacement in *The Last Chronicle of Barset*

“Thou comest in such a questionable shape
    That I will speak to thee”
—Hamlet

Why are there plots at all in Trollope’s novels? In his *Autobiography*, Trollope himself could only offer a kind of apology for his plots: “A novel should give a picture of common life enlivened by humour, and sweetened by pathos. To make that picture worthy of attention the canvas should be crowded with real portraits,—not of individuals known to the world or to the author,—but of created personages impregnated with traits of character which are known. To my thinking plot is but the vehicle for all this, and when you have the vehicle without the passengers, a story of mystery in which the agents never come to life, you have but a wooden show. There must however be a story. You must provide a vehicle of some sort.”121 (He goes on to say that the plot of the novel under discussion, *The Bertrams*, was “more than ordinarily bad.”) Trollope’s own interest in his “stories” does not rest upon their plots but rather upon their imagined milieu, delineation of character, moral pedagogy, allusions to *Othello*, classical aphorisms, etc.

Trollope’s objection to plot is grounded in what he saw as the purpose of his fiction. Although subsequent readers have drawn the conclusion from Trollope’s prodigious literary output that he was a “novel machine,”122 Trollope demurs: “I have ever thought of myself as a preacher of sermons.”123 (He is inordinately fond of quoting *Much Ado About Nothing* to the effect that “they

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that touch pitch will be defiled.”

The “picture of common life” necessary to this purpose is premised above all upon transparency and legibility—equally in the moral and the stylistic senses. Thus he cites with approval Nathaniel Hawthorne’s description of Trollope’s fictional world as “just as real as if some giant had hewn a great lump out of the earth and put it under a glass case, with all its inhabitants going about their daily business.” The intention is to do entirely without artifice, with nothing interposed between us and this basically amiable swarm of characters. As Walter Kendrick notes, “realism” for Trollope means: unmediated by any formal intervention or apparatus. Trollope’s great aesthetic accomplishment is to show us his world through a pane of glass—not darkly.

Trollope’s name for such artifice, however, is plot. Plot carries us away from the immediate, from the self-evidence of experience and habit, and into the alarming, sensational, and unreal. In his Autobiography, Trollope objects to Wilkie Collins’s plots on the grounds that, in reading them, he “can never lose the taste of the construction.” Plot, then, is essentially an additive—complete with aftertaste. Once Trollope has equated morality with the plainly legible, transparent, and “realistic,” plot can only be a more or less superfluous scaffolding, as much obstruction as support.

Given these reflections, The Last Chronicle of Barset (henceforth LCB) can only stand out among Trollope’s major works in almost qualifying as a mystery novel: the moral verdict on the Reverend Crawley, his guilt or innocence, is an open question for nearly 800 pages. Contrast

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124 This is quoted or paraphrased in, at least, the Autobiography, The Way We Live Now, Framley Parsonage, The Prime Minister, and Orley Farm.
126 Quoted in Trollope, Autobiography, 96.
127 “Writing done realistically becomes pure conveyance, a medium without a message, an absolutely lucid glass. Realistic writing, for Trollope, does not represent; it transmits.” Kendrick, The Novel-Machine, 6.
128 Trollope, Autobiography, 165.
129 LCB even contains some Collins-esque features: Mr. Crawley’s self-alienated recollections are a forerunner of Franklin Blake’s state-specific (opium-induced) memory of the crime he unconsciously commits in The Moonstone.
this with the next closest contender in his oeuvre, *Orley Farm*, in which Trollope gives the suspense away so early that he has to apologize for it in his *Autobiography*. But *mystery* is really too strong a word for what might be better described as *LCB*’s pervasive *confusion*. After all, the novel is only belatedly and momentarily a “whodunnit,” and it is difficult to characterize a book as a mystery novel when its solution is arrived at by the asking of a polite, direct question to a friendly party.

In what follows, I argue that this dominant affect in *LCB*, confusion, originates in the fetishistic form of interest in Victorian capitalism, whereby capital appears to simply shed a dividend out of its own greenhouse fecundity. The question mark hanging over the novel can be traced back to this displaced affect, which has spread from a minor plot set in the London financial market out into Trollope’s benign English ecclesiastical world and the enormously attenuated mystery plot. Here I differ from recent historicist criticism, which has seen the limits of Trollope’s moral immediacy and transparency as affectively bound up with the cognitive demands of capitalism and modernity. No matter how much historicism has problematized and interrogated the realist project, in looking for a discursive *content* to match a novelistic affect, historicism has relied upon the realist procedure of mimetic reference. Against this, I will be arguing that realist immediacy itself has as its conditions a reification which can never appear for that representation. There being no such thing as an unmediated appropriation of raw, pre-ideological, “natural” experience, Trollope’s incredibly broad mimesis is only possible on the basis of a cognitive modality—reification—which has structured that experience in advance. It is not possible for Trollope to hack a “great lump out of the earth” without *also* taking over the

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130 "The plot of *Orley Farm* is probably the best I have ever made; but it has the fault of declaring itself, and thus coming to an end too early in the book. When Lady Mason tells her ancient lover that she did forge the will, the plot of *Orley Farm* has unravelled itself;—and this she does in the middle of the tale.” Trollope, *Autobiography*, 109-10. *The Eustace Diamonds* and *Orley Farm* both portray thefts of greater value than *LCB*, but with less mystery.
logic of that immediacy itself. But this means giving up the search for an historical objective correlative—the affect, so to speak, belongs to the perceptual frame, rather than to the picture itself. And Trollope has already given us his name for that frame or “vehicle”: plot.

In recent historicist criticism, the Victorian novel’s objective as moral pedagogy has been reframed as the task of naturalizing for the reader new and anxiety-producing social categories. So, for Audrey Jaffe, the Trollopian novel is “that vehicle par excellence... for teaching the nineteenth century how to look upon things.”131 When confronted with a diffuse social “discomfort” about value in the stock market, “an uneasiness about the unpredictability of investing in shares,”132 the novel mediates and tames this pervasive nervousness by “rely[ing] on narratives of romantic love to adjudicate the relationship between feeling and value, the love relationship absorbing and disseminating the codes of ideological discourse.”133 Under this interpretation, morality and its romantic-narrative trappings are the smooth coating, as it were, that makes social norms and ideology go down easier for a panicky and uneasy population of readers. These threatening social categories and the anxieties they produce are the same “things” inside the novel (where they are defused) as outside, in contemporary Victorian reality, where readers have been taught “how to look upon” them.

Amanda Anderson’s account of Trollope’s liberal critique of modernity is also steeped in anxious affect: the vertigo and emasculation of a critique that can never fully transcend its necessarily “embedded” ethos.134 “The dwarfing of moral virtue by psychological excess... is

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132 Ibid., 45.
133 Ibid., 48.
134 Amanda Anderson, “Trollope’s Modernity,” ELH 74, no. 3 (2007), 517. The slippage between tradition and modernity, between virtue and psychology, produces a kind of gaping hole into which one can continuously pour (as Trollope did) a sea of words—without ever plugging it.
formally repeated in the vulnerability of the Tory ethos to the vertiginous conditions of modern life and the characters who embody it.”135 This “restless” and “energetically ambivalent”136 anxiety has a clear awareness of its origins, namely, “a particularly fraught and idiosyncratic ambivalence toward... new and otherwise threateningly impersonal practices” of modernity and the threats posed to sincerity, communicative transparency, and liberal or cosmopolitan disinterest.137 That is to say, Anderson equates the affective (the anxious) with the “embedded,” which for her is a kind of psycho-social cabinet from which one may (or sullenly may not) sally forth to wage rational critique. By contrast, confusion in LCB cannot be fixed so easily to definite social forms, nor to the fraught self-awareness Anderson describes. On my reading, affect is displaced, not directly responsive, and stems from an a priori condition of consciousness, not from a morally-challenging encounter.

In her recent study, Genres of the Credit Economy, Mary Poovey proposes a different affective nexus between LCB’s complicated economic material and its recognition plot, i.e. between a historical understanding of the movements of Victorian credit and the novel’s retrospective construction of the movements of Mr. Soames’ check. Whereas I see confusion in LCB as displaced from the truncated form of interest, i.e. as taken over from an “unconscious” economic category, Poovey sees anxiety as coming from an outside discourse. The concernful dealings and misunderstandings over a check, which make up the plot of LCB, reflect the contemporary discourse about financial instruments in Victorian political economy. Victorian credit is taken to be the same historical discourse-object whether it appears in a novel or in a work of political economy.138

135 Ibid., 511.
136 Ibid., 515.
137 Ibid., 516.
138 Poovey, Genres of the Credit Economy, 85. Trollope and Walter Bagehot, although working in different genres,
Owing to this identification, Poovey reads the novel’s recognition narrative as a pedagogical exercise in “pattern recognition”¹³⁹ and “narrative dislocation,”¹⁴⁰ the pedagogical aim of the novel being to “neutralize the problematic of representation inherent in the credit economy.”¹⁴¹ In Poovey’s reading, the narrative dynamic of recognizing “the detachment of signification from a referent and its subsequent endowment with meaning” is, “of course... also the dynamic of credit.”¹⁴² As I will show in discussing the fetishism of interest rates below, “the problematic of representation inherent in the credit economy” is not either “neutralized” or “supported” by anything so psychological (“subjective” in the Keynesian sense) as “collective belief.”¹⁴³ But meanwhile, Poovey’s narratological argument relies on an untenable premise, that recognition is the reconstruction of an original unity that has been “broke[n] up”¹⁴⁴ and scattered to the winds—so many fragments hidden throughout the novel. In recognizing the pattern, the dislocation is meant to be undone, and the delayed narration revealed as only apparent. But in *LCB*, this would require that the pattern’s visibility precede its “dislocated” confirmation. This is a kind of positivism; Poovey assumes that the framework can pre-exist its elements. By contrast, as I will argue below, the narrative order is not composed of self-identical units (atomic story-events) which could ever be assembled in the first place to be then “dislocated.” Indeed, in *LCB*, the solution to the mystery here is given in the first chapter: no dislocation here. From the first,

¹³⁹ Ibid., 393.
¹⁴⁰ Ibid.
¹⁴¹ Ibid., 401.
¹⁴² Ibid., 394. Insofar as checks “circulated as value because they were both detached from gold, and implicitly and belatedly, linked to it.”¹⁴³ Ibid.
¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 391-2.
Mr. Crawley says that he got the check from Mr. Arabin’s hands along with the gift of the bills. And this is the truth. That this truth is then balked and not recognized by characters is an entirely other matter than the critical-readerly project of "reconstructing" this truth anywhere else than where it is directly presented.

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For those who have not read *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, any summary of the plot is bound to have an air of the mock-epic: yes, this is the 900-page Victorian novel whose interminable main action centers upon the origin of—a bank check for twenty pounds. Since the novel is also the *last* chronicle of Barset, there are also extensive sub-plots and intersecting threads bringing together all our old friends, from Mr. Harding and Archdeacon Grantly to Lily Dale and Mrs. Thorne (*née* Dunstable). Just as, while reading Tolstoy, it is necessary to scribble out the diminutive forms of Russian names on a back page, so in *LCB* the web of cousins and Barsetshire’s fictional geography will have the reader taking pencil in hand to make little maps and family trees for private reference. However, in this initial summary, all of that can be safely left out: the exposition of the mystery of the check is confusing enough. As the order of presentation of the mystery is crucial to this study, I give each detail of exposition in the order in which it appears in the text.  

The summary is given as much as possible in quotations from the novel so as to preserve the nuance innate to literary “clues,” since these ambiguities will be precisely what I want to return to in what follows.

The novel’s protagonist is Reverend Josiah Crawley—known to readers of *Framley Parsonage* as the obstinate, moody, and impoverished curate of the Barsetshire parish of Hogglestock. “The crime laid to his charge was the theft of a cheque for twenty pounds, which he was said to have stolen out of a pocket-book left or dropped in his house, and to have passed

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145 All quotations from *The Last Chronicle of Barset* will be given parenthetically.
as money into the hands of one Fletcher, a butcher of Silverbridge, to whom he was indebted” (4). “A day before the date” that bills were to be posted for Crawley’s debt, “Mrs. Crawley had come to Silverbridge, and had paid the butcher twenty pounds in four five-pound notes... Some six weeks after this, inquiry began to be made as to a certain cheque for twenty pounds drawn by Lord Lufton on his bankers in London, which cheque had been lost early in the spring, by Mr. Soames, Lord Lufton’s man of business in Barsetshire, together with a pocket-book in which it had been folded. This pocket-book Soames had believed himself to have left at Mr. Crawley’s house” on the occasion of remitting “a rentcharge to Mr. Crawley on behalf of Lord Lufton, amounting to twenty pound four shillings” (9). Mr. Soames “had paid the money personally to Mr. Crawley. Of so much there was no doubt. But he had paid it by a cheque drawn by himself on his own bankers at Barchester, and that cheque had been cashed in the ordinary way on the next morning. On returning to his own house in Barchester he had missed his pocket-book, and had written to Mr. Crawley to make inquiry... [N]o pocket-book had been found... All this had happened in March” (9).

“In October,” the butcher was paid, and “in November Lord Lufton’s cheque was traced back through the Barchester bank to Mr. Crawley’s hands. A brickmaker of Hoggle End [sent by Mr. Crawley] had asked for change over the counter of this Barchester bank,—not, as will be understood, the bank on which the cheque was drawn” (9). This brickmaker has to come back the next day, however, with the check “bearing Mr. Crawley’s name on the back of it, together with a note from Mr. Crawley himself,” when he receives “the identical notes [that] had been given to Fletcher, the butcher” (10), which you will remember as the four five-pound notes mentioned above.

This is the trajectory of the check as far as is known for the first 700 pages. In short, Mr.
Crawley has cashed a check that was lost by Mr. Soames on a trip to Hogglestock. Already in chapter one, the explanations and conjectures start. First: “When inquiry was made, Mr. Crawley stated that the cheque had been paid to him by Mr. Soames, on behalf of the rentcharge due to him by Lord Lufton. But the error of this statement was at once made manifest. There was the cheque, signed by Mr. Soames himself, for the exact amount,—twenty pounds four shillings” (10), as distinct from the lost check for only twenty pounds. The second explanation is from Mrs. Crawley: “[S]he believed the cheque for twenty pounds to be a part of a present given by Dean Arabin to her husband in April last... Mrs. Arabin had told her [Mrs. Crawley] that money had been given,—and at last taken. Indeed, so much had been very apparent, as bills had been paid to the amount of at least fifty pounds... [Mrs. Crawley] had felt no doubt that the money [for the butcher’s bill] had been given by the dean” (10-11). But this account is contradicted by Dean Arabin himself. The Dean, who is abroad with his wife, writes upon inquiry that “on the 17th of March he had given to Mr. Crawley a sum of fifty pounds, and that the payment had been made with five Bank of England notes of ten pounds each, which had been handed by him to his friend in the library at the deanery” (12). These ten-pound notes, then, are distinct both from the check in question and from the five-pound notes that paid the butcher.

A kind of third explanation, which will become more prominent as the novel goes on, is that Mr. Crawley is so mentally agitated that he cannot be held responsible for his actions or his memory. Mrs. Crawley, trying to justify her husband’s erroneous first explanation, tells the lawyer Mr. Walker, “‘The truth is, sir, that my husband often knows not what he says... There are times when in his misery he knows not what he says,—when he forgets everything’” (11). I call this only a kind of explanation, since its fully developed version is so expansive, shifting, and contradictory:
It must be understood that by this time the opinion had become very general that Mr. Crawley had been guilty,—that he had found the cheque in his house, and that he had, after holding it for many months, succumbed to temptation, and applied it to his own purposes. But various excuses were made for him by those who so believed. In the first place it was felt by all who really knew anything of the man’s character, that the very fact of his committing such a crime proved him to be hardly responsible for his actions. He must have known, had not all judgment in such matters been taken from him, that the cheque would certainly be traced back to his hands... [T]he guilt of the theft seemed to be almost annihilated by the folly of the theft. And then his poverty, and his struggles, and the sufferings of his wife, were remembered; and stories were told from mouth to mouth of his industry in his profession... And then there were serious debates whether he might not have stolen the money without much sin, being mad or half-mad,—touched with madness when he took it...” (478-9).

All three of these explanations, therefore, are in place within the first dozen pages, in which space the first two are in turn refuted and only the third pseudo-explanation left to ferment and perpetuate itself (as above). No other self-sufficient account of the check is given, and the case makes no progress towards resolution for several hundreds of pages, until Mrs. Arabin drops the following bombshell to John Eames (Mr. Crawley’s nephew who has sought her out in Florence): “‘I gave him the cheque, you know’” (757). The history of the gift of the cheque was very simple. It has been told how Mr. Crawley in his distress had called upon his old friend at the deanery asking for pecuniary assistance... Previously to Mr. Crawley’s arrival at the deanery this matter had been discussed between the dean and his wife, and it had been agreed between them that a sum of fifty pounds should be given. It should be given by Mrs. Arabin, but it was thought that the gift would come with more comfort to the recipient from the hands of his old friend... At last it was agreed that the notes should be put into an envelope, which envelope the dean should have ready with him. But when the moment came the dean did not have the envelope ready... And then Mrs. Arabin explained to John Eames that even she had not had it ready, and had been forced to go to her own desk to fetch it. Then, at the last moment, with the desire of increasing the good to be done to people who were so terribly in want, she put the cheque for twenty-pounds, which was in her possession as money of her own, along with the notes, and in this way the cheque had been given by the dean to Mr. Crawley. (759)

But where did Mrs. Arabin get the check? “[S]he had taken the cheque as part of the rent due to her from the landlord of ‘The Dragon of Wantly,’ which inn was her property, having been the property of her first husband” (759). It later comes out, due to some amateur detection on the
part of another cousin, Mr. Toogood, that one Mr. Scuttle stole this check from Mr. Soames while driving him to the above-named inn, this Scuttle having subsequently lived up to his name and fled to New Zealand (781).

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I have given the Mr. Crawley thread above, as minimally as possible, and the rise and fall of Dobbs Broughton has had to be brought in along the way. We glimpsed Henry Grantly’s pursuit of Grace Crawley but not Henry’s discordance with his father over this matter; John Eames’ dalliance with Madalina Demolines has been alluded to, but not Conway Dalrymple’s wooing of Clara Van Siever. Adolphus Crosbie appears in a further plot—the victim of one of those between-novel spousal deaths so likely to befall a Trollope hero, free once more to pay court to Lily Dale (on now-limited means). Lastly, there are the more and less untimely demises of Mrs. Proudie and Mr. Harding, the former evidently killed off on a freak impulse of Trollope’s, and the latter’s slow shuffle into night the conclusion of the whole saga that began with The Warden and Mr. Harding’s conundrum in that novel.

For now, I want to return to the Mr. Crawley plot, which is undoubtedly central, leaving the proliferation of subplots to be discussed in the conclusion. There are several features of the Crawley plot that need to be drawn out prior to relating it to what I would like to call “economic formalism.” These features are as follows: 1) The mystery’s real solution is present from the opening pages; 2) that solution nevertheless has to be “activated” by outside material; 3) there is no movement on the side of the mystery itself, which is entirely static; and 4) the main plot is isolated and its consequences self-contained.

1. *The real explanation is present from the beginning.* After the initial error which Mr. Crawley makes in asserting the check to have been paid to him by Mr. Soames, the only
explanation Mr. Crawley offers—and one he persists in—is that “he still believed that the money had come to him from the dean” (13). Later: “He had not seen the dean’s monies as they had been given, and he had thought that the cheque had been with them” (82). But as in the Sherlock Holmes story “The Speckled Band,” the real explanation here, while present, is in the form of a pun. The reader learns only later to emphasize phrases like “had come to him from the dean,” with the stressed element being on the indirect mediation of the money. The truth here is seen pushing from the other side of discourse. The solution, then, is there from the start—and not merely nominally, as in a mystery novel where “everyone is a suspect” and therefore the real culprit is indeed suspected only tautologically—but rather as a positive explanation, and one repeatedly insisted upon.

Besides Mr. Crawley’s statements, there are two other moments where the real solution can be glimpsed between the cracks of logic, as it were. However, these stop short of being able by themselves to solve the mystery, anymore than Mr. Crawley’s sticking-to-his-story could solve it—and in fact the partial nature of each cancels out the other. Mr. Harding writes to his daughter, Mrs. Arabin, about the case: “It has something to do with the money which was given to Mr. Crawley last year, and which if I remember right, was your present” (432). Again, this is a true explanation, provided that two specifications are made—that “your” is read as “Mrs. Arabin” and not as the collective “your,” and that “money” means money in all its forms (checks inclusive) and not just bank notes. I owe the reference to this passage to Mary Poovey, but I disagree with her analysis, that “this detail has the potential to solve the mystery.” For, a few chapters later, Mr. Toogood tells John Eames that his belief is, “[T]hat the money was her [Mrs. Arabin’s] present altogether, and not his. It seems that they don’t mix their money” (504). This

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146 Additionally: “I thought that it had been given to me by my friend the dean” (324); “I thought I remembered that in my illness I had found the cheque with the dean’s money” (326).
147 Poovey, Genres of the Credit Economy, 393.
second moment, which can be synthesized with Mr. Harding’s comment in the final explanation, apparently neutralizes it, coming in this order. The attentive reading that picks up on the ambiguity of “your present” would, after Toogood’s remark, have to be satisfied that any monetary gift would have been Mrs. Arabin’s present anyways—check or no check. If the Arabins don’t mix their money, the specificity of the check’s being a present of Mrs. Arabin’s cannot obtain here.

2. The explanation nonetheless has to come from the outside. Although what Mr. Crawley has been insisting upon all along is “the truth,” it is not “the whole truth”—it cannot account for the question posed by an indignant Mr. Soames, “‘How should my pocket-book have got into Dean Arabin’s hands?’” (11). In order for the mystery to be solved by a canny reader (or by any of the characters), the solution would have to be immanent in the case as set out initially. However, everything rests upon the purely contingent piece of information that Mrs. Arabin owns the inn The Dragon of Wantly, and that she received the stolen check in payment of rent from Dan Stringer, of said inn (775, 778). The lack of this information is an insuperable barrier to any explanation which would mine the subtleties and gaps in logic of the narrative’s text itself. At the same time, Mrs. Arabin’s connection (through the inn and the theft) to Mr. Soames’ check can just as little be arrived at from any close examination of what has come before.

But here Trollope produces one of the greatest coups in all of literary mystery: this missing piece of the puzzle, Mrs. Arabin’s connection to the inn where Mr. Soames loses his check, can be found all the way back in the first book of the Barsetshire series, The Warden. When Trollope is introducing Mrs. Arabin’s soon-to-be first husband, John Bold, early in that book, we hear that the “Dragon of Wantly inn and posting-house belonged to him, also four
shops in the High Street” and that is the last that is heard of the John Bold-Dragon of Wantly connection for several thousand pages. Of course the inn itself recurs throughout the series as a Barchester locale, but even the passing of its ownership into the hands of the widow Mrs. Bold is left to be understood though unmentioned—or more likely, forgotten about completely. Five chronicles of Barset later, this miniscule detail from the opening pages of the first novel in the series is dropped into *LCB* as the key to the entire protracted mystery of Mr. Crawley. The effect of this link being thrown out across so many books and years to the mere mention of a place-name is potentially, almost paranoiacally, to illuminate every detail from the entire massive series as possibly signifying. If *this* fictional place name or this enumeration of someone’s property can become a vital clue, then it is as though the entire reality effect is suspended by the vertiginous possibility that every and any realist notation (and they are legion in Trollope) could be “rescued” in this way, thus transcending its immediate context as description.

At the same time, though, it is not as if any great light is being shed on *The Warden* or John Bold here. No avenue of meaning is being opened up to the past: we have only to recall, not to revise. The retrieval or preservation of this or that detail as a clue is merely supplemental, which is to say, playing this role lies outside of the “inner necessity” of the Dragon of Wantly. Contrast this with two instances from the history of recognition scenes in literature. In Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*, the courtesan “lady in pink” whom the narrator meets on one of his childhood visits to his uncle, is later revealed to have been Odette de Crécy, the Mme. Swann of later date. It is a staggering identity, made across thousands of pages, collapsing into one person two discrete figures whom the reader has been holding apart for so long as having separate meanings and chronologies and spheres of relation. But this identity is not only a coincidence, i.e. a line drawn between two points but remaining external to them. To begin with,

it lengthens and fills out the trajectory of this parvenue, connecting her triumph in *Le Temps retrouvé* with a period antecedent to her “first” appearance as Mlle. de Crécy in *Du côté de chez Swann*. Moreover, Proust thereby adds a scenic annotation to the entire drama of Swann’s jealousy in that novel: this scene, kept apart from the Swann plot as belonging to the narrator’s memories of his childhood, would in fact have been the key to all of that section’s tortured and anxious questions about Odette’s past, were it not that this recollection is only lying there inert, undiscovered. In much the same way, in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, the identity of Oedipus’ parents not only suggests a number of problems for the present moment, but this series of revelations also retroactively illuminates as inert a detail as the protagonist’s own name (in Greek, “swollen foot”). What was previously a mere biographical given, Oedipus’ lameness, is now integrated into an appalling explanation (his ankles were pierced by his parents before exposing him on a hillside), which in turn is granted all the power of tragic repetition (his being thus cast out to die as a child is repeated in his banishment from Thebes at the play’s conclusion).

These links with the past show how the “known” and given elements of life pursue their own course as the subterranean working-out of aspects which, on first appearance, are unstressed or deprived of their real connections, so that their development is manifest only in unrelated fragments, without their identity being visible. In short, the past’s existence for-itself is separated temporally from its being arrayed as what it finally is for-us. The character of the lady in pink or the fact of Oedipus’ lameness are not-yet-truths in their appearance; they are poorly situated, deprived of their native elements and require being renamed by later events that do not alter them, but rather fill out what they could not yet be in the narrative’s unfolding. *LCB*’s pointing to the Dragon of Wantly, though, is a mute one. Its repeated appearance as a mere inn is not
building up to this, its implementation: when Mark Robarts frequents the Dragon of Wantly in *Framley Parsonage*, nothing is being prepared for *LCB*. There is no “side” to the inn from which its development *into* its future role could be viewed. These relations are purely external to the elements themselves, just as the particular element here is arbitrary (i.e. it could as easily have been another of John Bold’s properties that played this part) and semi-external to the narrative whole we are dealing with.

3. **There is no development on the side of the mystery.** When Mrs. Arabin tells John Eames that she gave Mr. Crawley the contested check, this is in no way the culmination of an investigation which has been gradually assembling a puzzle, of which this is only the last piece. Instead, the mystery is pretty much where it was hundreds of pages earlier. There has been no continued accumulation of clues, or even a new set of questions. The only effort in this direction has been Mr. Toogood’s investigations, where he notices that there was “a queer lot about the house” at the Dragon of Wantly (410), but it’s entirely unclear how this could be relevant, and—as just noted—is less a development *of* the mystery than a sort of tangential annex. Certainly the “real explanation” which emerges therefrom does not enter into the novel’s themes or profundities: any other explanation of how the Soames check got into Mrs. Arabin’s hands would have served as well to exculpate Mr. Crawley.

In truth, one of Trollope’s great accomplishments of tone is how he poses the mystery as itself being superseded within the very novel it dominates. Archdeacon Grantly, when he has reconciled himself to his son marrying Grace Crawley, asks himself, “Could he desire in his heart that Mr. Crawley should be found guilty? … If it might be possible he would have no wish on the subject whatsoever” (615). Mr. Crawley also ceases to defend himself, reckoning that “in accordance with all law and all reason he must be regarded as a thief” (662). But though this be
true, “[h]e might be guilty before the law, but he was not guilty before God” (663)—and so he resolves to “submit to the bishop, let the bishop’s decision be what it might. Things were different since the day in which he had refused Mr. Thumble admission to his pulpit. At that time people believed him to be innocent, and he so believed of himself. Now, people believed him to be guilty... He would submit himself” (665). This submission and indifference to his fate—while maintaining the utmost principled dignity—is most poignantly expressed in the softening of Mr. Crawley’s tone towards his successor in the Hogglestock pulpit, Mr. Thumble. In fervidly defending himself in the first half of the novel, Mr. Crawley is viciously acute in criticizing his foes in the Proudie camp, but shortly before he is proved to be innocent, Mr. Crawley reprimands his daughter for disparaging Mr. Thumble’s sermon: “‘Be critical of Euripides, if you must be critical’” (753). It is a little moment, and Trollope doesn’t dwell on it, but it is really the climax of Mr. Crawley’s tragedy. He is not a broken man; he will accept whatever fate will befall him, uncomplainingly—though his humility is still haunted by this reference to his secret pride, his accomplishments in Greek. It is a move away from being persecuted, where the power of determination lies with the besieging forces, to ownership of his life. But it is also an abandonment or a devaluation of the plot we have been following since page one. To accept Mr. Thumble without mockery, Mr. Thumble whose humiliations and incompetencies I the reader so recently delighted in: it is not something I am ready to do. In other words, the emotional truth that Mr. Crawley arrives at is simultaneously the termination of his plot as a matter of interest. Even before it concludes, this plot has exhausted itself, has gone out with a whimper. What really happened is no longer an open question, and the parties involved have moved on—so, John Eames’ journey to Venice has more to do with proving himself, with escaping his hobbledehoyhood, than with being passionately convinced of Crawley’s innocence. When the
solution arrives, then, it pertains to a mystery that is, if not actually resolved, at least outdated or superseded as a concern.

For this reason, 4) the outcome of the Crawley mystery is essentially self-contained. In a Dickens novel, the ramifications would take up the novel’s whole denouement and tie together every least plot strand; here, the consequences are remarkably minor. In the beginning of the book, of course, the question of the check “brings in” other strands to the story, e.g., the characters from Framley Parsonage return here strictly in connection to the Crawley family and their woes. But the solution of the mystery, to which everything so apparently was leading, ends up resolving only itself. Mr. Crawley has already resigned his parish, Grace is going to marry Henry Grantly in any case, John Eames still does not win Lily Dale’s heart, the Proudie faction in Barchester has been vanquished beforehand by an act of god, and so on. This main plot, then, is finally somewhat isolated. Very little hinges upon this unveiling of the real history of the check.

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Confusion is a persistent topic in LCB even from the incredulity expressed in the first sentence: “‘I can never bring myself to believe it’” (1), uttered about the apparently irreconcilable facts of Mr. Crawley being charged with theft and Mr. Crawley being a clergyman. But this gossipy consciousness hardly rests there, and the vague, unstable explanation that the Barsetshire community finally arrives at is marred by the inner confusion of its “kettle logic”—its being several partial, incompatible explanations at once. And then, Mr. Crawley himself hardly helps matters: “In all that he said he was terribly confused, contradictory, unintelligible” (13). This is understandable, given the circumstances of the case, which requires at least three tedious, fine distinctions—between a check paid by Mr. Soames on behalf of Lord
Lufton and a check drawn on Lord Lufton himself; between a check for twenty pounds and one for twenty pounds four shillings; and between two Barchester banks, the one where Mr. Crawley has the check cashed emphatically not being, “as will be understood, the bank on which the cheque was drawn” (9). This all amounts to much aggressive specification surrounding the check in the early going, and does not abate even after John Eames has broken open the case and cleared Mr. Crawley of all suspicion:

As to the matter of the cheque, the dean acknowledged to his wife at last that he had some recollection of her having told him that she had made the sum of money up to seventy pounds. “I don’t feel certain of it now; but I think you may have done so.” “I am quite sure I could not have done it without telling you,” she replied. “At any rate you said nothing of the cheque,” pleaded the dean. “I don’t suppose I did,” said Mrs. Arabin. “I thought that cheques were like any other money; but I shall know better for the future.” (834)

The entire perplexity of the novel, then—in the words of the first chapter-title, “How did he get it?”—is thus accounted for on the basis of this confusing half-recollection of a confusion between two monetary forms!

But this is not to say that the root of this dominant affect is to be lodged in the objective basis of the check-form. First, confusion is too diffuse in the novel to be traced back to this instance which is therefore just one among many, sitting at the same level. Indeed, leaving the check to one side, one can observe that hardly any character in LCB seems to understand how Victorian society and institutions work. The following examples of confusion could easily be multiplied.

-When Mark Robarts is discussing bail with Mrs. Crawley before her husband’s hearing at Silverbridge, he tells her, “‘[I]t may be just possible, Mrs. Crawley, that something may be said about bail. I don’t understand much about it, and I daresay you do not either’” (79).

-When Anne Prettyman is explaining the proceedings of the case to Grace Crawley, she
first asserts, “‘They have found him guilty; they have indeed. They have convicted him,—or whatever it is... I don’t understand it altogether; but he’s to be tried again at the assizes” (84).

Trollope comments here, “Miss Anne Prettyman was supposed to be specially efficient in teaching Roman history to her pupils, although she was so manifestly ignorant of the course of law in the country in which she lived” (85). Then her sister steps in to further point out this mistake: “‘Committed him,’ said Miss Prettyman, correcting her sister with scorn. ’They have not convicted him. Had they convicted him, there could be no question of bail’” (85).

-This uncertainty about procedure and powers extends even to those who themselves wield institutional power. Discussing Bishop Proudie, Trollope remarks, “Now, episcopal authority admits of being stretched or contracted according to the bishop who uses it. It is not always easy for a bishop himself to know what he may do, and what he may not do” (106).

-But if Bishop Proudie is concerned to draw the appropriate limits to his authority— indefinite and borderless as it may be—his wife’s interference yields an indeterminacy of a different character, as she makes no scruples about the strict limits of terminology or precedent. When, in the course of urging her husband to effectively disregard the bounds of his office and nearly to clap handcuffs on Mr. Crawley himself, she refers to Mr. Crawley as “a convicted thief,” and is corrected by her husband, she repeats, “‘A convicted thief,’ [...] and she vociferated the words in such a tone that the bishop resolved he would for the future let the word convicted pass without notice. After all, she was only using the phrase in a peculiar sense given to it by herself” (105).

-One of the more prolonged comic misunderstandings in the novel is when Henry Grantly goes down to Allington to persevere in his declarations to Mr. Crawley’s daughter Grace, who is staying with Lily Dale. There is a kind of low-stakes dramatic irony here: the reader of the
previous novel in the series, *The Small House at Allington*, will “know her way around” this locale quite intimately, while Henry Grantly gets quickly disoriented among the placid but monotonous country lanes and brooks. Considering that Trollope prides himself on exactly this “reality” of his imaginatively detailed but prosaic landscape—on the last page, he reminisces that “to me Barset has been a real county,” conceived and *lived in* over many years (891)—this scene of prolonged *méconnaissance* almost stands in for the novel as a whole:

He was careful not to go out of Allington by the road he had entered it, as he had no wish to encounter Grace and her friend on their return into the village; so he crossed a little brook which runs at the bottom of the hill on which the chief street of Allington is built, and turned into a field-path to the left as soon as he had got beyond the houses. Not knowing the geography of the place he did not understand that by taking that path he was making his way back to the squire’s house; but it was so; and after sauntering on for about a mile and crossing back again over the stream, of which he took no notice, he found himself leaning across a gate, and looking into a paddock on the other side of which was the high wall of a gentleman’s garden. To avoid this he went on a little further and found himself on a farm road, and before he could retrace his steps so as not to be seen, he met a gentleman whom he presumed to be the owner of the house. It was the squire surveying his home farm, as was his daily custom; but Major Grantly had not perceived that the house must of necessity be Allington House, having been aware that he had passed the entrance to the place, as he entered the village on the other side. “I’m afraid I’m intruding,” he said, lifting his hat. “I came up the path yonder, not knowing that it would lead me so close to a gentleman’s house.” […] Then Major Grantly became aware that this must be the squire, and he was annoyed with himself for his own awkwardness in having thus come upon the house. He would have wished to keep himself altogether unseen if it had been possible,—and especially unseen by this old gentleman, to whom, now that he had met him, he was almost bound to introduce himself. But he was not absolutely bound to do so, and he determined that he would still keep his peace. Even if the squire should afterwards hear of his having been there, what would it matter? But to proclaim himself at the present moment would be disagreeable to him. He permitted the squire, however, to lead him to the front of the house, and in a few moments was standing on the terrace hearing an account of the architecture of the mansion. […] Then he followed the squire down to the churchyard, and was shown the church as well as the view of the house, and the vicarage, and a view over to Allington woods from the vicarage gate, of which the squire was very fond, and in this way he was taken back on to the Guestwick side of the village, and even down on the road by which he had entered it, without in the least knowing where he was. He looked at his watch, and saw that it was past two. “I’m very much obliged to you, sir,” he said again taking off his hat to the squire, “and if I shall not be intruding I’ll make my way back to the village.”

“What village?”
“To Allington,” said Grantly.
“This is Allington,” said the squire; and as he spoke, Lily Dale and Grace Crawley turned a corner from the Guestwick road and came close upon them. “Well, girls, I did not expect to see you,” said the squire; “your mamma told me you wouldn’t be back till it was nearly dark, Lily.”
“We have come back earlier than we intended,” said Lily. She of course had seen the stranger with her uncle, and knowing the ways of the squire in such matters had expected to be introduced to him. But the reader will be aware that no introduction was possible. It never occurred to Lily that this man could be the Major Grantly of whom she and Grace had been talking during the whole length of the walk home. But Grace and her lover had of course known each other at once, and Grantly, though he was abashed and almost dismayed by the meeting, of course came forward and gave his hand to his friend. Grace in taking it did not utter a word.
“Perhaps I ought to have introduced myself to you as Major Grantly?” said he, turning to the squire.
“Major Grantly! Dear me! I had no idea that you were expected in these parts.” (287-9)

It is as though Henry Grantly, otherwise so poised, upon entering the terrain of *The Small House at Allington*, becomes infected by the clumsiness and want of tact which marked John Eames as a “hobbledehoy” in that novel.

-This whimsical bafflement even continues into the next chapter, where the Allington folks try to sort out the character relations well-known to *us* from earlier volumes *Barchester Towers* and *The Warden*:

“I remember when they talked of making the son a bishop also,” said Lady Julia.
“What;—this same man who is now a major?” said Johnny.
“No, you goose. He is not the son; he is the grandson. They were going to make the archdeacon a bishop [...]”
“He didn’t look like a bishop’s son,” said Johnny [...]”
“But then [he],” said Lily, “is only the son of an archdeacon.” (291)

For the most part, the confusions just listed play upon common tropes surrounding the quaintly labyrinthine British legal/institutional order. But then, this is hardly a novel about those

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149 “Perhaps if there is one thing in England more difficult than another to be understood by men born and bred out of England, it is the system under which titles and property descend together, or in various lines. The jurisdiction of our Courts of Law is complex, and so is the business of Parliament. But the rules regulating them, though anomalous, are easy to the memory compared with the mixed anomalies of the peerage and primogeniture. They who are brought up among it, learn it as children do a language, but strangers who begin the study in advanced life, seldom make themselves perfect in it. It was everything to Melmotte that he should understand the ways of the country which he had adopted; and when he did not understand, he was clever at hiding his ignorance. Now he was
institutions, as *Bleak House* or *Barchester Towers* so obviously are. On the contrary, this is a novel where the very *modern* institution of credit and currency dominates plots both major (Mr. Crawley) and minor (Dobbs Broughton, Mrs. Van Siever, Crosbie). The “financial” is where I want to locate the origin of the rural/legal/institutional confusions, as though what began in one zone (the City) had to appear in its “opposite” (Allington). But for reasons given below, interest (finance, credit) has to take precedence over currency (the disputed check, especially) here. Mr. Crawley and his check are much more integrated into the Barsetshire cast and geography than the group of new, urban characters who provide us with the disruptive credit-material from the margins of an obscure subplot.

As we see, the moral transparency valorized by Trollope can only be carried onto the terrain of finance, credit, and capital with much modification and some difficulty. And yet Trollope’s novels are unprecedentedly immersed in the minutiae of Victorian social existence, especially the period’s practical economics. Indeed, this is the author who included a balance sheet of his literary income in his *Autobiography*. So it is easy to find support for Jaffe’s claim that Trollope reduces financial categories to moral terms: the speculator Melmotte in *The Way We Live Now* is personally repulsive in the highest degree; Sowerby in *Framley Parsonage* is an object lesson in the reckless selfishness that attends the cultivation of personal indebtedness; *The Last Chronicle of Barset*’s Dobbs Broughton is an uncouth, drunken brute who is brought to suicide by his involvements in the City. In these novels, flirtation with new vehicles of financial risk and immaterial value-forms (the stock-share or the “paper” flying around with one’s name on it) is demonstrably fatal both to one’s immortal soul and one’s pocket-book. To oppose the

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puzzled. He knew that Sir Felix was a baronet, and therefore presumed him to be the head of the family. He knew that Carbury Manor belonged to Roger Carbury, and he judged by the name it must be an old family property. And now the baronet declared that he was heir to the man who was simply an Esquire.” Anthony Trollope, *The Way We Live Now* (London: Penguin, 1994), 184.
City as an ideological topos, Trollope sets those economic virtues that emphasize aristocratic, landed wealth with its modest or flat growth and tangible, surveyable form. This contrast is perhaps most clearly set up in *Orley Farm*, where the magnanimous Sir Peregrine Orme warns the pretentious and sour Lucius Mason against the ruinous expenses of “experimental” farming—their opposing economic priorities doubling as characterization.

So, while these moral tales presuppose the mutual legibility of financial tools and of character, and the collapsibility of one into the other, this equation does not exclude legibility’s inverse: a thematics of unknowability, uncertainty, or unmarkedness, with the necessary correlate that what is illegible is in another sense always legible as—risky, subtle (in the sense of the Book of Genesis’ serpent), and deserving of caution.

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The ultimate affective referent of the finance material in *LCB* is not any real Victorian discourse about checks or the stock market—this discourse simply cannot step into a novel unaltered, “as itself.” We have to interpretively “reassign” the affect of confusion to the finance material (the stock market, finance instruments, interest rates)—but not to this material as it appears in the novel (specifically the Crawley theft case and the Dobbs Broughton/Van Siever subplot). Using Marx’s analysis of the fetishistic form of interest-bearing capital, we can restore this material to an original form which we never see as such in Trollope, the non-represented form to which the sundered affect belongs. Even though “finance” therefore appears on both sides of the equation, in Marx and in Trollope, it is not the same in each case. The literary image and the discourse-object have no intercourse here that could generate the novel’s confused, mysterious, befuddled tone and plot. Confusion in *LCB* is not alluding to or referencing the way that finance does show up in the novel; rather it is pointing to this material as an affective source.
which has *dropped out of representation*, so that confusion appears as largely displaced onto the most diverse bearers, e.g. the geography of Allington.

I am using “displacement” here in a technical sense borrowed from psychoanalysis. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in the section on “Affects in Dreams,” Freud remarks that in dreams, “[T]he ideational material has undergone displacement and substitutions, whereas the affects have remained unaltered,” so that “the ideational material, which has been changed by dream-distortion, [is] no longer compatible with the affect...”\(^{150}\) This incompatibility is on the side of the (substitute) dream-image rather than on the side of the (unaltered) affect. So, in Freud’s example, when a woman dreams that “She saw three lions in a desert, one of which was laughing; but she was not afraid of them,”\(^{151}\) analysis dissipates this fearful image—the lions are only substitutions for some non-threatening acquaintances, and it is this affect of not being threatened which has been preserved in the dream, putting it at odds with the threatening manifest content. As Freud puts it, “So this lion was like the lion in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* that concealed the figure of Snug the joiner; and the same is true of all dream-lions of which the dreamer is not afraid.”\(^{152}\)

In the same way, the confusion that reigns over *LCB* in all of the isolated, small moments cited above, has really been displaced from the monetary and financial spheres (*qua* “latent”). For instance, Allington, the quaintest place in existence, where everybody knows everybody, suddenly becomes a maze crowded with strangers—but only because this affect has been unlinked from the primary material and displaced onto a scene with which it is felt to be incompatible. Of course, taking the novel’s affects all together, seemingly nothing could be


\(^{151}\) Ibid., 499. In italics in the original.

\(^{152}\) Ibid., 500.
further from the hasty, distraught suicide of Dobbs Broughton than a good, English, comic misunderstanding of the sort that occurs between Major Grantly and Squire Dale on the paths of Allington, but this wide separation of feeling is no contradiction: “[E]very element in a dream can, for purposes of interpretation, stand for its opposite just as easily as for itself”—the so-called “reversal of affect.”

To be sure, there is a fair amount of out-and-out confusion in the strictly financial sub-plot. When Crosbie goes into the City to renew his bill at Broughton and Musselboro’s offices, he feels sitting there that he does “not quite understand the manner in which the affairs of the establishment were worked” (441). Or here: “Though he knew a good deal of affairs in general, he did not quite know what would happen to him if his bill should be dishonoured... [H]e did not know what his creditors would immediately have the power of doing” (447). Mrs. Dobbs Broughton is just as mystified as to her husband’s affairs: “She had never understood much about the City, being satisfied with an assurance that had come to her in early days from her friends, that there was a mine of wealth in Hook Court” (534).

However, this specific confusion cannot be said to belong to the workings of stock and credit as represented in LCB. Crucially, the confusion evinced by Crosbie and Mrs. Broughton stops at the door of the inner office, so to speak. From that point on, the motif of confusion is entirely transposed, into a precise language of interest rates, currency squeezes, scheduled payments and fallings-due, and profit—in short, shifted into a different register, one with pretenses of clear determination (higher risk=higher profit). For example, when Mrs. VanSiever comes to Broughton and Musselboro’s offices, she is in no doubt as to how things work there,

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153 Ibid., 508-9.
154 In which Johnny Eames carries on a flirtation with one Madalina Demolines, an old friend of a Mrs. Dobbs Broughton—who is herself carrying on a flirtation with Eames’ artist friend Conway Dalrymple. Dobbs Broughton’s business partner in a stockbroking firm, Augustus Musselboro, is meanwhile competing with Dalrymple for the hand of Clara Van Siever, whose mother is a silent partner in Musselboro and Broughton’s usury sideline.
however much Crosbie may be. When Musselboro, in the process of declining to remit the
payment due her, condescendingly informs Mrs. Van Siever of the workings of credit, she is not
at all cowed or put off. ‘‘You must remember, Mrs. Van Siever, that ten per cent. won’t come in
quite as regularly as four or five. When you go for high interest, there must be hitches here and
there […]’ ‘I know all about it,’ said Mrs. Van Siever” (381).

Now, readers of the novel may recall that there is a definite and recurrent discussion of
“risk,” “uncertainty,” “speculation,” “chancy” money, and a “smash” in _LCB_—pertaining to
Dobbs Broughton’s impending ruin at the hand of the market. Taken over approximately 900
pages, it is easy to neglect that all of this talk comes from only one (far from trustworthy)
character, Madalina Demolines. In fact, these themes have no root except in Miss Demoline’s
personal vendetta against her erstwhile friend, Mrs. Dobbs Broughton (née Maria Clutterbuck)
and do not emanate from what one might call a reliable source. Risk, chance, or a smash are not
otherwise put forward as causes of Dobbs Broughton’s precipitous fall. When Miss Demolines
says, “City money is always very chancy” (259) and that “risk is every thing to” “City people,”
who are “always living in the crater of a volcano” (399), however aphoristic, general, and indeed
persuasive her conflation of the City with explosive risk might be, it is in fact part of the
delineation of this one character. Recall that John Eames, by far the more level-headed character,
is apt to answer Miss Demoline’s gossip with anodyne remarks such as, “‘Life is always
uncertain, Miss Demolines,’” or, “‘I think that’s the same with all money’” (259).

I stress this point because the stock-market suicide in this novel, unlike in _The Way We
Live Now_ or _Little Dorrit_, cannot be traced to any thematization of risk, speculation, volatility,
etc.\footnote{A distinction has to be made here as to the application of money advanced, between debt and loans taken out in the service of interest-bearing capital. The risk pertaining to the former is capable of a more directly moral lesson} actually found within _LCB_. Trollope rather attributes Dobbs Broughton’s taking of his
own life to his drinking (647) and to his being “‘sold up’” by Mrs. Van Siever to make room for his partner Musselboro, whom she intends to take over the business and marry her daughter (646).

 […] Broughton’s property had never been great, and … his personal liabilities at the time of his death were supposed to be small. But he had fallen lately altogether into the hands of Musselboro, who, though penniless himself in the way of capital, was backed by the money of Mrs. Van Siever. There was no doubt that Broughton had destroyed himself in the manner told by Musselboro, but the opinion in the City was that he had done so rather through the effects of drink than because of his losses. (714)

Here, then, “risk” disappears, and extra-financial explanations hold the day: alcoholism, marital machinations, betrayal, a certain vulgarity.

If, as I claim, all the vast confusion of the novel is rooted in this “other scene,” interest-bearing capital, confusion is itself remarkably absent from that scene. Finance in LCB is eminently calculable and rational for the characters in that sphere. “‘I know all about it’” is as though written above the entryway to the City as a Dantean inscription. The confusion cited just now—stemming from ignorance—is the immediate reflection of this scene in the minds of characters (Miss Demolines, Crosbie, Mrs. Arabin) who are excluded from the professional knowledge of Mrs. Van Siever, Musselboro, et al.

Confusion thus belongs, as an affect, to the “latent” original finance material, yet when this material appears in the novel it has become a rational and orderly element. So where does one locate this confusion, if the original is apparently nowhere to be found?—and always bearing in mind that it cannot be imported ready-made from some exterior historical discourse or corpus of cultural affects. Let’s have a look at least at how finance is conceived in LCB, especially in its (Crosbie, Mark Robarts in Framley Parsonage) than the abstract “risk” in the form M-M', where money is to be directly realized on one’s private capital. (See Chapter One, on Little Dorrit.) In LCB, the financial activities in the City are employing and loaning money as capital: these loans are taken out and bought-up (by Broughton and Musselboro) with the intention of realizing a profit, of securing a rate of return for their partner. When Musselboro buys up Broughton, this is not systematic risk, but rather a direct personal double-dealing: an entirely intentional act. Which is another thing than the risk pertaining to the blind averages operating on capital in the stock market.
determining form of interest.\footnote{I am including under this heading of interest-bearing capital or the expansion of credit both “share capital” and stock ownership, following Marx, \textit{Capital III}, 347, 375.}

Lecturing his son about the importance of owning land, and thus casually threatening that Henry will lose his landed inheritance if he goes ahead and marries Grace Crawley, Archdeacon Grantly remarks, “‘It is astonishing how land has risen in value... and yet rents are not so very much higher. They who buy land now can’t have above two-and-a-half for their money.’” (623)

This he opposes to “a scratch income,—an income made up of a few odds and ends, a share or two in this company and a share or two in that, a slight venture in foreign stocks, a small mortgage and such like convenient but uninfluential driblets” (624). Or, there is Dobbs Broughton’s line of business, “raising money on his own credit at four or five per cent., and lending it on his own judgment at eight or nine” (439). Broughton’s line is partially in the service of Mrs. Van Siever, who has “drawn close upon two thousand a year for less than eighteen thousand pounds” of principal: more than an eleven percent return (377). Most concise of all is Butterwell’s way of stating the interest rate to Crosbie: “‘Money’s about seven now’” (453).

Disregarding the ideological values Trollope attaches to landed wealth, rent (profit on land) is manifestly a worse application of capital than interest (profit on money), by several percentage points. But whereas rent has an obvious source in agricultural labor, interest appears to return its seven or eight percent like clockwork \textit{on its own}, money having this rate built into it as the commodity, capital. This tallies exactly with what Marx has to say about interest-bearing capital in Volume 3 of \textit{Capital}:

\begin{quote}
In interest-bearing capital, the capital relationship reaches its most superficial and fetishized form. Here we have $M-M'$ [the process of a quantity of money $M$ yielding a greater quantity of money $M'$: BP], money that produces more money, self-valorizing value, without the process that mediates the two extremes. In commercial capital, $M-C-M'$ [capital $M$ purchases commodities $C$—the means of production and labor-power—the latter of which produces surplus-value, realized as the enlarged revenue $M'$: BP] at least
\end{quote}
the general form of the capitalist movement is present, even though this takes place only in the circulation sphere, so that profit appears as merely profit upon alienation; but for all that, it presents itself as the product of a social relation, not the product of a mere thing. The form of commercial capital still exhibits a process, the unity of opposing phases, a movement that breaks down into two opposite procedures, the purchase and sale of commodities. This is obliterated in \( M-M' \), the form of interest-bearing capital... In other words, [in interest-bearing capital] capital is not a simple quantity. It is a relation of quantities, a ratio between the principal as a given value, and itself as self-valorizing value, as a principal that has produced a surplus-value. And as we have seen, capital presents itself in this way, as this directly self-valorizing value, for all active capitalists, whether they function with their own capital or with borrowed capital...

This is the original and general formula for capital reduced to a meaningless abbreviation. It is capital in its finished form, the unity of the production and circulation processes, and hence capital yielding a definite surplus-value in a specific period of time... Capital appears as a mysterious and self-creating source of interest, of its own increase. The thing (money, commodity, value) is now already capital simply as a thing; the result of the overall reproduction process appears as a property devolving on a thing in itself... [T]his automatic fetish is elaborated into its pure form, self-valorizing value, money breeding money, and in this form it no longer bears any mark of its origin. The social relation is consummated in the relationship of a thing, money, to itself. Instead of the actual transformation of money into capital, we have here only the form of this devoid of content... the capital mystification in the most flagrant form.\(^{157}\)

Here Marx is describing the appearance of interest in the capitalist mode of production, not its actual determinations within the labor theory of value (e.g., the average rate of profit’s relation to the composition of capital). These would of course have been unknown to Trollope, while the appearance would have been everywhere operative, giving rise to ideas that are “merely the expression in consciousness of the apparent movement.”\(^ {158}\) It forms no part of this study to present again Marx’s findings, as the real movement of interest and money-capital does not touch upon the logic of \( LCB \). Suffice it to say that in Marx’s analysis, capitalist production, reproduction, circulation, and accumulation all form a process of many stages, in which unpaid quantities of the commodity labor-power are valorized as value in the production process, a surplus (unpaid-for) portion of this value then being realized by its sale as a commodity on the market, thus returning to the capitalist as profit. Capital only realizes a surplus-value through

\(^{157}\) Ibid., 515-6.

\(^{158}\) Ibid., 428.
production, labor being the site of capital’s valorization. In the case of money loaned out at interest, nothing changes: the interest repaid has always been thus applied as productive capital, but invisibly, by other parties, and at a temporal remove from the bank-ledger, from whose perspective interest is a function belonging to money as its “price,” as mere markup, and hence worlds apart from the complex material process of the realization of surplus-value. Thus, the commodity components of this productive capital (wages + means of production) no longer appear for interest-bearing capital: the entire mediating process of production is cut off here, so that interest-bearing capital “is not given out as money or as a commodity, i.e. neither exchanged for a commodity when it is advanced as money nor sold for money when it is advanced as a commodity. It is rather given out as capital.” So, while interest-bearing capital is the highest, most-developed form of the capitalist process, involving the most stages and the longest actual journey from outlay to return, its appearance is the exact opposite: it shows up as the most abridged, the least relational, and the most abstract form of capital. Hence, the “reflexive relationship in which capital presents itself when we view the capitalist production process as a whole” disappears, and as interest, capital “is here simply embodied in it as its character, its capacity, without the intervening mediating movement.”

So, when someone in LCB says, “Money’s about seven now,” what we are hearing is not just the quote of the going interest rate, but also the phenomenology of capital in its most abstracted form. However, this abstraction is not, for all that, removed out of daily life and into the sphere of politico-economic treatises. On the contrary, this logic—an abstract, unmediated interest rate—is a predicate of that everyday instrument, money. Money is its seven per cent rate of return. With money, then, we are back in the heart of Trollope’s realist procedure: has any

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159 Ibid., 466.
160 Ibid.
other author even been as scrupulous as Trollope in detailing each and every character’s source of income? The movement of money, or the space of money’s appearance, is of course everywhere, invisibly carrying with it the logic of its suppressed determinants.

Whence confusion, then? The mystified form of interest as reflected in consciousness is $M-M'$, money begets money, which is simple enough and not particularly confusing. Even children understand the savings accounts that are opened in their names. As I indicated above, this fetishized form of capital takes on a rational and calculable shape in the professional financial sector, for example in the strictly chartable correlations of risk and rates of return. However, $M-M'$, the automatic self-valorization of a “thing,” to use Marx’s expression, is irrationality itself: “a form devoid of content.” It is against the law of physics of the conservation of matter, money’s auto-genesis here being much more aligned with fairy-tale thought. To be clear: interest-bearing capital is not only irrational and mystified in relation to the real workings of capitalist reproduction or to the formation of the rate of profit; irrationality pertains to the form itself, in which a quantitative relation (the difference between $M$ and $M'$) is posited as the content of the self-relation of a thing, money-capital.

This is not a case of homology, such that the novel’s affect would be identical to an affect ready-to-hand in the economy. Confusion is rather the excess of appearance over its name, over this formal tautology $M-M'$. Just as, on one hand, the real process or essential laws of production of surplus-value are in excess of this mystified relation, so on the other hand, the appearance itself is irreducible to this name or formula. For the manifest, quantitative aspect of interest, the interest-rate, is here an objective determination entirely exclusive of the relation itself. As Marx demonstrates in his extensive quotations from Parliamentary reports, the simplicity of the interest

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161 “The mere form of capital—money that is given out as a certain sum $A$ and returns as a sum $A + \frac{1}{2} A$, after a certain period of time, but without any other mediation besides this temporal interval—is simply the irrational form of the real capital movement.” Marx, Capital. III, 470.
relation is contrasted at every turn with the *complexity* of its expression as a rate. So he quotes Lord Overstone: "3653. The fluctuations in the rate of interest arise from one of two causes: an alteration in the value of capital or an alteration in the amount of money in the country." Here the fetishized form: the determinations are completely within the relation M-M', i.e. this ratio of quantities. But the appearance, or the expression of this form, which also shows up for consciousness, as Marx lists these phenomena, is one of a nearly infinite regress of causation:

Dearer corn, rising cotton prices, the unsaleability of sugar on account of overproduction, railway speculation and crash, the flooding of foreign markets with cotton goods, the forcible export and import trade with India... for the purpose of speculation in bills of exchange. All these things, overproduction in industry as well as underproduction in agriculture, i.e. quite different reasons, led to a rise in the demand for money capital, i.e. for credit and money. The increased demand for money capital had its origins in the course of the production process itself. But whatever the cause, it was the demand for money capital that made the rate of interest, the value of money capital, rise. If Overstone is trying to say that the value of money capital rose because it rose, this is a tautology.

In the case of interest, the very simplicity of the formula is outflanked instantly by the phenomenon of the interest rate and all of the multiplying intricacies of the world supply and demand of currency. The tautological abstraction, residing in its own simple self-sufficiency, is thus immediately abandoned as a name, in favor of what is implicitly only a description: the ideologeme of the market’s "complexity," its ramifying interactions, its unending relatedness, its atomic and quasi-magical regulation by invisible forces, etc. The form $M-M'$ as a name is always therefore just a place-holder, insufficient in every case to settle into categories (other than sheer identity) the "complexity" of the appearance of the interest-rate.

Confusion is thus the formal effect of the gap within reification between the interest’s apparent contentlessness (its magical self-relation and tautological form) and the real content (interest rate, crises, capital accumulation, e.g. the worldwide project of Victorian imperialism).

162 Ibid., 549.
163 Ibid., 550.
which is reduced to nothing by this form—this unincorporated real content of course having its “revenge” in periodic global economic crises. This gap in interest’s form of appearance, its being a form “devoid of content” while at the same time functioning as the abstract reduction of real social-historical content (the mode of production’s other manifestations, to begin with)—necessarily passes over into the shape and content of a work, such as LCB, which takes this gap over wholesale into its form as part of its appropriation of the reality to be depicted. What is reduced in the form $M-M'$ cannot however be reduced to nothing by the realist novel, whose task is to render the very breadth and bulk of this social-historical content. Confusion here is the mark of the irony that Trollope, whom no one has ever thought of as abridging or reducing, has taken as the inner structure of his fictional world’s movements these very formal tendencies. This internalized, fetishized form is restrictive where Trollope is expansive, formulaic where Trollope’s art is the multiplication of empirical variety. What is confusing is just this inadequacy of the form to the content whose logic it is, but not as the logic of its real movements (i.e. capital’s expanded reproduction) but the logic of its appearance for appropriation by consciousness.

But how does this process of appropriation work? How does literature assimilate and transform reality? This is a question that has been with us a long time, since Aristotle. Even there, plot is not something laid on top of raw experience. Rather, emplotment doubles or reproduces the conditions of immediate experience, of reality’s “appearing” at all. This is almost especially true for Trollope, whose novels verge on an expansive virtual reality, so deeply imagined that it is one form of escapism to take up a Trollope novel, but another kind of escapism to then put it down.

What I am calling “cognitive modalities” are necessary to the presentation of phenomena
as such, and therefore cannot be dispensed with either in experience nor in the second-order mimesis of plotted narrative. Interest-bearing capital is an object for representation that cannot be taken into the novel without bringing along the necessary conditions of its appearance in developed capitalist society, namely its fetishized appearance as the automatic self-increase of money. We see here the contrast between this object and the check-form: interest-bearing capital has a definite and inviolable logic built into its objective structure as a datum for consciousness, whereas the check-form, as Mary Poovey demonstrates, is a matter of psychological "attitudes," which can be directly brought forward and addressed by a rhetoric whose aim to naturalize certain behaviors—all as a matter of conscious persuasion.

I say that interest-bearing capital is an "object for representation," rather than a real object or a discursive object, because at no point is it a matter for Trollope of examining the real workings of interest-bearing capital, of making a study that would reveal the "moments" thereof, nor is interest-bearing capital a concern merely imported from the political economy, journalism, or conversation of the day. Interest-bearing capital is a real process, but what shows up to be represented is not the processual genesis of interest as a form of surplus-value, but rather its fetishized appearance as self-generation. At the same time, this appearance ($M-M'$) is not merely subjective—"capital presents itself in this way"—and therefore takes precedence over attitudes, whether in academic economy or in idle chatter, about this form. We see this clearly when a conversation in *LCB* reproduces this chatter about interest and capital—the understanding in these scenes hardly accounts for the way that the fetish-form diffuses itself throughout the work, e.g. its translation into a set of formal effects. The basis of the finance content, therefore, does not appear alongside this content itself, but has already been transposed along other lines.

In sum, the way that reality shows up as material for the novelist, is itself predicated upon
and structured by cognitive modalities that are also the prerequisites for usual, social, ideological
life (going to work, buying food, retiring, etc.) The way in which quotidian experience is pre-
structured, therefore, is duplicated in the creative appropriation of this same contemporary
reality. Put ahistorically, a cognitive modality is just the Kantian set of “necessary
representations” *a priori* for the arranging of the manifold content of the phenomenal world for
our experience. But in the specific social formation in question—advanced capitalism at
precisely the moment Marx is writing *Capital*—how are social phenomena structured for
consciousness? In his famous essay on proletarian consciousness, Georg Lukács gives this
answer: reification, the logic of capitalist society where the commodity has become its “the
universal structuring principle”⁶⁴ or “universal category.”⁶⁵ “Just as the capitalist system
continuously produces and reproduces itself economically on higher and higher levels, the
structure of reification progressively sinks more deeply, more fatefully and more definitively into
the consciousness of man.”⁶⁶

Now, reification is precisely descriptive of what is happening in interest capital’s
appearance as *M*-⁹⁰*M*. However, this form has its logical antecedents in the fetishism of the
commodity, which is a much earlier moment in Marx’s exposition. Still, it is instructive to revisit
this famous concept under the heading of its being a “cognitive modality.” Recall that in
commodity fetishism, what is originally subjective and social, namely the expenditure of
socially-necessary labor in creating use-values, becomes in the commodity-form as though
objective and external to these producers. Their value (the amount of necessary human labor
expended thereupon) appears as a characteristic magnitude belonging to commodities
themselves, and then as a relation or ratio of values these products have automatically and on

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⁶⁵ Ibid., 86.
⁶⁶ Ibid., 93.
their own with other commodities in exchange.\textsuperscript{167} The point here is that the rationality of “objectivity” itself (i.e. commodities having value) is \textit{for consciousness} only insofar as objectivity is preceded in perception by the structure of reification, a structure inscribed into being’s appearance as objective, rational social life. In other words, reification is not a subjective error; it is the reflex in consciousness of objective contradictions. Hence, “it arises from the [commodity] form itself,” not from perception.\textsuperscript{168} Or, arising from perception only as from the category of perception itself:

\begin{quote}
[T]he products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time suprasensible or social. In the same way, the impression made by a thing on the optic nerve is perceived not as a subjective excitation of that nerve but as the objective form of a thing outside the eye. In the act of seeing, of course, light is really transmitted from one thing, the external object, to another thing, the eye. It is a physical relation between physical things.\textsuperscript{169}
\end{quote}

In other words, reification is not “objective”—commodities don’t really, materially have exchange-value—but neither is it “subjective”—a mistake which could be corrected by a new perspective or dispelled by theory. Reification is in fact \textit{like perception}, almost identical with it; hence, a “necessary representation” of the contradictions in class society. Our social cognition is not possible except on the condition of reification, anymore than sight is possible except on the “illusion” that vision is our subjective impression of objective things. The cognitive modality of reification, therefore, names the \textit{experience} of social life in capitalism. This modality would then belong to any appropriation of this reality as the prior condition of its appearance for cognition. Strictly speaking, reification is not a predicate that would attach to the inclusion of this or that content (financial, commercial, etc.) in the novel. Rather, it is a form that precedes such content. Nor does it cling to “economic” subject matter when such does appear. We have seen above how

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\textsuperscript{167} Marx, \textit{Capital I}, 163-77.\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., 164.\textsuperscript{169} Ibid., 165.
\end{flushright}
the affect pertaining to this form, its abbreviated and contentless self-relation, in fact fails to account for or be adequate to any content whatsoever, thereby producing confusion everywhere.

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We can now return to the vicissitudes of recognition in *LCB*. Here things are much more direct than with affect. Plot, tasked with structuring and objectifying the represented social reality, relates and orders not only events and characters, but also knowledge. A novel’s plot is just as much a *shape of knowledge* as any Foucauldian episteme or Bachelardian epistemological region. The plot not only performs its known narrative functions (suspense, exposition, closure, etc.) but also duplicates and consolidates the spontaneous experience and texture of social existence, bearing within it the traces of the pre-mimetic “cognitive modality.” In the instance of reification, the structural features of Marx’s formula for the ideological appearance of interest-bearing capital carry over into *LCB*’s structure of recognition. The plot of the novel is in this way subject to the form of realisM’s pre-experiential content: even though interest and finance capital appear in this latent, form-determining content and in the manifest, structured content, this is only a case of over-determination. Plot as a shape of knowledge follows the formalization of content of the reified cognitive modality; this content itself, credit and finance, can then appear in the novel as in a sense “innocent.”

The key point to emphasize about the reification of interest is its structure as being the “mere form” of capital, its “irrational form,” its “form devoid of content,” and so on. This is the very essence of reification, precisely what Lukács is criticizing as the contradictions of bourgeois thought when, addressing the idealism of Fichte and Kant, he stresses “the irrational nature of the contents of their concepts.”¹⁷⁰ But the irrational nature of the contents of the bourgeois concept of interest are what we have just seen under the heading of Trollope’s recognition plot in *LCB*:

¹⁷⁰ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 118.
arbitrariness, unrelatedness, lack of development, and a static or fixed quality. Of course, I am not calling this 900-page novel “devoid of content,” nor is it “irrational” in the sense of Surrealism or a William Burroughs word-collage. Rather, what is irrational or arbitrary is: the lack of connection of the main plot (or its consequences) to the surrounding material, or the purely external role that the Dragon of Wantly plays. What is lacking in content is the main plot, which stays in the same place, pacing about within its main dilemma—if Mr. Crawley did pick up the check in his house, was he responsible or not responsible for then cashing it, thinking it belonged to him?—for hundreds of pages.

To draw parallels, then. If 1) the mystery’s real solution is present from the opening pages, then the activation of this truth which discovers itself lurking in this initial and inert form, ought to have made a quasi-Hegelian leap of externalization, so as to “return into itself” after having emptied itself out into uncomprehending otherness. We see this in the other examples of recognition (Proust, Sophocles), where the truth returns to the earlier moments with all the weight and force of a long separation, of a gap impossibly bridged by insight. But, in LCB, as in the case of interest, this return is only “the superficial form of the return, separated off from the mediating circuit.” Interest-bearing captial does not appear as having gone on a long journey through many divested forms, but rather finds itself only quantitatively altered. The surplus-value here returns to find itself already present in the bank account, never having left home, as it were.

Nevertheless, 2) that solution has to be “activated” by outside material. But this outside material is not, in interest, the salto mortale where the capitalist throws out his capital in order to win it back in even greater quantity. For in that case, examined in Capital, volume I, this leap is within the very nature of the movement $M-C-M$: the commodity purchased, labor-power,

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171 Marx, Capital III, 468.
contains this transformation in itself, while the relations that enable capital to thus purchase labor-power are the essence of this mode of production. But in interest, the interest rate is just such an outside, external factor that stands in no internal relation to the given formula. The interest rate is a kind of magical incantation which is completely abstract and arbitrary from the perspective of money’s self-relation, while objectively determining the latter from an “outside.”

3) **There is no movement on the side of the mystery itself, which is entirely static.** Of course, there is “movement” in interest: the movement from $M$ to $M'$. But this is “money breeding money,” “a property devolving on a thing in itself,” self-valorization “without the process that mediates the two extremes.”

As interest-bearing capital, ... capital obtains its pure fetish form... [as] a thing for sale. Firstly, by way of its continuing existence as money, a form in which all capital’s determinations are dissolved and its real elements are invisible... In the reproduction process of capital, the money form is an evanescent moment, a moment of mere transition... Secondly, the surplus-value it creates, here again in the form of money, appears to accrue to it as such. Like the growth of trees, so the generation of money (токо́ц) seems a property of capital in this form of money capital... As soon as it is lent, or else applied in the reproduction process, ... interest accrues to it no matter whether it is asleep or awake, at home or abroad, by day and by night.

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Crucially, in interest, what is loaned out as money “appears as [a] commodity”—hence the misunderstanding of interest as the *price* of the commodity, money. But the functioning of the process which allows for the return of interest—the production of surplus-value—necessitates that this quantity $M$ function not just as money for circulation, but *as capital*, hence that $M$ (capital) turn into its opposite $C$ (wage-labor) in the real process that allows interest to be repaid. But this movement and changing-of-shapes is precisely what is occluded by the form we are dealing with. In the static tautology of $M-M'$ no such transition or movement takes place.

4) **The main plot is isolated and its consequences self-contained.** “For vulgar economics,

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172 Ibid., 517-8.
173 Ibid., 465.
which seeks to present capital as an independent source of wealth... this form is of course a
godsend, a form in which the source of profit is no longer recognizable, and in which the result
of the capitalist production process—separate from the process itself—obtains an autonomous
existence.“174

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In one sense, to point out the arbitrariness, lack of integration, or isolation in Trollope’s
series fiction is not to say anything new: the Barsetshire series has never been conceived as other
than “loosely organized.” The expansion that occurs over the series is uneven and haphazard at
best, with the penultimate novel *The Small House at Allington* being the most free-standing: it is
really only brought into the fold subsequently, by *LCB*. And it is difficult not to feel that the
marriage plots of *Doctor Thorne, Framley Parsonage*, and *LCB* are repetitions of the same static
form: a young man whose family is of the landed gentry (Frank Gresham, Lord Lufton, Henry
Grantly) has trouble persuading his family to accept the girl (Mary Thorne, Lucy Robarts, Grace
Crawley) he has chosen to marry, a girl who is in every case of humbler origins but emphatically
not a vulgar commoner: she is always a lady, a fitting match culturally if not socially. In a sense,
it is Trollope’s being so firmly stuck on this one plot form that gives the Barchester series its
tenuous unity. (Again, *The Small House at Allington* is the work that doesn’t fit, just as it is the
novel geographically the farthest away from Barchester, and also the furthest from the clerical
material that occupies the other novels.)

However, this more abstract charge of the loose and static character of the Barchester
series is not to be explained away with the same explanation as for the working-out of the form
of *LCB*’s recognition plot, just given—where the aspects of the recognition and the shape of
reified interest are point for point the same. When thinking about the series as a whole, it is less a

174 Ibid., 517.
matter of objectification than of selection. To take the example of that other great series, Zola’s Rougon-Macquart cycle, mimesis is here subordinated to a pre-existing framework of social spheres—isolatable test-tubes for novelistic experiments in sociology—and the capacious but capricious branchings of a family tree whose logic (how many cousins, etc.) is subject to the needs of the given novel, but which (in a vicious circle) is at the same time the supposed basis of the whole project. Just so, in Trollope, the very connections between novels, though usually in good taste and not objectionable, are in a sense the weakest part of the series. Anyone who picks up the next volume to learn of the further adventures of Archdeacon Grantly or Lady Lufton will be utterly disappointed—until the last volume, which knits all the books into the series which until then they only were in potentia. But at the same time, selection and geography—and not mimesis, as I have been defining it—dominate the process of enlarging his world, thus introducing randomness and a number of awkwardly-related spaces into his series. So Trollope is always alighting upon the same marriage plot, or marrying Dr. Thorne to Miss Dunstable in a thoroughly undermotivated connection (although its motivation is obvious from the perspective of the novelist’s convenience). But this is all quite another matter than the mimetic objectifications that rule the Crawley plot in *LCB*. The chance encounters on a fictional map, the recycling of a marriage plot, the clumsy (but quite natural!) reconciling of new social spaces, really speak more to economic problems of the novel form and to the handiness of certain conventions, than to the cognitive modality which produced such similar “micro” effects in the form of the individual work.

Once again, homology and identity have to be avoided. What looks the same, formally, may really be at the more abstract level (of the entire series) a matter of entirely different determinations. Trollope’s large-scale method and his small-scale working practice cannot be
read seamlessly back and forth into each other. To be sure, Trollope insists on precisely this in his *Autobiography*: his very manner of writing memos in the Post-Office seems to be oblique advice about novel-writing.\(^{175}\) But it seems very doubtful critical practice to thus link up every level across one principle. In the same way, while the separation of society into “spheres” that can be treated as distinct and from one another is very much an instance of reification, of the detached observation of rational and isolated processes, it is not “the same” all down the line. If I have said nothing else in this chapter, I should think I have shown that we have always in literature to start anew with form. It is just here, in the least evidently historical space, that history shows up in its particularity, as distinct from the hovering perfume of a work’s “context” or *Zeitgeist*. But this is only true so long as form is never reduced (say, reduced to Trollope’s working method, or to a class-ideology, or to an objective correlative)—only so long as the historical content is what is spoken by form, and not the other way around.

\(^{175}\) This, I take it, is also the main consequence of Kendrick’s reading in *The Novel-Machine*. Here is a sample passage from Trollope: “Through my whole official life I did my best to improve the style of official writing. I have written I should think some thousands of reports,—many of them necessarily very long; some of them dealing with subjects so absurd as to allow a touch of burlesque; some few in which a spark of indignation or a slight glow of pathos might find an entrance. I have taken infinite pains with these reports, habituating myself always to write them in the form in which they should be sent,—without a copy. It is by writing thus that a man can throw on to his paper the exact feeling with which his mind is impressed at the moment… I have revelled in these official correspondences, and look back to some of them as the greatest delights of my life. But I am not sure that they were so delightful to others.” *Autobiography*, 89-90.
Chapter Three

Locked Rooms: Empiricism and Form in Sherlock Holmes

“The naked result is the corpse of the system which has left its guiding tendency behind it.”
—G.W.F. Hegel

At the end of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s story “The Final Problem,” Sherlock Holmes and the arch-criminal Professor Moriarty have evidently tumbled to their deaths over the Reichenbach Falls, locked together in a hateful struggle. So, when Holmes returns from that undiscovered country in “The Adventure of the Empty House,” he has some explaining to do. “In your picturesque account of the matter,” Holmes tells an astonished Dr. Watson, “you assert that the wall was sheer. That was not literally true. A few small footholds presented themselves, and there was some indication of a ledge,” by which means he made his miraculous escape.176

The resurrection of Holmes is not one of Conan Doyle’s most elegant devices, but even though Holmes is not solving a crime here, the sudden appearance of ledges and footholds in his account is quite typical of the detective’s procedure in reconstructing his solutions. Such last-minute emendations will be familiar to any reader who has tried to work through the cases to retrace Holmes’s thinking. I will limit myself to mentioning the “old manservant at Merripit House” who is parachuted into the last pages of The Hound of the Baskervilles to account for the glaring gap in the story’s logic raised by the question, “But what became of the hound when its master was in London?” (764).

The abrupt introduction of such heretofore unobserved qualifiers is in marked disaccord with Holmes’s own account of his method. In his self-characterizations, Holmes insists that he arrives at the solution from the same set of information that is set before Watson (and by extension, the

reader), i.e. the solution is always immanent in the *given* facts.

“In solving a problem of this sort, the grand thing is to be able *to reason backward*… There are few people… who, if you told them a result, would be able to evolve from their own consciousness what the steps were which led up to that result. This power is what I mean when I talk of reasoning backward, or analytically.” (*A Study in Scarlet* 83-4, my emphasis)

“‘The ideal reasoner,’ [Holmes] remarked, ‘would, when he had once been shown *a single fact in all its bearings*, deduce from it not only all the chain of events which led up to it but also all the results which would follow from it.’ (“The Five Orange Pips” 224-5, my emphasis)

Watson, the stories’ narrator, is perpetually astounded by this particularity of Holmes’s method, that from a small set of confused data he can reconstruct an extraordinarily complex and improbable solution—without introducing any new material:

“‘But do you mean to say,’ [Watson asks] ‘that without leaving your room you can unravel some knot which other men can make nothing of, *although they have seen every detail for themselves*?’” (*A Study in Scarlet* 24, my emphasis)

“I trust that I am not more dense than my neighbors, but I was always oppressed with a sense of my own stupidity in my dealings with Sherlock Holmes. Here I had heard what he had heard, *I had seen what he had seen*, and yet from his words it was evident that he saw clearly not only what had happened but what was about to happen, while to me the whole business was still confused and grotesque.” (“The Red-headed League” 185-6, my emphasis)

Following Roland Barthes’ idea of a “reality effect,” we might even speak of a “method effect” produced by the texts: the aura of a consistent standard operating procedure adhered to by the detective. (And by the writer. The genre’s strict guidelines have often been codified as various “ten commandments” of detective fiction.) It is only if these oft-propounded statements are first taken to form a forensic and generic canon that the all-too-convenient materialization of footholds and old manservants can be felt as an exception or a departure from an articulated method. That is to say, a procedure adhered to and then not adhered to. Thus, the critics who have noted Holmes’s apparent deviations from protocol have at the same time reinforced the
effect of there *being* a protocol from which to deviate.\(^{177}\)

In this study, I argue that the dissonance seen in narrative deviations from the logical method of the Sherlock Holmes stories is a dissonance internal to the logical method itself. It is not that Conan Doyle fails to execute the rigor of the rational, scientific logic enunciated in the stories. Rather, this logic (which I will ultimately locate in philosophical empiricism) is itself the hitch in the narrative, owing to a constitutive atemporality and idealism in British empiricist thought. The empirical method is not what the Sherlock Holmes stories are demonstrating or representing; empiricism is rather an anti-narrative tear in the very fabric of the stories.

What I am calling the method effect accounts for much historicist criticism of the Sherlock Holmes stories that has been concerned with attesting the contemporary scientific references found in the stories. Holmes explicitly names Winwood Reade in *The Sign of Four* (137), Georges Cuvier in “The Five Orange Pips” (225), and Alphonse Bertillon in “The Naval Treaty” (460). The effect lies precisely in suggesting that these citations are only the tip of the iceberg. *Underneath* Holmes’s discourse, Lawrence Frank discovers allusions to Charles Lyell, Charles Darwin, John Tyndall, E.B. Taylor, Thomas Huxley, Francis Galton, William Whewell, *et al.*\(^{178}\) Other critics have seen Holmes as participating in the discourse surrounding the biopolitics of the British colonial apparatus, extending into identification, fingerprinting, ethnicity, and epidemiology—whether as complicit in reproducing these discursive regimes or as anxiously

\(^{177}\) Régis Messac notes that, in contrast to Poe’s detective stories, “too often, these astute little deductions do not advance Holmes one step toward the solution of the problem: they bear on points of detail, or even on points completely foreign to the inquiry.” *Le “Detective Novel” et l’influence de la pensée scientifique* (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1975) 604. Rosemary Jann’s concern is with “evasions of coding that... expose the incompleteness of Doyle’s positivistic enterprise.” in “Sherlock Holmes Codes the Social Body,” *ELH* 57, no. 3. (1990), 687. Stephen Knight notes the limited relevance of scientificity to Holmes’s solutions, “a failure to face the real, disorderly experience of the data,” *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1980), 86. According to Franco Moretti, Conan Doyle discovers the use of clues in detective fiction but then “loses his touch,” and “does not work it out” fully. “Slaughterhouse of Literature,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 61, no. 1 (2000), 215.

problematizing their queasy, now-discredited suppositions, which are doubtless bound up with the triumphalism of the Victorian natural sciences.\footnote{179}

In such studies, the translation of the discourse of the scientific disciplines into the method of the fictional detective is taken to be a no-loss exchange—in other words, is taken not to be a translation at all, but only a shuttling between different sites sharing the “same” discursive object. We see this clearly in the entirely de-historicized semiotics of the Umberto Eco-edited collection *The Sign of Three: Dupin, Holmes, Peirce*, which explicitly studies “the ‘method’ of Sherlock Holmes in the light of Peirce’s logic.”\footnote{180} It is only a very slight exaggeration to say that these researches would not differ in any way had Holmes been a real person. There is even a palpable regret in these essays that Holmes never published his planned monograph on the whole science of detecting. What is absent is any consideration of the plotting of the Holmes stories, or the temporal structure of the solutions.

But if we are to look for the epistemology or structure of knowledge of the Holmes stories, it will not be found outside of the stories themselves, neither in the contemporary references (to Cuvier, Reade, or Bertillon), nor in reconstructions of analogous procedures (along the lines of Peirce or Huxley). Instead of starting from what the texts *say* (or don’t say) about method, I am asking after what they *do* as narratives. To this end, I consider the concluding reconstructions that Holmes offers in each story, as well as the numerous flashbacks or interpolated narratives that shadow these conclusions, with particular attention paid to *A Study in Scarlet’s* chapters set in Mormon Utah.


As we will see, these reconstructions do not follow Holmes’s own characterizations. In contrast to what Holmes and Watson emphasize in the quotations above, none of the stories’ conclusions shed light upon a closed set of data, nor analytically draw out an immanent significance from the données immédiates of the case. Holmes invariably relies upon some information hitherto unavailable to the reader and outside of the initial situation. In other words, one has never “seen the same things” as Holmes, one has not “seen every detail for oneself,” although the miraculous effect of Holmes’s solutions depends on this ostensible parity.

Since there is no specificity to the “real” of the method effect, we cannot speak of a particular referent that is being invoked in the stories. The method in question is not drawn from Bacon, Peirce, etc., but is produced by the Conan Doyle texts. The method effect imports a consistent doctrine into the fictional background—we see method in the stories. Against this, I consider the method as story—how empiricism is narrativized. Setting aside the philosophical or forensic value of Holmes’s aphorisms, I propose to locate the structure of knowledge of these fictions in their narrative form, or better, in the gap between the two—that is, the stories’ epistemology is to be found in the divergence between their scientific rhetoric and empirico-logical aura on one hand, and the narratological structure of the retrospections which conclude each case, on the other. Far from being a direct instantiation or mirroring of Victorian ideology, the Sherlock Holmes stories run up against a formal limit in the empiricism they invoke—an ahistorical idealism at its core—a limit which reappears in the stories’ temporal organization. The task, then, is neither to reiterate, qua “scientific thought”, excerpts that are ready-to-hand for historicism, nor to produce an underlying, coherent message intact “beneath” the text. Instead, the question is how narrative time intersects and interrupts this external logic of empirical inquiry. In the last part of the chapter, I look at how narrative time in novel theory is rooted in

181 I am excepting the several non-mystery stories, e.g., “A Scandal in Bohemia,” where there is nothing to solve.
structures of reification—in other words, I propose to historicize the temporality of the stories as an ontological mode.

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Sherlock Holmes never solves the case using only the information which has been presented to the reader.\(^{182}\) “A few small footholds,” so to speak, always appear. The reader cannot therefore “play along” in solving the crime. The hapless efforts of Dr. Watson are a running joke, and serve as a warning by proxy against readerly ingenuity. One can’t help anticipating the answer, darting at false solutions, etc.—but this is never a principle of the stories’ construction. Only a later development of the genre will require that the reader be (technically) capable of solving the case at the same time as the detective, so that all of the same clues and observations are at his or her disposal. This principle is wonderfully summed up by Agatha Christie’s Hercule Poirot: “Of facts, I keep nothing to myself. But to everyone his own interpretation of them.”\(^{183}\) The pleasure of reading the Holmes stories is not in being shown the answer to a brain-teaser which one has wracked one’s brain to solve; it is the pleasure of viewing an impressive and non-duplicable feat. This doesn’t stop Conan Doyle and his characters from voicing, as a principle, that Holmes is reasoning from limited data to an explanation, or solving a puzzle using the same evidence that Watson has presented to us. It is just that this does not ever happen. Not a single time.

Consider the short story “The Adventure of the Cardboard Box.” In this story an elderly woman receives two severed human ears through the mail, inside the titular packaging. Holmes

\(^{182}\) Messac already observes this in 1929, with evident boredom at Conan Doyle’s construction and his mishandling of genre requirements inherited from Poe: “In ‘The Crooked Man’… Watson shows us Holmes in his search for a cripple: the detective comes, goes, tramps about, and suddenly captures his man. We are impressed, but we would be less so if we had been briefed as to the extent of all the results of Holmes’s sorties. Holmes suspects, and he goes to see [Miss Morrison] to get out of her what she knows—but he says nothing to us, he does not tell us until the end. To proceed thus, is to put aside Poe and to tend to transform the detective story into a mystery story.” Le “Detective Novel”, 610). My translation.

is called in on the case, goes down to the country, looks at the ears, looks at the box, looks at the elderly woman, asks a few questions about her family life (she has two sisters, one of whom has unhappily married a sailor with a drinking problem), and sends a telegram. He then drives around to visit her sister, finds the house closed on account of illness, and finally, upon receiving the answer to his telegram, pronounces the case solved. Holmes tells the Scotland Yard investigator where and when he may pick up his man.

How did he do it? What we didn’t know (weren’t shown) was that the knot used to tie the box was “one which is popular with sailors” (896), nor that the elderly lady’s ear “corresponded exactly with the female ear in the box” (loc. cit.), nor that the answer to Holmes’s telegram (a frequent device) showed that the brother-in-law had been in port in Belfast the day the package was sent—from Belfast (897). This is all new information to the reader who was astonished at the case being solved on the basis of the earlier, more limited set of clues. Nonetheless, Holmes tells Watson that this was a case where he has “been compelled to reason backward from effects to causes” (895). Undoubtedly, Holmes himself, as a fictional personage, has reasoned back from effects (visible, immediate, senseless facticity) to causes (a chain of meanings). But this is completely outside of the literary construction. The story tells about reasoning backward from effects to causes, but these are “effects” known only to Holmes.

It would be welcome but exhausting to debate this in every case. One more, and one that initially gave my thesis some trouble, “Silver Blaze” from the Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes. The question before us is: can a logically-complete explanation of the crime be given using only material available to the reader prior to Holmes’s solution, and dependent upon that material?

In this story, a racehorse goes missing, its trainer is found dead, and the murderer turns out to be... the horse. There are two points in favor of Holmes’s having solved the case only from
what was immanent in the presented facts. First, the famous “curious incident of the dog in the night-time” (347). Holmes points out to Watson that the watchdog at the stable did not bark when the horse was stolen. Later on, Holmes shows that this indicated that the criminal was someone *known* to the dog and thus belonging to the stables. From this he concludes that it was an “inside job.” This is indeed “reasoning backward.” So far so good. Second, Holmes asks a question about the lame sheep near the stables. Holmes explains subsequently how this pointed to the culprit being the trainer himself, because if someone wanted to lame the stolen racehorse, he would have first practiced by cutting the tendons of such animals as sheep. Both these facts are available in the lead-up to the solution, and Holmes’s explanations show how decisive these seemingly-minor observations were in reaching the solution. Indeed, it looks like Holmes’s proclaimed method of rational deduction is at work here.

However, a crucial part of Holmes’s solution is the *motive*, namely, that the suspect is supporting a mistress in a separate establishment under an assumed name. He needs the money to keep up this lavish double life. But this information is withheld from us until the very end. Until the last pages, the reader is led to believe that a bill discovered for an expensive gown belongs to a certain Mr. Derbyshire. *Unbeknownst to us*, offstage, Holmes has taken a photo of the trainer to the milliner and has ascertained that the trainer and Mr. Derbyshire are one and the same person. Holmes is therefore in possession of a motive dependent upon data which simply does not exist for the reader or Watson. We don’t know that any of this has happened—the milliner’s is an entirely separate excursion not belonging to the “given facts” of the case.

In constructing his evolutionary “tree” of Victorian detective fiction, Franco Moretti notes this odd characteristic, that the characteristic device setting Conan Doyle apart from his (now forgotten) contemporaries—the presence of clues that are visible, decodable by the reader,
and necessary to the solution—is also not a property of Conan Doyle’s work. In half of the Sherlock Holmes stories in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, “clues are present, they have a function, but are not visible: the detective mentions them in his explanation, but we have never really ‘seen’ them in the course of the story.”¹⁸⁴ And at the next evolutionary branching, Moretti notes, “[E]ven being generous, there are decodable clues in no more than four of the *Adventures* (and being strict, in none).”¹⁸⁵ In other words, Conan Doyle’s stories suggest this next branching, but do not reach the promised land of that form. So, why this distance between what the texts point to (reasoning backward) and what they do (suddenly introduce new data)?

Moretti sees the inconclusive, hesitating, and imperfect development of the clue-device as demonstrative of an evolutionary truth: such “oscillations” underscore “an important Darwinian feature of literary history: in times of morphological change, like the 1890s for detective fiction, the individual writer behaves exactly like the genre as a whole: tentatively.”¹⁸⁶ In other words, this hesitancy is not to be interpreted after all: it is itself the confirmation of the evolutionary model’s refusal of teleology. However, if we are “being strict,” in Moretti’s words, there are no oscillations or tentativeness. Let us look closer at the four cases that Moretti, in his “generosity,” categorizes as decodable.

1) “A Case of Identity,” to be solved in this waym would require the reader to detect that the same typewriter was used in two different letters—letters we do not have before us to compare. 2) In order to solve the case of “The Red-Headed League,” we would need to see (as Holmes does) the knees of Jabez Wilson’s assistant, as well as to recognize in his description all the traits of one John Clay—whom Holmes has been tracking for years but who is of course unknown to us. To recognize a known criminal mastermind by his physical appearance is

¹⁸⁴ Moretti, “Slaughterhouse of Literature,” 214.
¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 215.
¹⁸⁶ Ibid.
certainly a great advantage in “decoding” the other facts of the case! Holmes has this advantage and we do not. 3) It is impossible to decode “The Adventure of the Speckled Band”—as Moretti notes, “usually seen as a splendid cluster of clues”—because this story in fact relies on very doubtful deductions, i.e. “snakes do not drink milk, cannot hear whistles, cannot crawl up and down bell cords, and so on.” And the reader would have to “know” all of this bogus information to decode the clues rightly. 4) “The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle” is solved by Holmes following the repeated sale of a goose back to its origin; the real criminal is caught because he is retracing the same tracks. This one seems to me not even close. It is really a case of legwork and not clues.

In Sherlock Holmes’s methodological aphorisms cited above, Arthur Conan Doyle is clearly advertising how well-versed his character is in the scholarship of forensics and contemporary scientific philosophy, and how doggedly empiricist. But then none of the stories are solved by the method or principles advertised. But is this a departure from empiricism—or the utmost consistency? In the following, I argue that the abandonment of any reconstruction-from-given-facts coincides with certain epistemic conditions of subjectivity embedded in empiricism, specifically in an atemporality which empiricism shares with philosophical idealism. The inner limitations of the empiricist ideology that is asserted require its being compromised by a procedure in which Holmes arrives at the solution “behind our backs.” But the identity of empiricist and idealist presuppositions (see below) is a dialectical one, meaning that one cannot merely sort out these elements into two piles, nor locate an idealist “core” as opposed to an empiricist “surface.” Their identity is rather in their mutual limitation. This self-dividing identity reveals itself in the stutters of retrospection, in how the temporality of reified thinking vitiates narrative.

187 Ibid.
The last Sherlock Holmes stories were published in 1927, the same year as Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*. Henri Bergson’s researches into duration and subjectivity first appeared in 1889, the first volume of Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* in 1913, and another massive novelistic treatment of temporality, Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*, in 1924. But if time was a persistent concern of Conan Doyle’s contemporaries, it is almost nowhere to be found in the Sherlock Holmes universe. (One could argue that Conan Doyle’s lesser-known works include such treatments of temporality, albeit not in any modernist sense: the historical novel *The White Company*, set during the Hundred Years’ War, and the science fiction novel *The Lost World*, about prehistoric life forms still surviving.)

As an entry point into the temporality of the Holmes stories, consider the thematic of revenge. No one in this universe ever forgives and forgets. Once the wheels of vengeance have been set in motion, no number of disguises, no amount of globetrotting, and no passage of time can ever diminish the revenge motive. *A Study in Scarlet*, *The Sign of Four*, and *The Valley of Fear* all depict the prosecution of an ineradicable—though long past—grievance. Contrast this with the extremely complicated temporal logic of forgiveness in Thomas Hardy’s novels of the same period, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, and *Jude the Obscure*. The latter novels revolve around reconciliations that had better not have taken place, after a long passage of time and the wearing-away of painful memories—and the disastrous forgiving of things that had better not have been forgiven (wife-selling, rape, bigamy). But in the Sherlock Holmes stories, there can be no forgiveness, nor wearing-away. Revenge brooks every delay: the true meaning of Satan’s “immortal hate” in *Paradise Lost*. For example, at the end of part one of *A Study in Scarlet*, the arrest of John Ferrier is held up as an astonishing success, even though it arrives
when there is no risk of any further murders—he has succeeded in murdering everyone he had intended to—and too late for justice to be served, as Ferrier dies of a heart attack before he can even stand trial.

To account for the intrusion of long past revenge motives into the present of the stories, Conan Doyle has frequent recourse to a device first seen in *A Study in Scarlet*: a long flashback, bracketed off from the Watson narration, and set in some far-flung exotic locale. Often, these supervening flashbacks import into the stories a distinctive *generic* content as well. In *A Study in Scarlet*, the flashback is a historical romance; in *The Sign of Four*, it is a *Moonstone*-esque tale of the 1857 Indian Rebellion; in “The Adventure of the Cardboard Box,” a domestic melodrama of adultery; in “The *Gloria Scott,*” a tale of mutiny on the high seas; in *The Valley of Fear*, something like the industrial novel. It is as though Conan Doyle were conducting, in the margins of the detective genre, a revue of the literary variety of which he was capable and from which the public’s demand for more Sherlock Holmes was keeping his talents. At the same time, the stories include the past only as discrete miniatures—far from being “dialogic,” such inclusions are strictly partitioned off from Holmes himself. Contrast this gesture of distance with Agatha Christie’s oriental novels, *Murder in Mesopotamia, Murder on the Orient Express*, and *Death on the Nile*. These are so exactly like Christie’s novels set on English country estates that it is almost only a matter of changing a few place-names. A “locked-door” is the same everywhere. Whereas Conan Doyle is at great pains to import the generically exotic into 221B Baker Street, Christie ingenuously flaunts her ability to set an identically English mystery virtually anywhere—as long as it is a place frequented by the English bourgeoisie. Further along the generic timeline, consider the generically distinctive flashback which is proper to *film noir*: it is completely irrelevant whether the hero gets over his head in a bad business with the *femme fatale*
in the main storyline or in the flashback, since the genre never presents a non-noir past. All noir flashbacks are generically continuous with the main story.

Viktor Shklovsky defines the Holmesian style of mystery by its use of retrospection or “temporal transposition,” i.e. “the omission of a particular incident and its appearance after the consequences of this incident have already been revealed.”¹⁸⁸ But in practice, the Holmesian flashback is marked by its externality to the detective’s solution of the case, both generically and temporally.

Take for instance *A Study in Scarlet*, padded out to full-length by a retrospective narration by an American murderer who is seen only briefly before he launches into his tale. A summary of the plot is probably in order. *A Study in Scarlet* is probably most memorable to its readers for introducing Holmes and Watson. A mutual acquaintance suggests that they room together, although he also warns Watson about Holmes’s eccentricities and aloof nature. The two men move into 221B Baker Street, and thereafter Watson sets about to discover what all of Holmes’s peculiar interests add up to. Naturally, this first mystery—what is Sherlock Holmes’s profession?—is too deep for Watson, but no sooner has Holmes told Watson that he is the world’s only “consulting detective” than the two friends are off upon their first case together. An American has been found dead, but with no marks of violence, in an unfurnished room in Brixton, and the Scotland Yard investigator Gregson has called Holmes in for assistance. Despite the word “Rache” being written in blood on the wall, the murder has in fact nothing to do with a “Rachel” nor with German socialists (the two official theories). Holmes gives an astonishingly precise description of the murderer, although he fails to prevent a second murder, that of the first victim’s secretary, also an American. Holmes’s method of investigating is in fact entirely opaque to Watson (and to the reader): on one hand, he asks seemingly irrelevant questions and makes

pronouncements with no apparent basis; on the other hand, the first part of the novel ends abruptly with Holmes clapping handcuffs upon a complete stranger who comes up to their rooms of his own will, and declaring this unknown cabdriver, Jefferson Hope, to be the murderer.

Immediately following this, Conan Doyle drops the “reminiscences” of Dr. Watson, and begins a long third-person narrative entitled “The Country of the Saints,” set in Mormon Utah. The main character of this section is neither Holmes, nor Watson, nor even the murder victim, not even our recent acquaintance Jefferson Hope, but someone we have never heard of, one John Ferrier. The historical setting is 1847, and then 1860, while the murder under investigation by Holmes takes place in London in the early 1880s. This John Ferrier and an adoptive daughter are saved from starvation by Mormons while migrating westward, but on the condition that they join the faith. When they arrive in Salt Lake City, Ferrier prospers and the girl Lucy grows up to be a beauty, fought over by the sons of the Mormon Elders. Ferrier, disgusted by the practice of bigamy, refuses to let Lucy marry into the bigamous Mormon elite, and together they escape from Salt Lake City with the help of Lucy’s non-Mormon fiancé Jefferson Hope. The Mormons, not to be put off so easily, murder John Ferrier and take Lucy back to Salt Lake City, where she is forced into a bigamous marriage but dies soon after. Jefferson Hope vows revenge for this double murder, and follows Lucy’s two Mormon suitors across America and then across Europe. He finally catches up with them in England, with the murderous results already seen. The finale occurs in two parts: the third-person narrative, and then Holmes’s reconstruction of the case.

Taken together, the flashback (set in Mormon Utah), the murderer’s confession to the police, and Holmes’s own reconstruction of the case overwhelm the novel with retrospection. The second half of the novel takes on the inverse characteristics of that psychological type recognizable from Dostoyevsky or psychoanalysis, the innocent person who will not stop
confessing to heinous crimes out of all proportion to his real culpability. It is as if in *A Study in Scarlet* no crime can be quite solved *enough*, with the result that the initial crime scene becomes just such a minor appendage to a litany of “explanations.” But the material in the flashback (taking up roughly one-third of the novel) does not correspond exactly with what *was to have been* explained—namely, how the murder was committed. Notwithstanding this positive flood of material from the past, the flashback does not advance the case’s solution proper, but instead shelters a vast horde of irrelevancies. The third-person narration ceases upon the arrival of the murderer, Jefferson Hope, in London, i.e. stops before the murder—and the most important elements (such as the motive) are recounted once more when the story resumes in Watson’s hand. Conspicuously, Sherlock Holmes makes not a single reference to the strange life of John Ferrier which we have just had at great length.

But then, after we have been transported to 1850’s Utah, and having then heard Jefferson Hope’s confession at the police-station—where he explains how he had planted false clues at the crime scene, the chemical makeup of the poison he used, the connection to the second murder, etc.—what is there left for Holmes to add? In fact, a great deal—all pertaining to his own process of reasoning (as we will see in more detail below). It is as though everything has to be observed twice: once for the mystery of the crime itself, and again for the equally mysterious method of Holmes’s solution. In its insufficiency to either task, Watson’s account, that famous device of focalized narration—which becomes a standard feature of detective novels, e.g. Hastings in the Poirot novels—turns out to be only holding at bay the unadulterated stream of the detective’s logical consciousness.

The endings of detective stories seem to call less for a formalist interrogation, hence subjection to the full battery of narratological instruments, than for analysis as a *formula—*
prescribed, repetitious, an achieved mechanism.\textsuperscript{189} What, for instance, are the minimal pieces of information necessary to arrive at the identity of the murderer and to arrest him? This can only be done by going in reverse. I will say right away that the name of the murderer, the solution, appears out of the blue—is not a datum for the reader prior to the arrest, and the most important clue (the wandering cab-tracks) are first mentioned only a few pages from the end, long after the arrest and the Mormon flashback. There is no iron rule for this, but it is very often the case in the Holmes stories that the murderer’s name is first mentioned while the handcuffs are being put upon him, and that the decisive clue is safely tucked away in Holmes’ own pocket, unseen by the reader or Watson, and brought out only in the conclusion.

In order to arrest Jefferson Hope, only three clues are required. These clues can be arranged in various ways—the order in which they appear in the commission of the crime, the order in which Sherlock Holmes acts upon them, their logical priority in the solution, their order of appearance to the investigation, and their order in Holmes’ narration in the dénouement.

- **Crime.** Cab-tracks, murder, wedding ring.
- **Arrest.** Murder, wedding ring, cab-tracks.
- **Logic.** Murder, cab-tracks, wedding ring.
- **Visibility.** Wedding ring, murder, cab-tracks.
- **Dénouement.** Murder, wedding ring, cab-tracks.

We might also speak of the order of these orders—that is, the crime obviously comes before the arrest, Holmes’s thought-process comes before its reconstruction. The arrest order is what is most visible to the reader, but without coinciding in its arrangement of clues.

*Crime.* The three clues left in the committing of the crime itself are: the wheel-tracks of a

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\textsuperscript{189} Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, 115.
cab in front of the house where the murder is committed; the fact of a murder at all, as opposed to suicide; finally, the wedding ring found at the scene of the crime, which is dropped in the exultation over the dead body. It is only these three pieces of evidence that play any role in solving the mystery. The murder weapon (poison capsules) is intuited by Holmes from the dead body having no injuries and from a whiff of poison about the lips, but he does not find Jefferson Hope by tracking down these pills—in fact, they merely turn up at the scene of the second murder. The same can be said for Holmes’ impressive foreknowledge of the murderer’s height, his florid face, the fact that the horse driving the cab has three new shoes and one old one, the particularities of the cigar ash at the scene, the length of his fingernails, etc. All of this is window-dressing, and irrelevant to the solution.

*Arrest.* Sherlock Holmes tracks down the criminal first by knowing the name and place of origin of the victim (Enoch Drebber of Cleveland: which the police discover in his wallet), then ascertaining that the victim has been poisoned rather than committed suicide (murder), then suspecting that a woman is involved (wedding ring), then sending a telegram to Cleveland pertaining to Enoch Drebber’s marriage. At this point Cleveland telegrams Sherlock Holmes the name of the murderer, Jefferson Hope. It is at this point only a matter of sending out his auxiliaries to ask for a cab driver working under this name (cab-tracks).

*Logic.* Holmes asserts that “the whole thing is a chain of logical sequences without a break or flaw” (85). The “single real clue which was presented” (49) is the presence of the cab-tracks. However, in Holmes’ description, the revenge-character of the crime is truly delimiting (murder), whereas the clue of the cab-tracks only make sense when subordinated to this first determination: “Supposing one man wished to dog another through London, what better means could he adopt than to turn cabdriver?” (85). The least clue, logically-speaking, is the
ring, which only “settled the question” of motive which Holmes had already surmised (loc. cit.).

Visibility. This is a tricky category. As readers, we have only Watson’s reports to go by, but Watson sees but does not observe, while Holmes has “both seen and observed” (162-3). What I count as the first appearance of something has to be its first mention in all of its pertinent aspects. So, if Watson mentions, e.g., a footprint, this clue does not yet become “visible” until Holmes shows that this footprint exactly matches a pair of the victim’s slippers. A great many clues in Sherlock Holmes remain in this limbo, however—we see a sheer cliff, but no ledges. Now, although Holmes describes the cab markings at length early on (32), the crucial result—that the murderer was himself the cab driver—can only be deduced when one learns much later that “the marks on the road showed [Holmes] that the horse had wandered on in a way which would have been impossible had there been anyone in charge of it” (85). The first visible fact is the wedding ring which falls away from the body when it is being carried to the morgue; the second is the fact of murder by poison, which Holmes asserts as a conclusion in Chapter 3, but which is only “visible” in Chapter 7 when he tells Watson that he smelled poison on the victim’s lips; and lastly the true nature of the cab-tracks.

Reconstruction. Holmes begins explaining the case to Watson in the last chapter by lecturing him upon analytical reasoning. “Now this was a case in which you were given the result and had to find everything for yourself. Now let me endeavor to show you the different steps in my reasoning. To begin at the beginning” (83-4). Holmes then goes over everything, not “backward” at all, but in the very order in which he observed and acted. Instead of the order of analytic thought, we get merely a “behind the scenes” look into what Holmes was thinking at moments when his behavior or pronouncements were obscure to Watson. This order, then, is the same as the narrated “arrest” order, but with all of the irrelevant clues (the murderer’s “florid
face,” et al) brought back into the presentation.  

Epistemologically speaking, what is interesting here is that the reasoning subject treats his own behavior as much as a matter for explanation and recognition as the ostensible mystery of “whodunit”: the logical procedure not only fills in gaps in reality (the murder weapon, the criminal’s identity), but itself produces these lacunae, through Holmes’s inexplicable leaps and characteristic whimsical inclinations. In a narratological study of detective fiction, Tzvetan Todorov identifies the crime with the fabula (the raw occurrence), and the investigation with the sjužet (its narrated order)—not “two parts of the story or two different stories, but two aspects of the same story... two points of view on the same thing.” On Todorov’s reading, the reconstruction is inessential, a kind of ladder to be pulled up after reaching the “real” of the crime. But as we have just seen, the Sherlock Holmes stories effect a curious reversal: the “real” (the crime order and the flashback) turns out to be the inessential, while the detective’s own process of reasoning becomes the locus of mystery. On top of this, the flashback remains a kind of leftover, an overcompensating superfluous illumination that “has another try” at folding the fabula into the sjužet, but never intersecting the detective’s explanation.

Aesthetically, the extreme digression of Conan Doyle’s flashbacks can be somewhat jarring. However, this reliance upon external material in the fictional conclusions (e.g., long stretches of omniscient third person narration) is entirely consistent with Holmes’s practice in his investigative conclusions. That the flashbacks are outside the course of the Watson narration—intruding rudely upon the self-contained “given facts” of the case, drawn fully-formed from the

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190 All the other sequences are unique. It might be argued that two other sequences present the same irrelevant data as the dénouement: the crime itself, and the visible order of clues. However, of the sequences which “belong” to Holmes (his own actions leading to the arrest, his logical process, and his own reconstruction), it is his own narration which is marked by irrelevant, though virtuoso, interpretations.


192 Todorov, Poétique de la prose, 59.
generic worlds of romance or adventure—only confirms their importance to and inextricability from the Holmes paradigm. In the flashbacks, the stories abandon what Ernst Bloch identifies as the “most decisive criterion” of the detective novel, namely, “the un-narrated factor and its reconstruction...the discovery of something that happened ante rem.”¹⁹³ Instead, the flashbacks merely attach additional material to the investigation, not so much reconstructing the past as annexing an adjacent narrative. But if the insertion of flashbacks abdicates any purely immanent relationship to the preceding material, this is not a departure from Holmes’s own narrated reconstructions—it only recapitulates their formal structure.

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By empiricism, I do not mean a discursive field which would provide a context for Holmes’s supposed “method,” but a structure of temporality, mediation, and representation (e.g. the construction of objectivity). If I now turn to more philosophical accounts of empiricism, it is not in order to shift said “context” further down the line, onto philosophical terrain. The buck does not stop at canonical philosophical elaboration. The point rather is to isolate a statement of the ontology and temporality of a reified cognitive mode, and to work out its implicit contradictions, conditions, and slippages for narrative form. No part of the following depends on a filiation between, say, Berkeley and Conan Doyle. Indeed, empiricist philosophy might be taken as grounded in a repression of temporality that returns as the vicissitudes of narrative form discussed above. Time is not excluded by philosophical empiricism once and for all, but, suppressed there, reappears in the very temporal fabric of its ideological bearer, detective fiction: the solipsism of Holmesian retrospection, the chronological monads of the flashbacks, and problems of periodization and internal continuity.

Whether we are discussing Berkeley, Locke, Hume, or Mill, empiricism posits an observing subject who is the site of experience, concepts, and representations. This subject is set in opposition to an objectivity sundered from any structure of rationality. Concepts have an only subjective existence, and truth is the correspondence or adequacy of a mental representation to a perceived object. Logic is not a property of the external world, but of the reasoning subject, for the purpose of bringing the world under categories and causality.

This rough sketch will at least have differentiated empiricism from the ancient Greeks (Forms were real for Plato, substance for Aristotle), and from European rationalism (Kant does not deny rationality to things-in-themselves, only our knowing anything about it; for Spinoza and Descartes, the order of ideas pertains outside of the cogito).

Defining empiricism this way makes it identical with idealism. As Hegel writes in the Phenomenology of Spirit, reason, in its first appearance as “the abstract empty idealism” of Fichte and Berkeley, “is bound, therefore, to be at the same time absolute Empiricism.”\textsuperscript{194} This means: the withdrawal of the subject’s certainty into itself as the only reality, so that all sensible being is being-for-this-consciousness (idealism), is also what founds empiricism, “because, for the filling of this empty ‘mine,’ i.e. for the element of distinction and all the further development and embodiment of it”—the impressions that fill up the mind’s blank slate—“its reason needs an impact operating from without, in which lies the fons et origo of the multiplicity of sensations or ideas.”\textsuperscript{195}

In empiricism and idealism, therefore, the rational subject only finds itself over and over again, without seeing its activity or researches as being implicated on the side of the object. This relation to the world is also an “immediate” one, meaning that what comes between us and the

\textsuperscript{194} Hegel, Phenomenology of Mind, 279.
\textsuperscript{195} Ibid.
object is only what we put there—for instance, Baconian idols or Gestalt perception are on our side of the divide. This stands in contrast to dialectical thinking, in which objectivity always already involves a minimal conceptual organization in order to even “occur” as appearance or exteriority.

In empiricism/idealism, time—continuity and duration—is on the side of the subject, as the succession of our impressions (Hume). Objectivity is only a “bad” infinity of perpetually-arising sensations, without permanence in-itself; it is never conceived as a historical or immanent process. In short, empiricism’s identity with idealism consists in the immediate relation of a reasoning, contemplative subject towards an objectivity that is inessential, atemporal, and void of concept.

This structure of subjectivity and its temporality is rooted in and repeats the reification of consciousness in capitalist society.\textsuperscript{196} “Narrative time” does not simply carry over from the ideological elaborations of a Berkeley; rather, the articulations of time in philosophy, narration, scientific practice, and even raw “lived experience” derive from and are conditioned by the historical organization of objectivity and consciousness.

Reification is the process whereby social domination in capitalism (the exploitation of workers by the capitalist class) is concealed by the commodity-form, i.e. by the exchange of equivalent abstract values objectified in \textit{things}. Whereas earlier modes of production engaged in directly social exploitation (e.g., slavery, feudal serfdom), the capitalist wrings surplus labor from the worker only through the form of a wage paid in money. But there is another difference as well. Pre-capitalist modes of production are only ever engaged in the amassing of \textit{absolute} surplus-value, the forced extension of the working day to an ever-greater length. The

transparency, so to speak, of this exploitation, contrasts with the reified and particularly capitalist form of *relative* surplus-value—which no longer manifests as an observable length of time. The concept of time pertaining to absolute surplus-value is pure duration: the accumulation of hours in the work week, or (as in the *corvée*) the allocation of a fixed period every season to surplus labor for the feudal aristocracy. Relative surplus-value is also determined by time, but no longer the raw extension of clock-time or calendar days; the surplus is found rather in decreasing the amount of labor time (and hence, decrease the value paid out as wages) necessary to “reproduce” (i.e. feed, clothe, house) the worker, relative to the portion of labor time that the capitalist is free to appropriate as his profit. That is to say, what the capitalist is appropriating as surplus-value in its relative form is only time in the abstract, an *inner relation* of necessary and surplus labor-time, rather than a piling-up of an “absolute” time-quantity.

In empiricism, time has an ideal existence, as when Hume writes that, “Wherever we have no successive perceptions, we have no notion of time, even tho’ there be a real succession of objects.”197 Just so, the production of relative surplus-value yields a conception of time with only an ideal existence—what the social theorist Moishe Postone calls the “abstract time” of the capitalist mode of production.198 According to Postone’s reading of Marx, value in capitalism is determined by *abstract* labor, a purely social category; capitalist value is a “nonmanifest abstract quality” measured by time.199

Just as empiricism denies time to objectivity, reserving it for subjective understanding or a feature of consciousness, Postone notes that abstract time makes up no part of the (thingly) objectification of value during the labor process: “As a social form, the commodity is completely

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199 Ibid., 175.
The proportions of necessary and surplus labor time in relative surplus-value, i.e. the structure and degree of class exploitation, which inhere *abstractly* in the commodity as bearer of value, make up no part of its objective composition, a disjunction expressed by Marx in his quip that, “So far no chemist has ever discovered exchange-value either in a pearl or a diamond.” Instead, this socially determinate time-relation is concealed by the muteness of the given commodity and its expression of a single magnitude of value. On this reading, reification as the concealment of social relations of domination is identical with the abstract non-objectivity of time in relative surplus-value.

It is this division between a temporalized subject and an abstract object that reoccurs at every instance of the Holmes stories’ literary form. The Sherlock Holmes stories are *stories* rather than philosophical treatises—and so it is as narratives, unfolding in time, that these ontological contradictions “stick”: the *externality* of the flashbacks to the main story, the solution of each case by clues *outside* of the given data, the *arbitrariness* of the retrospections (the repetitions across flashback, confession, Watson’s account, or Holmes’s conclusion), and the *relocation* of mystery from the crime to Holmes’s solving of it—all instances of the partition erected by contemplative reason against an increasingly reified objectivity.

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It is one thing, however, to root the ideality of time and the empiricist construction of objectivity in the concrete form of reification, and quite another to sketch out a properly literary mode of this subjective organization. The Sherlock Holmes stories are not an “instantiation” of these determinations, a freestanding expression of an existential-material structure. I have tried to undo the causal or contextual “outside” that founds the method effect in Holmes criticism. If the

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200 Ibid.
201 Marx, *Capital I*, 177.
above ontological premise of reification is granted, this does not however mean that Sherlock Holmes springs up directly from the constitution of a scientific “world picture,” as from Cadmus’s teeth. Literary recognition contests reification, under conditions that have their own history and determinations. The literary mode of idealism, then, is not a mere repetition of philosophy and economy, as we see in moving backwards from *History and Class Consciousness*, in order to locate the Sherlock Holmes stories within *The Theory of the Novel*’s discussion of “Abstract Idealism.”

What is “idealistic” about *The Theory of the Novel*’s abstract idealism? To begin, the entire problematic of the book—the “unbridgeable chasm between cognition and action, between soul and created structure, between self and world”—is derived from Kant’s transcendental idealism, which is historicized as the condition of a fallen modernity. Lukács thus transforms Kant’s critical separation of subjective experience from an ungraspable external world into an historical “dissonance special to the novel, the refusal of the immanence of being to enter into empirical life.” Because the unity of world and self found in the Homeric epics is no longer possible, the novel can only oppose its hero in various ways to an indifferent, heterogenous objectivity. Abstract idealism is therefore a kind of travesty of Kant’s ethical philosophy, wherein “the idea, because it should be, necessarily must be,” even though “reality does not satisfy this *a priori* demand.” The narrative result is the hero’s one-sided and monomaniacal, but ever-defeated attempt to realize this idea in the world. As examples, Lukács adduces *Don Quixote, Tristram Shandy, Dead Souls*, and Balzac’s *Human Comedy*.

But how can the Sherlock Holmes stories fit into the same category as *Don Quixote*? Even

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203 Ibid., 71.
204 Ibid., 97.
205 The Sherlock Holmes stories mirror *Don Quixote* in more ways than covered by “abstract idealism.” Like
granting some form of literary “idealism,” the character of these works, and even their external
heft and degree of literariness, seem irreconcilable. Here is the core of Lukács’s definition:

In neither of the two spheres [the soul or the sphere of action] is there an element of
immanent progress or development, either within itself or arising from relationships with
the other... Nothing can shake its inner certitude, because it is imprisoned in its safe
world—because it is incapable of experiencing anything. The complete absence of an
inwardly experienced problematic transforms such a soul into pure activity. Because it is
at rest within its essential existence, every one of its impulses becomes an action aimed at
the outside. The life of a person with such a soul becomes an uninterrupted series of
adventures which he himself has chosen. He throws himself into them because life means
nothing more to him than the successful passing of tests.206

Outside reality remains quite untouched by [the soul], and reveals itself “as it really is”
only as an opposition to every one of the hero’s actions... The hero in his demonic search
for adventure arbitrarily and disconnectedly selects those moments of this “reality” which
he thinks most suitable for “proving himself.”207

There are five separate points here I would like to draw out and apply to the character of
Sherlock Holmes, the objective world he interacts with, and the temporality of that relation. 1)
The hero’s “complete absence of an inwardly experienced problematic” requires a ceaseless
external activity, a “demonic search” taking the form of a series of (ultimately futile) minor
“tests.” 2) “Outside reality remains... untouched” by the hero’s actions, without “an element of
immanent progress or development.” 3) The world “reveals itself... only as an opposition” to the
hero’s actions. 4) These adventures take the narrative form of being “arbitrary and
disconnected,” a bad infinity of isolated incidents.

1) Because Holmes’ soul is “at rest within its essential existence, every one of its impulses
becomes an action aimed at the outside”; thus, the stories take the form of a “demonic search.”

This can almost be taken literally—the search for clues, the relentless hunting down of the

Sancho Panza, trailing behind on his donkey, Dr. Watson is always slow to catch up with his detective friend.
Holmes and Quixote are bachelors, while Panza and Watson are married. The publication of their adventures is also
an event in the fictional universe—in Part Two of Don Quixote, Cid Hamet Benengeli’s history appears in print,
while Holmes continually chides Watson for the popular quality and lurid titles of his published accounts (i.e. the
very stories we are reading).

206 Ibid., 99.
207 Ibid., 100.
criminal. To be sure. But what is important here is that Holmes’ character is leveled-down by his constant pursuit of the same thing, to something less than human (Holmes the asocial drug addict) and also more than human (his incredible feats of memory, the ability to forego sleep when on a case). Man’s character is developed by his productivity (Marx), and Holmes’ one-sided activities, however intellectually stimulating, leave him a stunted and partial person. In *A Study in Scarlet*, Watson writes of Holmes:

> His ignorance was as remarkable as his knowledge. Of contemporary literature, philosophy and politics he appeared to know next to nothing. Upon my quoting Thomas Carlyle, he inquired in the naïvest way who he might be and what he had done. My surprise reached a climax, however, when I found incidentally that he was ignorant of the Copernican Theory and of the composition of the Solar System. (21).

Holmes is a monomaniac, a Macbeth or an Ahab, who sees in the world only the distorted image of his own *idée fixe*. He has forcibly, purposefully reduced himself to the machine that he is: “He said that he would acquire no knowledge which did not bear upon his object” (21). Holmes has instrumentalized every relation and activity; he has no acquaintance whom he cannot call upon to play some part in a case, no hobby that he does not turn to some surprising use. He is therefore “sealed off” as a human being. Lukács’s insight is to show the dialectical reversal wherein this inner completeness requires that Quixote/Holmes frenetically throw himself upon the world:

> “His unquestioning, concentrated interiority forces him to translate that interiority... into actions... [H]e is incapable of any contemplation; he lacks any inclination or possibility of inward-turned activity.”

208 From the moment we first meet Holmes in *A Study in Scarlet*, he is complete: the thousand pages that follow only “fill in” superficial qualities (e.g. the name of his brother). This completeness means of course, that he is violently *incomplete* as a person or “realistic” character.

2) “Outside reality remains... untouched” by Holmes’ actions. No matter how many

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Sherlock Holmes stories there are, no number could ever be enough for the detective to succeed in imposing his ideal (of law, of rationality) upon the world, of rendering his own activity superfluous. The detective is not exactly tilting at windmills—his career is a nearly unbroken string of incredible successes—but his constant activity, being only reactive, leaves the world untouched rather than shaping it in the image of his will. Not being able to end all crime, his “negating of it, therefore, cannot go the length of being altogether done with it to the point of annihilation.”

209 The fantasy of retirement that he outlines in “The Final Problem”—“[T]hat if I could beat [Professor Moriarty], if I could free society of him, I should feel that my own career had reached its summit, and I should be prepared to turn to some more placid line in life… I could continue to live in the quiet fashion which is most congenial to me, and to concentrate my attention upon my chemical researches’”—is of course unrealizable. Even though, as we have seen, Holmes defeats this “Napoleon of crime” in “The Final Problem,” neither the death of this arch-villain nor Holmes’ own apparent death are sufficient to put an end to his crime-solving activities. In a novel like George Eliot’s Mill on the Floss, when characters meet their death clasped in each other’s arms, this represents a symbolic and emotional finality, an artificial but appropriate conclusion. When Sherlock Holmes (apparently) and Moriarty (actually) plunge to their deaths, it is felt as an abrupt and arbitrary termination, not as a resolution and culmination of forces long at work. The Holmes saga can only come to a halting and abortive stop (as in “The Final Problem”) or be cut off mid-reel, as it were—such that the last stories, in The Case Book of Sherlock Holmes, give no indication of being the last stories. One of the great ironies in the history of Tables of Contents is the staggering number of Holmes stories after this “final” one.

209 Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit (Miller translation), 116. (§ 190).
210 When Conan Doyle first resurrects Holmes, he sets his investigation (The Hound of the Baskervilles) in 1889,
3) Outside reality only reveals itself as an opposition to the hero. Just as the world shows up in *Don Quixote* only in order to be misunderstood as a hostile challenge, so in Sherlock Holmes all of Victorian England appears only as a string of crimes and infamies. The quotidian is in both cases banished. At most, we can see Watson reading a newspaper or coming back from a patient before the story’s client sends up his card at 221B Baker Street or (in the later stories) Watson is called away from his wife by Holmes’ summons. The little “down time” that is visible in the stories is anathema to Holmes:

[Watson:] “May I ask whether you have any professional inquiry on foot at present?”

[Holmes:] “None. Hence the cocaine. I cannot live without brainwork. What else is there to live for? Stand at the window here. Was ever such a dreary, dismal, unprofitable world? See how the yellow fog swirls down the street and drifts across the dun-colored houses. What could be more hopelessly prosaic and material? What is the use of having powers, Doctor, when one has no field upon which to exert them? Crime is commonplace, existence is commonplace, and no qualities save those which are commonplace have any function upon earth.” (93).

The “dismal, unprofitable world” is however, rarely seen. Holmes’s world is as suffocating as Hamlet’s Elsinore. Holmes prefers the blinds to be drawn.²¹¹ Watson only takes up his pen to describe the brief periods of crime-solving which dot an otherwise commonplace existence. Whereas a novel such as *Madame Bovary*, *The Warden*, or *Middlemarch* takes its entire action from the minor pettiness of bourgeois existence, the everyday event cannot enter at all into a Holmes story. So, on one hand, the world reveals itself only in opposition to Holmes, as a “field” for him to exercise his talents—but on the other hand, it is the very ruptures in the prosaic world prior to “The Final Problem,” such that the latter story marks a limit-point—May, 1891—the Holmesian “end of history,” after which no real action is possible. However, even this pretense is soon abandoned, and Holmes is corporeally brought back to life in “The Empty House,” and thereafter Holmes is more active than ever. Watson tells us in “The Adventure of the Solitary Cyclist”: “From the years 1894 to 1901 inclusive, Mr. Sherlock Holmes was a very busy man. It is safe to say that there was no public case of any difficulty in which he was not consulted during those eight years, and there were hundreds of private cases, some of them of the most intricate and extraordinary character, in which he played a prominent part” (526).

²¹¹ “He loved to lie in the centre of five millions of people, with his filaments stretching out and running through them, responsive to every little rumor or suspicion of unsolved crime” (“The Adventure of the Cardboard Box” 888).
which call Holmes forth, as it were.

The fundamental problem of the detective story is to provide an explanation of a social fact (crime) in terms of both logic and probability. To this end, Holmes frequently insists on knowing the whole history of crime in order to assemble the current case: “There is a strong family resemblance about misdeeds, and if you have all the details of a thousand at your finger ends, it is odd if you can’t unravel the thousand and first” (A Study in Scarlet 24). But in these stories, the social (what might otherwise be thought to be the ground or origin of crime) is what can never appear—we know that Holmes has no interest in history per se, but only in the newspaper’s agony column (“The Adventure of the Noble Bachelor” 288). Watson tells us, “I was aware that by anything of interest, Holmes meant anything of criminal interest. There was the news of a revolution, of a possible war, and of an impending change of government, but these did not come within the horizon of my companion” (“The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans” 913).

4) The narrative form is marked by arbitrariness and disconnection. Very few Holmes stories rely upon the existence of any of the others. Holmes is given to repeating the choice maxims concerning his method, in case the reader has missed them elsewhere. Even the characterization of Professor Moriarty in The Valley of Fear presumes no readerly acquaintance with his earlier presentation in “The Final Problem.” The stories are chronologically “out of order,” but even this is a kind of pointless quirk—there is no good reason why a given story could not as well have taken place in 1887 as in 1903.

Such arbitrariness at the formal level contrasts with the most apparent thematic of the detective genre. The entire skill in detection is to avoid arbitrariness, to assign the correct meaning to the unique detail. As Holmes remarks about circumstantial evidence in “The
Boscombe Valley Mystery”: “It may seem to point very straight to one thing, but if you shift your own point of view a little, you may find it pointing in an equally uncompromising manner to something entirely different” (204). But as a form, as narrative, the order in which one reads the stories, the year in which they are set, whether Holmes is thought to be alive or the story has been drawn from a posthumous archive—all of this is utterly contingent, incapable of intruding on the character or the literary formula.

The idealist conception of objectivity outlined above therefore remains in force in abstract idealism: the outside world is inessential, atemporal, and void of concept. Inessential, because “outside reality is no more than a sluggish, formless, meaningless mass”; atemporal, since “events... are almost timeless, a motley series of isolated adventures complete in themselves”; void of concept, because “a world forsaken by providence and lacking transcendental orientation.”

Contrast, then, the treatment of time in abstract idealism with the famous passage in The Theory of the Novel on the novel of passive, bourgeois subjectivity, Flaubert’s L’Éducation sentimentale. Lukács writes, “the greatest discrepancy between idea and reality is time”—meaning, we get old, things decay, opportunity grows stale, we set aside our dreams, etc. However, against this receding present, the power of memory allows the subject to “glimps[e] the organic unity of his whole life through the process by which his living present has grown from the stream of his past life dammed up within his memory,” as in Proust’s Le Temps

212 Lukács, Theory of the Novel, 100.
213 Ibid., 130.
214 Ibid., 103.
215 Ibid., 120-31.
216 Ibid., 127.
In this sense, it is time as duration which endows experience with (subjective) meaning, thereby synthesizing a rich, memurious interiority and the nihilating objective passage of time. In abstract idealism, however, the passing of time neither accrues meaning nor wears it away. In Tristram Shandy, time can come to an absolute standstill without impeding the narrative progress; the posthumous and/or archival Holmes stories that Watson “publishes” long afterward—the next-to-last published tale, 1927’s “The Adventure of the Veiled Lodger,” is set back in 1896—lack any consciousness of the time lapse. Hence the “eternal” quality of the evergreen Victorian setting of the stories. This has the peculiar result, analyzed above, that history is both 1) arbitrary in presentation, such that the stories are outside of any chronological order, and 2) so foreign to the detective’s world that it can only occur in flashbacks set apart from the primary focalization (Watson).

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By way of concluding, I would like to return to one of the loftier themes of The Theory of the Novel, what might be called its underlying ontological statement: “the refusal of the immanence of being to enter into empirical life”\textsuperscript{218}—in other words, that “there is no longer any spontaneous totality of being.”\textsuperscript{219} What for The Theory of the Novel is the historico-philosophical problematic (the “dissonance”\textsuperscript{220}) particular to the novel, is for us as much an epistemological statement as an ontological one. The Hegelian problem of the possibility of immanent meaning, and the set of necessary mediations necessary to produce a whole within knowledge—is this not precisely the thematic we are dealing with in mystery fiction and in the vocabulary of recognition? Is the “clue,” for example, not the most concrete manifestation of The Theory of the Novel’s affirming...

\textsuperscript{217} This is anachronistic, of course. See Lukács’ 1962 Preface, 14, for a mature reappraisal of his claims about la durée in Flaubert’s novel.
\textsuperscript{218} Ibid., 71.
\textsuperscript{219} Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{220} Ibid., 71.
that “the immediate meaning of objects has disappeared”?

One way to approach this is through the topic of “disenchantment.” At a first pass, the detective’s aim is the restoration of meaning and order to a confused heap of events, descriptions, agonies, personalities, etc. The avowed logic of Holmes’ world is “*Omne ignotum pro magnifico [est]*” (177). In other words, his task is to demonstrate that what is real, however strange, is ultimately rational. Everything has to be given meaning. So, for Moretti, the structural principle of the detective genre is “disenchantment” in a Weberian sense, hence its “totalitarian aspirations towards a *transparent* society.”

But there is a double aspect here. To give a well-known example from the Holmes canon: in “The Adventure of the Dancing Men,” the childlike and apparently random drawings of dancing men turn out not to be mere whimsical sketches but rather an intricate code for secret messages. On one hand, explanatory order is made here to penetrate and colonize (what looks like) some harmless, thoughtless doodling. But on the other hand, there is a kind of re-enchantment at work: behind every banality now might lurk a secret message. Nothing remains entirely innocent, for what is most obviously overlooked might be the crux of apprehending a criminal conspiracy. This tension is also replayed at the formal level: as Moretti notes, “In detective fiction, everything that is repeatable and obvious ceases to be criminal and is, therefore, unworthy of ‘investigation,’” in contrast to the formulaic narrative sequence which unfolds according to a “perennial fixity of the syntax.” In shorthand, we do not know if Holmes is translating the world into *signs* (explanations, reductions) or into *wonders* (the copying-out of the Encyclopedia Brittanica is resolved into an underground tunnel burrowing into a bank vault).

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222 Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders*, 155.
223 Ibid., 136.
224 Ibid., 135.
225 Ibid., 141.
But this epistemological problematic brings us once more to *Don Quixote*, surely *the* novel of “disenchantment.” Like Holmes, Don Quixote is perpetually deciphering the world, bringing to it an explanatory ordering it no longer spontaneously has. We might say that the perpetual *misrecognition* of the world by Don Quixote occupies the same narrative place as Sherlock Holmes’s solutions: a point-by-point reordering of the world, the kind of notation or mapping of extensive reality that so interested Jorge Luis Borges. There is a magic name awaiting every empirical given; nothing fails to find a place in his ravings.

Michael McKeon notes, “One of the prescient implications of *Don Quixote* is that the modern disenchantment of the world entailed not the eradication of enchantment but its transformation, its secularization.” In Part I of the novel, mundane phenomena are metamorphosed into the fantasies of romance by a subjective delusion:

As our hero’s imagination converted whatsoever he saw, heard or considered, into something of which he had read in books of chivalry; he no sooner perceived the inn, than his fancy represented it, as a stately castle with its four towers and pinnacles of shining silver, accommodated with a draw-bridge, deep moat, and all other conveniencies, that are described as belonging to buildings of that kind.

Don Quixote’s vision enchants the quotidian world, “nor would [he] use the intelligence of his own eyes.” But in Part II, this delusion has invaded reality itself. Don Quixote’s madness is no longer confined to himself and Sancho, but begins to be taken up by others (Sampson Carrasco, Don Antonio Moreno, the Duke and Duchess, his steward, and her damsel Altisidora). No longer is the illusion or fantasy of romance a misrecognition of the empirical real, a failure to attend to one’s senses—now, the distorted, upside-down world is become objective, social, and in the form of the printed book of Part I, even material. That is, the site of “enchantment” shifts.

This, however, is a precise paraphrase of what Marx intends by his idea of the fetishism of the

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228 Ibid., 64.
commodity. Not coincidentally, it is in a discussion of commodity fetishism that Marx makes the following remark about *Don Quixote*:

> One thing is clear: the Middle Ages could not live on Catholicism, nor could the ancient world on politics. On the contrary, it is the manner in which they gained their livelihood which explains why in one case politics, in the other case Catholicism, played the chief part. For the rest, one needs no more than a slight acquaintance with, for example, the history of the Roman Republic, to be aware that its secret history is the history of landed property. And then there is Don Quixote, who long ago paid the penalty for wrongly imagining that knight errantry was compatible with all economic forms of society.\(^{229}\)

Etienne Balibar glosses this passage:

> Marx’s thesis does not signify that in these modes of production different from capitalism the structure of social relations is transparent to the agents. “Fetishism” is not absent, but displaced (onto Catholicism, politics, etc.) … In effect, it appears that “mystification” bears precisely, not on the economy (the mode of material production) as such, but on that instance of the social structure which, according to the nature of the mode of production, is determined to occupy the place of the determination, the place of the last instance.\(^{230}\)

To put this all in one sentence—the “secularization of enchantment” is the movement from a displaced mystification of feudal economic structures to the fetishism of commodities. Ideological misrecognition is no longer a secondary (superstructural) position taken up external to a positive economic reality, as religion might stand towards the brutality of medieval exploitation.

> It is henceforth the quotidian world of exchange and production which is magical, “abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.”\(^{231}\) Indeed, reification appears to be inextricable from a language of mystification and enchantment: not only the famous dancing tables, but also the “bewitched, distorted and upside-down world haunted by Monsieur le Capital

\(^{229}\) Marx, *Capital* I, 176n.
\(^{231}\) Marx, *Capital* I, 163.
and Madame la Terre, who are at the same time social characters and mere things.” Nor is this enchanted world a kind of subjective, erroneous image separable from dry, secular reality: “These impersonal and abstract social forms do not simply veil what traditionally has been deemed the ‘real’ social relations of capitalism, that is, class relations; they are the real relations of capitalist society, structuring its dynamic trajectory and its form of production.”

Contra Weber, illusion and enchantment are not at all done away with or receding in capitalism, even in reification.

Thus, in Part II of the novel, Don Quixote might be taken to be engaged in a kind of rudimentary “ideology critique” along these lines. No longer does he insist that the world around him is directly the chivalric romance world, e.g. that these windmills are giants. Rather, it is the very ordinariness of appearances (the shared space of social encounters) that now calls for a fantastic explanation, for the undoing of the work of “that malicious inchanter, my inveterate enemy, [who] hath spread clouds and cataracts before mine eyes, to them and them only changing and transforming [Dulcinea’s] unequalled beauty into the appearance of a poor country-wench.”

The comparison to Don Quixote allows a belated answer to the question, why call Holmes’s reconstructions instances of “recognition” at all? For if the knight errant at last has the scales fall from his eyes and mourns the loss of the knightly world, the constitutionally infallible Holmes

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232 Marx, Capital III, 969.
233 Postone, Time, Labor, and Social Domination, 6.
234 Here I should note that throughout I have avoided equating reification with the associated Weberian concepts of “rationalization” and “calculation” as Lukács does continually in his essay. Basically, Lukács departs from his starting point, the commodity form as the “universal structuring principle” (85), in order to pursue a sociology of the factory as containing “in concentrated form the whole structure of capitalist society” (90). But Marx’s use of the concept of reification never refers to any “rationalization” of the production process, but rather to the abstract social domination of the commodity-form. Lukács’s argumentation has the baleful consequence of deriving bourgeois ideology from the position of the worker, as well as equating class consciousness with the particularity of the industrial site.
235 Cervantes, Don Quixote, 636.
will never find himself alienated amongst the illusions and red herrings of his adventures.

(Although this does happen in mystery fiction—recall the solution to the mystery of *The Moonstone*, where the investigating protagonist Franklin Blake learns that he himself committed the crime, in an opium-induced unconscious state.) It can only be ironic that recognition belongs at last to the perpetually mistaken Don Quixote, but never to Holmes, who never fails to catch his man. And surely Don Quixote’s recognition of plain reality in the last pages of the novel could be read as a sentimental, ennobling gesture by Cervantes.

However, *Don Quixote* offers another moment of recognition, one that is structurally impossible for Sherlock Holmes. In Part Two, when Don Quixote encounters the knight of the mirrors, he finds that his foe has already read and absorbed the entire printed tale of *Don Quixote*, Part One, and claims not only to have defeated Don Quixote in battle but essentially now to stand in for his prowess and history—i.e. to mirror back (like his armor itself) to Don Quixote his own identity from within the upside-down, enchanted world of his adventures:

“I value and applaud myself chiefly, for having conquered, in single combat, that so renowned knight Don Quixote de la Mancha, and made him confess, that my Casildea is more beautiful than his Dulcinea. Now, in that single conquest, I deem myself superior to all the knights in the universe; for, that same Don Quixote hath vanquished all his contemporaries; and I, in conquering him, have transferred and conveyed to my own person, all his honour, glory, and reputation; the victor being always honoured in proportion to the fame of his vanquished foe; wherefore, the innumerable achievements of the said Don Quixote are placed to my credit, as if they were the effects of my own personal prowess.”

For all that the Sherlock Holmes stories consist only in a ceaseless retrospective construction of meaning from a fragmented, discontinuous world, never will Holmes encounter himself in this way, as an uncanny doubling, within that foggy, criminal world lying beyond Baker Street. At the dawn of the novel, reification meant the enchantment of the quotidian and social, and called forth recognition as the reflection of an undaunted monomania to unconcealment. In the Sherlock

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236 Ibid.
Holmes stories, recognition is only ever the inverse of *Don Quixote*’s procedure of “misrecognition,” i.e. an exhaustive, timeless decoding, which leaves the facing, external world untouched and separated by an unbridgeable divide.
Chapter Four

Unhappy Consciousness

“With disgust I find only myself, over and over, in every thing that I create.” – Wotan, Die Walküre

The golden bowl in Henry James’s *The Golden Bowl* is there instead of a recognition scene. About two-thirds of the way through the novel, when the heiress Maggie Verver confronts her friend Fanny Assingham with evidence of her husband’s infidelity, the scene of Maggie’s fortuitous discovery and disillusionment is dropped out of the narrative order, and recounted only in retrospect. In place of any scene, there is only the golden bowl, “inscrutable in its rather stupid elegance, and yet, from the moment one had thus appraised it, vivid and definite in its domination of the scene.” The reader (who has seen the bowl before) has no idea how it came into Maggie’s possession, and although Maggie insists to Fanny, “That cup there has turned witness” against Prince Amerigo, no testimony is forthcoming. Fanny urges Maggie, “I don’t know, you see, what you now consider that you’ve ascertained; nor anything of the connexion with it of that object that you declare so damning.” But, seeing that the bowl is meant to function in a recognition scene of Maggie’s own staging, as what Aristotle calls “recognition by token,” a visible reminder of Amerigo’s covert trespasses—Fanny smashes the bowl into pieces on the ground.

On a first reading, then, the bowl is exponentially anti-climactic. In its first appearance, the Amerigo and Charlotte Stant pass up buying it as a wedding gift. Then, Fanny Assingham shatters it before it can be employed in Maggie’s planned encounter with her husband. What is

238 Ibid., 170.
239 Ibid., 171.
more, Maggie shrugs off this wild destruction, telling Amerigo, “Its having come apart makes an unfortunate difference for its beauty, its artistic value, but none for anything else. Its other value is just the same—I meant that of its having given me so much of the truth about you. I don’t therefore care so much what becomes of it now.”

However, the bowl is not just (and not even) an incriminating exhibit entered into the record against Amerigo. The bowl does not figure in a chain of explanations or deductions that clarifies Maggie’s understanding, nor does it function as a “token” for her own recognition. Instead, Maggie points to it as a self-interpreting, complete synopsis of her epistemological crisis. When Fanny asks her, “But what has that to do—?” Maggie answers, “It has everything.” “It was on the whole thing that Amerigo married me.’ With which her eyes had their turn again at her damnatory piece. ‘And it was on that—it was on that!’ The bowl is a condensation of all “her accumulations of the unanswered”; Maggie’s understanding of her marital relations are in this thing, the bowl. This is why Fanny acts upon these ideas there, by smashing it—as though to dispel the recognition Maggie has had, into so many crystal pieces. (In a fairy tale, this might have worked.)

When Fanny hears that the bowl has an inner flaw, she tells Maggie, “Then your whole idea has a crack.” Pages later, Maggie feels, “within her, the sudden split between conviction and action.” The bowl has a crack, the idea has a crack, the bowl is broken into pieces, Maggie’s ideas are suddenly split. In short, consciousness is figured is a thing. Instead of a sequence of Maggie’s perceptions, emotions, where she might “get the facts of appearance

240 Ibid., 196.
241 Ibid., 166.
242 Ibid., 176.
243 Ibid., 14.
244 Ibid., 185.
245 Ibid., 193.
straight, only jam them down into their place, [show] the reasons lurking behind them.” Maggie only points to this mute object above the fire-place, which in turn takes on "a conscious perversity." The relations of consciousness, the determinations of the past, and the location of the self are no longer figured as “a roomful of confused objects, never as yet ‘sorted,’” “the mass of vain things, congruous, incongruous,” but are transposed onto a single, as it were speaking, intensely symbolic lump of thinghood.

This reading is at odds with the usual picture of consciousness in Henry James as determining consciousness. So, for Peter Brooks, James’s fiction presents “the melodrama of interpretive consciousness.” Consciousness deciphers, even if what ultimately confronts thinking is an “abyss of meaning,” a “moral occult” impenetrable to interpretation and in excess of it. In an entirely other register, Ross Posnock sees consciousness in James as confronting—not an abyss, but a churning, dynamic urban world in inexorable flux. Instead of interpretation, Posnock’s words are immersion, improvisation, curiosity, and exposure.

Consciousness is supposed to get outside of itself, and not just puzzle over the figure in the drawing room carpet. In Sharon Cameron’s book Thinking in Henry James, consciousness is something projected, sometimes with results that sound almost like ESP. Consciousness dominates others, and James’s novelistic world is one of interpenetrating, contesting, and

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246 Ibid., 54.
247 Ibid., 172.
248 Ibid., 15.
250 Ibid., 178.
252 Ibid., 4.
253 Ibid., 6.
254 Ibid., 5.
256 Ibid., 28.
constituting consciousnesses. Cameron even states a “Jamesian first principle: that there be nothing ‘outside’ consciousness, at least nothing determining of consciousness, that has a constituting hold over it.”

The scene from *The Golden Bowl*, above, has already suggested how what is “outside” consciousness may precisely be... consciousness. This is also the great paradox of reification: how the medium of thought, of abstraction, is not the mind (not the theater of subjectivity) but rather the universal equivalent of the commodity-form, money. As Alfred Sohn-Rethel puts it, “[R]eflection itself is not a mental process... the reflecting medium of the real abstraction is coinage.”

On my reading, James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* is a systematic presentation of the reification of consciousness: the determination of consciousness by outside objects and its condensation within them; and the possibilities for recognition that follow.

Most critics have agreed in seeing *The Portrait of a Lady* as being about a misrecognition—although, as I will show, they have not put their finger on the same place. To quickly recap the plot: A young American, Isabel Archer, is brought to England by her aunt, a Mrs. Touchett. Once there, she quickly captures the affection of an English lord, whose proposal of marriage she rejects, and of her invalid cousin Ralph. Upon her uncle’s death, Ralph secretly bequeaths her half of his own inheritance, because he wants to watch what she does with her beauty, intelligence, and a fortune that everyone in the book equates with independence. Of course this money and these expectations turn out to mean not freedom but intrigue and disaster. Isabel falls in with two dissolute, cosmopolitan, aesthete Americans, Madame Merle and her

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257 Ibid., 23.
258 Ibid., 174n.
friend Gilbert Osmond. Isabel marries Osmond, but their life together is one of suffocating
cynicism and enclosed superiority. Isabel finally breaks with Osmond when her sister-in-law
reveals that Osmond and Madame Merle were once lovers, and that Osmond’s daughter Pansy is
really his child with Madame Merle. Isabel returns to England, to Ralph’s deathbed, but not
before Madame Merle has told her the bitter secret of her inheritance (that it was Ralph’s doing).
In the last scene, Isabel departs England to return to Rome, with full consciousness of the
loveless pit of vipers that she is going back to.

It is this conclusion that most critics and readers have had trouble with. It is as though we
were watching a horror film, and the embattled heroine were to start going up the stairs of her
house, where she will have no escape. Helpless to assist her by shouting at the screen, criticism
has resorted to blame.

The implication is that Isabel has not “learned her lesson” properly—but what lessons
was that supposed to be? Here is where the theorization of consciousness becomes important.
The usual way that the novel is read is that Isabel’s error consists in adopting Osmond’s hermetic
doctrine of aesthetic egoism, namely that the best way to keep the self unsullied by the gross
world, is to make the self into an aesthetic object. On this reading, Isabel exchanges an
indeterminate, abstract freedom for the lacquered definiteness of being a rare object among her
husband’s fine things.

I call this the “fall” reading, one where Isabel descends from a position of autonomous
subjectivity into an unfulfilling, restricted instrumentalization at the hands of Osmond. The move
is from a naïve indeterminacy, soaring above particulars, to a crushing, definite placement—
which is at the same time a criticism of the unworldly abstraction of her initial self-conception.
These positions are dialectically linked: Osmond is seen to be the “truth” of Isabel’s earlier idealism and its insufficiencies.

The “fall” reading follows automatically from the idea of a determining consciousness. In a first move, consciousness is constructed as heroic—in the interpretive model, as a kind of detective; in the pragmatist model, opposing praxis to the autonomous self, as the fairy tale hero who must leave the confines of home and learn what fear is; and in the intersubjective model, as plural consciousnesses, the mind is all that there is on stage, so that all relations are still between consciousnesses. In a second move, this heroic agency is either blamed or victimized.

But Isabel Archer is her mistake. Her subjectivity does not lamentably become objectified and (badly) determined; her subjectivity is always-already determined, narcissistically caught up in an object. And self-consciousness is shown to be the moral equivalent of a hamster wheel. Indeed, the ground of the ethical subject in James is not self-consciousness, not an agency that is further “inside.” Rather, the ethical act begins from where the subject does not perceive herself externally, from a misrecognition in the world of phenomena. Indeed, never in Henry James is “our” ethical notion phenomenologically identical with that of a narrated self-consciousness.260

This sounds like a fairly “pragmatist” version of Henry James—the emphasis on perspective, the refusal of a priori truths, intervention in external reality, etc. The same case could be made

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260 This division of the subject’s appearance-to-self from the subject as free ethical agent is also the basis of the Kantian practical philosophy, which forms the starting point for Lukács’ typology in his Theory of the Novel. In Kant’s transcendental idealism, self-consciousness is confined to the phenomenal “I” and its dealings with appearances (including itself); only the noumenal ground of the subject is free, inasmuch as it does not stand under deterministic laws of experience. For Kant, the subject’s freedom stands beyond the boundary of experience and beyond the subject’s appearance-to-itself. Pure reason, not belonging to appearances or subject to succession in time, therefore does not intervene in appearances or produce effects according to “our” causality. “Free” means: effective only within the unknowable, atemporal beyond where consciousness has its ground but cannot recognize itself (as cause or as appearance). In Lukács’s Theory of the Novel, the novel is the artistic form expressing the gulf that Kant set up between the subject and the things-in-themselves underlying objective reality. As in Kant, The Theory of the Novel’s separation of a knowable, subjective experience and an unknowable objective ground is repeated within the subject itself, vitiating any immediate ethical certainty. James’s fiction effects an overturning of these partitions: the ethical is the unconscious.
for James’s conception of recognition: he doesn’t produce a substantial, latent content from the
given, but like a good pragmatist he shows the nullity of “immanence.” But I think not. Not, the
pragmatist anti-metaphysical point that nothing is illuminated—but, what is illuminated (in
recognition) is a nothingness. Not, that there is no transcendental position (the “absolute” or
“thing-in-itself”)—but, this position is consubstantial with the subject’s negation in appearance,
with the holes and oversights belonging to that perspective. Not the departure from an entrenched
observational mode into an immersion in praxis—but, the way that that observation is already
mirrored back from external reality. All this is what James is up to in The Portrait of a Lady, as
the following analysis of that novel’s recognition plot will show.

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This “perpetual recurrence of the same thing” causes us no astonishment when it relates
to active behavior on the part of the person concerned and when we can discern in him an
essential character-trait which always remains the same and which is compelled to find
expression in a repetition of the same experiences. We are much more impressed by cases
where the subject appears to have a passive experience, over which he has no influence,
but in which he meets with a repetition of the same fatality... The most moving poetic
picture of a fate such as this is given by Tasso in his romantic epic Gerusalemme
Liberata. Its hero, Tancred, unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is
disguised in the armor of an enemy knight. After her burial he makes his way into a
strange magic forest which strikes the Crusaders’s army with terror. He slashes with his
sword at a tall tree; but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul
is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved once
again.  

Why does Isabel go back to Rome at the end of the novel, presumably back to her
tyrannical husband and failed marriage? It would be unreasonable, inaccurate, and pointless to
argue that The Portrait of a Lady illustrates Freud’s theory of repetition-compulsion, and such is
not my intention here. (To begin with, repetition plays a very different role.) But Freud’s
emphasis on the passivity of Tancred’s sorrowful fate can only echo what is most troubling about

Isabel Archer, who has an early premonition that she “can’t escape [her] fate” nor “escape unhappiness.”

We are accustomed in novel-reading to seeing heroines (Emma Woodhouse, Gwendolen Harleth) morally rebuked for arrogant, heedless striving. Isabel, by contrast, suffers even though in marrying Gilbert Osmond she has evidently set aside the presumptions of ambition, declaring that life is no longer “such an inviting expanse” as it had once seemed to her. “One must choose a corner and cultivate that,” she tells Henrietta Stackpole (II, 65). Nonetheless, through this passive renunciation she only pours on herself treble confusion and woe.

Any reading of the novel that is not to reduce it to an overlong lecture about the dangers of being taken in by supercilious charlatans, must start from Isabel’s responsibility for her fate. James takes every pain to emphasize Isabel’s freedom and circumspection: she marries Osmond “with her eyes open” (II, 160), “not deceav’d,” in Milton’s words. Of course there are dark facts of which she is kept unaware. (I will show later on how these same excluded elements belong to the way Isabel frames her world and her choice: what is brought out by subsequent recognition was already part of the falsifying, misleading structure of appearances from the outset.) Isabel’s much-vaunted freedom and determination to see for herself turn around and becomes their own opposite: the blindfolded passivity of stepping into “the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation” that is her marriage (II, 196)—surely as nightmarish a scene as the terrifying magic forest in Tasso.

263 “One must accept one’s deeds. I married him before all the world; I was perfectly free; it was impossible to do anything more deliberate.” (II, 284)
The question then is when Isabel “falls”—when Isabel first “gets in wrong,” in Hemingway’s phrase from “The Killers”—whether she first objectifies herself in marrying Osmond, or if this is only a repetition of an earlier, unhappy interpellation.

James writes in the preface to the novel how his creative process began with Isabel conceived independently of any “set of relations.”264 Rather than beginning with a situation or a setting, James started from Isabel as a “stray figure, the unattached character, the image en disponibilité.”265

Thus I had my vivid individual—vivid, so strangely, in spite of being still at large, not confined by the conditions, not engaged in all the tangle, to which we look for much of the impress that constitutes an identity. If the apparition was still all to be placed how came it to be vivid?266

The question for James is how Isabel is “to be placed”—how he can begin “organizing an ado” about her.267 This is his writerly problem, but the novel’s narrative makes no attempt to cover the tracks of its creation. James sets Isabel before us in all her disponibilité: an Albany girl waiting quietly in a room for something to happen to her, unengaged, set apart from local life—before promptly embedding her in a marriage plot and in the international scene afoot at Gardencourt. The story quite literally follows the sequence of James’s “process”: first character, then placement.

This necessity of finally being placed, of becoming a determinate someone instead of remaining a groundless “apparition,” is how Isabel justifies her marriage to Gilbert Osmond, undoubtedly the central “ado” of the novel. Not only is Isabel not placed at the start of the novel, her intellectual self-conception dictates that she “must be free, and freedom means first of all

265 Ibid., 44.
266 Ibid., 47.
267 Ibid., 48.
independence, not being attached or committed anywhere, not being identified with a role or function, not, indeed, ‘being’ anything (at least, she seems to think, not yet, not for a while).”

Coming down from this lofty, unattached attitude that led her to turn down both Caspar Goodwood and Lord Warburton, Isabel didactically concedes that, “[I]f one marries at all one touches the earth... [O]ne must marry a particular individual” (II, 74). But her marriage is, ultimately, a horrendous mistake. As a determination or placement, it is ruinous.

In marrying Osmond, Isabel not only is placed but is also objectified—she becomes “like some curious piece in an antiquary’s collection” (II, 42). It is this objectification which Posnock associates with the Jamesian critique of reification—her mistake is to “reify” herself. Posnock argues that this objectification is only the mirror image and corollary to Isabel’s belief in her “absolute subjectivity,” her “relentless drive to fortify the self and subdue experience”: a dialectic whereby her autonomous self-conception can only be realized in being treated as a thing, “as senseless and convenient as mere shaped wood and iron” (II, 379).

But is her marriage the first moment that Isabel is “placed”? Is there an earlier determination in which she “touches the earth”? Everything depends on this. If Isabel’s mistake in marrying Osmond only sets in stone (sets in porcelain?) her naïve conception of the self—whether a mistaken instrumental aestheticizing, or a valorization of contentless freedom—then the incredible spiritual ravages that Isabel suffers would be James’s didactic warning against such aesthetic idealism. Isabel, then, has to be “brought low from heights of self-idealization,” to

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269 “Absolute subjectivity engenders the mirror image of its opposite—woman as ‘object.’ ‘She made a convenience of me,’ Isabel Archer says of Madame Merle... Her fate is caught in Adorno’s remark that “the more autonomously the subject ascends above the ontic realm, the more it turns surreptitiously into an object, in ironic cancellation of its constitutive role.” Posnock, *The Trial of Curiosity*, 261.
270 Ibid., 261.
271 Ibid., 118.
learn the virtues of “immersion” in contrast to the rigidities of the autonomous ego. A bad idea leads to a bad mistake: the point was not to have had that idea in the first place. I find this unhelpful and cruel. It is like telling Tancred that he repeatedly kills Clorinda because of his bad habit of waving swords around. But to argue, as I do, that Isabel is responsible for what happens, means that she has produced the very framework within which she errs.

For Isabel is not first “placed” when she descends from an abstract freedom to the determinate confines of a particular marriage, rendering herself an acquired aesthetic object. Rather, the very appearance of this abstract subjective freedom itself is placed and determined, a produced effect and not a spontaneous immediate state. Certainly Isabel speaks in terms of a self-positing subjectivity unmarked by and indifferent to material otherness: “[O]ne’s ideal could never become concrete” (I, 266); “Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me; everything’s on the contrary a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one” (I, 288). But we are not obligated to accept Isabel’s image of her consciousness as self-constituted and transcendental. Here I depart from Sharon Cameron’s phenomenological account of Jamesian consciousness as autonomous and self-positing, where intersubjectivity is the supra-psychological grounds of the domination and productivity of consciousness. Isabel’s self as an unbounded ideal freedom is, on the contrary, intensely framed and situated.

This framing is doubled by the novel’s structure of recognition. There are two big moments of revelation in the novel that recast Isabel’s perception of what has befallen her. First, Isabel learns from the Countess Gemini that Gilbert Osmond and Madame Merle had been lovers before Osmond’s marriage, that Pansy is their illegitimate lovechild, and that Isabel’s courtship with Osmond was a stage-managed conspiracy to gain her fortune. Shortly thereafter, Madame

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272 Ibid., 12.
273 Cameron, Thinking in Henry James, 3-7, 22, 29.
Merle, exposed at last, tells Isabel that Ralph Touchett, not his father, is really Isabel’s benefactor (something the reader already knows). Temporally, these recognitions are given in reverse of their order and scale, almost nested one inside the other like Russian dolls, since Isabel’s fortune precedes and looms over her marriage. The first recognition shows the devastating concealed determinations that Isabel’s freedom succumbs to, almost the hidden strings pulling her limbs. The isolated consciousness, we see, is not entitled to posit freely its own world of others, treating life coolly as a set of unencumbered aesthetic-critical judgments. Life is rather a matter of being tossed, without bearings, into a world already in motion and multiply entangled, even instrumentalized within other people’s projects. If things stopped here, the novel’s lesson would be something like, “Be on your guard!” But a second illumination quickly follows, to show that this consciousness of freedom is itself a product of further determinations. What had appeared to Isabel to be her duty to a transcendent principle of freedom, an obligation to suspend reality in a cosmopolitan accumulating of impressions, is unmasked as a show enacted for Ralph Touchett’s observation. She learns, in effect, that there is no symbolic guarantee of her liberty—the view for which she has performed her life is only that of a disappointed, terminally ill empirical person.

For Isabel’s first placement is to be interpellated by Ralph’s gaze, which is also her first “objectification”—the gaze is her subjectivity as an object. At the same time, Isabel’s blindspots, where recognition will later emerge, are inscribed in this perspective. Her “fall” is not a set of errors made on top of this, but she is in a sense already these mistakes and oversights and misrecognitions. Instead of showing us a “fall” that might have been avoided by a more scrupulous or more pragmatic actor, the novel shows that we are at our most “framed” (placed, determined) at the very moment we suppose that a free choice lies transparently before us. And
as I will argue about the ending of the novel, real freedom does not lie in being “sufficient to have stood,” but rather in retroactively affirming these choices, filling in the gaps of the past with the present self. Isabel at last decides not to “escape,” but to identify with what was negatively presented in that first distorted framing.

Her recognitions are belated illuminations of alienated aspects of her desire and subjectivity. She must “put herself” back into the gaps of fate and misrecognition. We have seen something similar in Hegel’s Unhappy Consciousness who, searching ever for an external confirmation of its being, cannot see “the inner certainty of itself... [in] the process of canceling and enjoying reality,—existence in the form of independent things. The unhappy consciousness, however, finds itself merely desiring and toiling... [I]ts inner life really remains still a shattered certainty of itself; that confirmation of its own existence which it would received through work and enjoyment, is, therefore, just as tottering and insecure.”

With reference to Freud’s theory of repetition-compulsion mentioned earlier, the key element for my argument is to see Isabel as a “barred subject.” From the outset, the psychoanalytic cure consisted in leading the patient to recognize in her hysterical symptoms not an external affliction with a physiological aetiology, but the expression of her own repressed desires and the history of her personal symbolism. The “barred subject” of the unconscious describes the disavowal (by the ego) of the unconsciousness’s productions, wherein the dream, or the parapraxis, or the symptom is classed as accidental, unintentional, and unwanted, hence consigned to non-signifying objectivity. Lacan identifies this split or misrecognition as the essence of repetition-compulsion: the “insistence of the signifying-chain” is correlative with the “ex-sistence” of “the subject of the unconscious” (Écrits I, 11). In the parapraxis, the symptom, or the dream—alienated by language—the subject is really enjoying or pleasuring herself. “The

274 Hegel, Phenomenology of Mind, 259.
symptoms constitute the sexual activity of the patient.\textsuperscript{275} As Hegel writes, the Unhappy Consciousness “in appearance renounces the satisfaction... but it gets the actual satisfaction of that feeling, for it \textit{has been} desire, work, and enjoyment.”\textsuperscript{276}

What the subject is “barred” from, then, is the objective form of her own (condensed) meaning and (mutilated) desire.\textsuperscript{277} What shows up instead does not seem to belong to the self at all: a debilitating illness, or a tragic chance happening, e.g. in the example from Tasso, or in the dream, “Father, don’t you see I’m burning,” where a beloved child’s funeral wrappings catch fire.\textsuperscript{278} It is a hard saying to understand a misfortune like this as \textit{one’s own doing}. This line of argument can seem like a show trial where one confesses to a whole slate of uncommitted crimes, thereby laying claim to an omnipotence (guilty of \textit{everything}!) belied by one’s presence in the dock. But if there is something unhappily deterministic about placing oneself in a chain of unconscious causality,\textsuperscript{279} the point is \textit{not} to recover somewhere an un-barred subject. Robert Pippin nicely captures the paradox here: for Isabel “to have achieved a self-determined life is to ‘recover’ her past as her own,”\textsuperscript{280} i.e. this self-determination can only be accomplished retrospectively, by restoring intention to the discontinuity and fumbling of a botched life. When faced with the truth of her choices, the morbid ways that her desires have come to pass, Isabel does not retreat from them, does not plead that she didn’t mean it. Instead, she affirms her own meaning within what she can only regret, claiming a mangled outcome as something desired. “One must accept one’s deeds. I married him before all the world; I was perfectly free; it was

\textsuperscript{276} Hegel, \textit{Phenomenology of Mind}, 262.
\textsuperscript{277} As well as being barred from the “lost” \textit{jouissance} whose lack is recovered (posited) in the big Other.
\textsuperscript{278} Freud, \textit{Interpretation of Dreams}, 547-50.
\textsuperscript{279} “The displacement of the signifier determines the subjects in their acts, their destiny, their rejections, their blindness, in their success and in their fate.” (\textit{Écrits} I, 30)
\textsuperscript{280} Pippin, \textit{Henry James}, 142.
impossible to do anything more deliberate” (II, 284). In saying this, and in returning to Osmond, Isabel writes herself into her own history as free within the long wreck of her past.

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Isabel Archer is first introduced to the reader almost as a pair of disembodied eyes, like those staring out of the dark forest in Disney’s Snow White: “She was looking at everything, with an eye that denoted clear perception” (I, 18); “she had an immense curiosity about life and was constantly staring and wondering” (I, 45). Her gaze even precedes her: on her arrival at Gardencourt, Ralph Touchett finds that he “had been an object of observation” for Isabel “for some moments before he perceived her” (I, 16). She is all vision, “seeing without judging” (I, 42). This Ur-Isabel, this incorporeal vector of perception, is very much the “not confined” and “not entangled” “apparition” of James’s preface. A portrait on such a bare background is not yet a person—she lacks what “constitutes an identity.” She is more like a soul primed for metempsychosis.

Isabel immediately becomes an object of observation and conjecture—even before her arrival, really, as Ralph Touchett and his father debate the wording of the telegram announcing her impending visit (I, 13). Once at Gardencourt, Isabel cannot remain a mere pair of eyes, or a question mark, for long. Her own spontaneous, irrepressible vision is soon met by her cousin’s gaze. Ralph is described as contemplating Isabel in architectural terms that recall the famous metaphor of “the house of fiction” in James’s preface: “He surveyed the edifice from the outside and admired it greatly; he looked in at the windows and received an impression of proportions equally fair. But he felt that he saw it only by glimpses and that he had not yet stood under the roof” (I, 87). It is this gaze which structures everything that comes after, framing and tilting Isabel’s own perspective and opening up the field in which Merle and Osmond appear. “I don’t
pretend to advise you,” Ralph tells Isabel; “I content myself with watching you—with the deepest interest.” (I, 211)

By contrast, look at Isabel’s response to Caspar Goodwood, when he meets her in London. She is trying on a cosmopolitan attitude that is new to her, as if to hear how it sounds in her voice:

This attitude was part of a system, a theory, that she had lately embraced, and to be thorough she said after a moment: “Don’t think me unkind if I say it’s just that—being out of your sight—that I like. If you were in the same place I should feel you were watching me, and I don’t like that—I like my liberty too much. If there’s a thing in the world I’m fond of,” she went on with a slight recurrence of grandeur, “it’s my personal independence.” (I, 227-8).

Here, Isabel opposes being-seen to her independence. But she is not being “thorough” at all, having made no similar objection to Ralph’s open professions of watching her every move. And if this is a new system for her, it is not one plucked at random from the intellectual ether. Rather, Isabel’s theoretical independence is (however counterintuitively) an expression of Ralph’s gaze. When she dresses her liberty up as a grandiose posture, it is under the confessed personal observation of her cousin, and when her accession to a fortune makes this liberty possible outside of the abstract, she exercises it under the (concealed) auspices of Ralph’s continued scrutiny. Unmoored free agency and autonomy=being seen by Ralph Touchett.

The crucial development here is the passage from Ralph’s gaze to the gaze of the impersonal Other, the transcendental guarantor-observer of Isabel’s free ego—for, in the novel’s final recognition, when Madame Merle’s character lies naked before Isabel, her parting shot is to reverse this move. Defeated, Madame Merle’s only power is—like Toto in The Wizard of Oz—to yank back the curtain that hides the wizard’s pathetic true identity. This recognition, which sets
everything in motion for the book’s conclusion, resolves the ideal spectator of Isabel’s life into this frail, dying, heartbroken man.

Early on, Ralph tells Henrietta Stackpole that, when it comes to Isabel, “‘I’m only Caliban; I’m not Prospero’” (I, 169):

[Henrietta]: “You were Prospero enough to make her what she has become. You’ve acted on Isabel Archer since she came here, Mr. Touchett.”

“I, my dear Miss Stackpole? Never in the world. Isabel Archer has acted on me—yes; she acts on every one. But I’ve been absolutely passive.”

“You’re too passive, then. You had better stir yourself and be careful. Isabel’s changing every day; she’s drifting away—right out to sea.” (I, 169-70)

The irony here is that when Ralph does play the Prospero figure, in arranging for his father to divide the inheritance between himself and Isabel—weaving Isabel’s fate behind the scenes, incognito, through mediaries—he makes a dreadful mess of the life he wants to enchant. “The direful spectacle of the wrack” this time is all too real and not a mirage. Ralph, in being “too passive,” in observing Isabel, by a dialectical inversion is found to have “acted on” her. In “watching,” “surveying,” sneaking “glimpses” of Isabel, his own vision acts as a kind of lure to draw hers. Isabel, all perception, is caught in this narcissistic reflection of another set of eyes returning her look. What first captivates Isabel is thus not the allures of European sophistication (Lord Warburton) but the mirroring of her gaze of her cousin’s rapt fascination, which resembles a closed loop: a mutual interest in “the thrill of seeing what a young lady does who won’t marry Lord Warburton” (I, 212).

Although Ralph’s transformation is yet to come, Henrietta Stackpole detects the secret identity between the ungainly creature and the Duke of Milan. For Caliban’s grotesque appearance is at once a disturbing rupture in excess of the magical arrangement of the island, a “dull thing,” “hag-seed,” who makes an indecipherable streak across the field of vision—
What have we here? a man or a fish? dead or alive? A fish: he smells like a fish; a very ancient and fish-like smell; a kind of, not of the newest, Poor-John. A strange fish! Were I in England now, as once I was, and had but this fish painted, not a holiday fool there but would give a piece of silver: there would this monster make a man; any strange beast there makes a man. When they will not give a doit to relieve a lame beggar, they will lay out ten to see a dead Indian. Legg’d like a man! and his fins like arms! (II.ii.21-3)

—and at the same time a necessary node for Prospero’s Robinson Crusoe-like “economy.” This object of disgust, however repudiated and spurned by the island’s sovereign, in reality stands in for Prospero’s order, as the particular product of its logic. Behind the hideous creature glower the enchanter’s eyes. Thus, Caliban’s body makes a stain, blot, or mark—the “strange, suspended, oblique object”\(^{281}\) that indicates “the pre-existence of a gaze—I see only from one spot, but in my existence I am seen from all around.”\(^{282}\) Caliban’s obscene existence (indeed, his obscenity learned from Prospero) is a foul marker of Prospero’s omniscience—the inscrutable point of excess that signifies the magician’s stage-management.

Isabel is first caught in the mirror of Ralph’s returned gaze, but what is decisive is the disappearance of this literal set of eyes belonging to a person, and the submersion of Ralph’s intent observation under a symbolic mandate: the move from “a gaze seen” to “a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other.”\(^{283}\) In acting as Isabel’s Proppian benefactor, Ralph is adamant that this story-function not appear as his own. The new will must appear as Mr. Touchett’s own eccentricity in favor of Isabel. Even in obliging his son, the father remarks on the somewhat perverse implications of the wish: “When I cared for a girl—when I was young—I wanted to do more than look at her” (I, 262). But the consequence is really to erase Ralph’s looking-at-Isabel from her field of vision. His surveillance of her is all the more effective in becoming impersonal and disembodied. The seen figure of Caliban gives way to the all-seeing Prospero.

\(^{282}\) Ibid., 84.
\(^{283}\) Ibid., 98.
Ralph moves into the background, relishing the spectacle he has arranged for himself:

“Ralph looked forward to a fourth, a fifth, a tenth besieger; he had no conviction she would stop at a third” (I, 395). No longer does he lock eyes with Isabel, or advertise his reconnaissance mission to her, opting to proceed clandestinely. “Ralph Touchett, when he appeared to be looking listlessly and awkwardly over her head, was really dropping on her an intensity of observation” (I, 413). Isabel refuses to see, in the logic of her “fate” that she has been voicing, anything to do with the quotidian personage of Ralph, whose advice she haughtily shrugs off. When this “little” other starts to claim the privileges of the “big” Other’s gaze, Isabel refuses any identity between the two, almost to the point of covering her ears:

“I had treated myself to a charming vision of your future,” Ralph observed... “I had amused myself with planning out a high destiny for you. There was to be nothing of this sort in it. You were not to come down so easily or so soon...”

“I don’t understand you in the least... You say you amused yourself with a project for my career—I don’t understand that. Don’t amuse yourself too much, or I shall think you’re doing it at my expense.” (II, 69-70)

From Isabel’s perspective, then, her inheritance is in no way an extension or displacement of her cousin’s observation of her. Rather, she construes Ralph’s plan for his own “mere amusement” (I, 262) as an alien intrusion, to be “look[ed] at... in a dozen different lights” and “scrutinized” (I, 300-1). Above all, she doesn’t see any strings attached. So, her unlooked-for windfall is rationalized abstractly; the immediate consequence is “to be able to do” (I, 301), a responsibility she feels imposed on her from without: “I look at life too much as a doctor’s prescription” (I, 319). The “prescription” that Isabel imposes on herself is essentially a categorical imperative, a single and indeterminate principle not derived from experience. To be able to do, so generally, is possible only as long as one does not so much as exercise this privilege: the very nature of doing

284 “The gaze only presents itself to us under the form of a strange contingency.” Ibid., 85.
is to close down other possibilities of doing. Nothing could be less pragmatist than such a spontaneous directive, uttered from within and really proscribing action. But this imperative is not really derived from an \textit{a priori} regulative moral law, but on the contrary, from her specific position in being interpellated by Ralph’s benefactor-function. Moreover, it is based on Isabel’s illusion that nothing has happened, i.e. that she is still the same girl as when she was sitting in Albany. She still thinks that she has not been “placed,” and that this can be postponed indefinitely. But this exact illusion is itself her placement—a determinate perspective that dissembles itself as the very opposite: abstract, unbounded free consciousness.

Ralph’s gaze, then, is the first “placement” and objectification\textsuperscript{285} of Isabel, which is only repeated in the misrecognition of Osmond and Merle.

To be sure, mine is a tendentious psychoanalytic reading, asserting the pre-existence of a symbolic order in the retrospective construction of an ego. But it is also just what Henry James says in the book’s preface, describing the innumberable windows looking out from the “house of fiction”:

> These apertures, of dissimilar shape and size, hang so, all together, over the human scene that we might have expected of them a greater sameness of report than we find. They are but windows at best, mere holes in a dead wall, disconnected, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life. But they have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other. He and his neighbors are watching the same show, but one seeing more where the other sees less, one seeing black where the other sees white, one seeing big where the other sees small, one seeing coarse where the other sees fine. And so on, and so on; there is fortunately no saying on what, for the particular

\textsuperscript{285} Following Lacan’s insight that the gaze is an \textit{object}. “Once there is this gaze, the subject tries to accommodate herself to it, becomes this object that sticks out, this point of vanishing being, with with the subject confuses her own defeat. Further, of all the objects in which the subject can recognize the subordination (\textit{dépendance}) where she is in the register of desire, the gaze specifies itself as unknowable. This is why it is, more than any other object, misrecognized.” Ibid., 97.
pair of eyes, the window may not open; "fortunately" by reason, precisely, of this incalculability of range.\textsuperscript{286}

Isabel’s mistake is just this: to imagine that she has a “hinged door opening straight upon life,” that she can exercise her consciousness in unlimited observation and unfixed \textit{praxis}. There is not, as in Plato’s allegory of the cave, any escape out of the edifice, where one might frolic among things-in-themselves before reporting back to the other prisoners. We are stuck at our “mere hole in a dead wall,” faced with the situation of a theatergoer who buys the cheapest tickets. Every consciousness is marked “Obstructed View.” But this limitation is not, as in the philosophy of Kant, an \textit{a priori} restriction built into “pure reason.” In James’s metaphor, each pair of eyes is decisively placed, particularized, and “distinct from every other.” And Isabel’s being situated at a “pierced aperture” (46) not only rules out her notion of gaining an unobstructed vision of the world—this notion of freedom itself belongs to this delimited perspective.

The “house of fiction” metaphor might suggest the following reading, which is inimical to my line of argument: \textit{If our consciousness of the world is only ever from a partial perspective, and if Isabel’s mistakes stem from ignorance of what will later be illuminated, then what befalls her is actually built into her subjective position, once she is set at whatever “window.” If Isabel had seen “more” instead of “less,” fine instead of coarse, and so on, then she would not have been such an easy prey. So, she is doomed in advance from the sheer fact of her location and incomplete perspective—not unlike the man from the country in Kafka’s parable “Before the Law.” He is told, on the verge of death, after years of being refused admittance, “No one else could ever be admitted here, since this gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut it.” His failure and tragedy is just to occupy that position prepared for him—to be in his place is itself enough to seal his fate.}

\textsuperscript{286} James, \textit{Art of the Novel}, 46.
Much as William James’s pragmatist philosophy, in its railings against idealism, often seems to imagine that Cartesian dualism can be “overcome” just by booting the subject out of his oak-paneled study and into the real world, this reading fails to include the limitations and structures of the subject as essential to appearance itself. But *The Portrait of a Lady* could not be clearer. The framing and restrictions of Isabel’s field of vision are not just overlaid upon an unchanging and static objectivity; she also posits a symbolic depth behind the framed image, a space “through the looking glass”—the logic of what she is “meant” for, a quasi-providential slot preordained for her. What appears through the window is not just raw appearance; the structure of appearance contains, from the outset, the returned gaze of an Other.287

As this is something of an obscure proposition, take Freud’s case study on the Wolf Man as a demonstration, which revives the principle conceit (looking out a window) from the “house of fiction.” You will recall that Freud interprets the patient’s dream—of five wolves perched in a tree outside his window, staring intently—as reproducing a childhood experience of awakening and witnessing his parents having sex.

He had woken up and had seen something. The attentive looking, which in the dream is ascribed to the wolves, should rather be shifted on to him. At a decisive point, therefore, a transposition has taken place... [I]nstead of immobility (the wolves sat there motionless; they looked at him, but did not move) the meaning would have to be: the most violent motion. That is to say, he suddenly woke up, and saw in front of him a scene of violent movement at which he looked with strained attention... [T]he distortion would consist in an interchange of subject and object, of activity and passivity: being looked at instead of looking.288

In other words, the subject’s own gaze has to be written into the scene witnessed in the dream—here, as the wolves’ stare. The viewer is not excluded from what it is seen outside the window;

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287 “The Other... the place corresponding in our model to the real space on which are superimposed the virtual images ‘behind the mirror.’” Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* II (Paris: Seuil, 1999), 155.
rather, he is essentially reflected therein. The misperceived gaze is the representative of the subject, a narcissistic object alienated in the symbolic field. It is simultaneously the Other’s viewpoint (for whose desire fantasy is staged) and the trace of that too-much of enjoyment (the repressed infantile trauma of confused observation). Moreover, as I argued above concerning Ralph Touchett, this reflection is a narcissistic mirroring: if Isabel is originally captivated by Ralph’s gaze, this is because she is all staring and looking to begin the book.

In other words, what is being presented in The Portrait of a Lady is not so much the record of a consciousness, even of a “reflected” one, as the way that what appear as the inner workings of an autonomous self-consciousness are already articulated and “at work” outside of that interiority. The distortions and gaps in Isabel’s subjective position do not remain there—the very limitations of reflection are already included in objectivity, in things themselves. That is to say, illusion is not a passive category, but shows up as a hostile external force.

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Nowhere is this more evident than in the case of Madame Merle. Since I want to argue that she is presented by Ralph as a model for Isabel, a point of identification, it will be best to start with how Ralph describes her:

“She’s complete.” (I, 252)

“Serena Merle hasn’t a fault.” (I, 277)

“She’s too good, too kind, too clever, too learned, too accomplished, too everything.” (I, 361)

“Oh the character of every one else you may find some little black speck... But on Madame Merle’s nothing, nothing, nothing!” (I, 362)

289 “Consciousness is implicated and involved in the development of the object, and the reflection is the same on both sides, i.e. there is only one reflection.” Hegel, Phenomenology of Mind, 180.
“Worldly? No...she’s the great round world itself!” (I, 362).

Madame Merle is the “complete” image of the precocious but disoriented Isabel, reflected back at her and misrecognized as her own image: without defect, uncertainty, a trace of a past, or fuzziness in self-presentation. Isabel’s identification with her is almost immediate—Madame Merle “presented herself as a model” from the first, engaging Isabel’s admiration and envy (I, 270)—but is thoroughly reinforced by Ralph, as though her were casting a spotlight on this perfectly polished and powdered vision. This identification with a reflected, ideal image, governed by the gaze of the Other, corresponds to the psychoanalytic concept of the the “specular image” and its role in the mirror stage—the mastery of the unbroken image assumed (anticipated) by the infant whose motions are still fragmented and halting.

Isabel and Madame Merle’s friendship eventually sours. (Madame Merle is only a slightly better friend than Iago.) The ugliness of this disintegration—the resentment and suspicion that closeness and similarity give rise to—is perfectly expressed in Lacan’s description of the ideal-ego in the mirror stage identification:

What the subject finds in this altered image... is the paradigm for all the forms of resemblance that will tint the world of objects with hostility, by projecting there the avatar of the narcissistic image, which, from the jubilant effect of its encounter in the mirror, becomes in this confrontation with its counterpart the release valve for the most intimate aggression.

But this poisonous intimacy is all to come. How does Isabel first respond to Madame Merle?

“She’s a Frenchwoman,” Isabel said to herself; “she says that as if she were French.” And this supposition made the visitor more interesting to our speculative heroine. (I, 245)

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291 Ibid., 289.
Isabel found it difficult to think of her in any detachment or privacy, she existed only in her relations, direct or indirect, with her fellow mortals. One might wonder what commerce she could possibly hold with her own spirit. One always ended, however, by feeling that a charming surface doesn’t necessarily prove one superficial; this was an illusion in which, in one’s youth, one had but just escaped being nourished. Madame Merle was not superficial—not she. She was deep, and her nature spoke none the less in her behavior because it spoke a conventional tongue. (I, 274)

There was something between them [Madame Merle and Ralph Touchett], Isabel said to herself, but she said nothing more than this. If it were something of importance it should inspire respect; if it were not it was not worth her curiosity. With all her love of knowledge she had a natural shrinking from raising curtains and looking into unlighted corners. The love of knowledge coexisted in her mind with the finest capacity for ignorance. (I, 284)

In each instance, Isabel can be seen putting something “behind” the image of Madame Merle: the sophistication eternally associated with being French, being “deep” and undoubtedly holding unperceived “commerce... with her own spirit,” and as having “unlighted corners” and unraised curtains in her past relations. But this depth, the space behind the curtain, so to speak—is Isabel’s creation, a “speculative” dimension carved out in thought, not corresponding to anything in appearance—coinciding only with the “through the looking glass” space from where she is regarded by the Other.

In short, Madame Merle—the architect of Isabel’s emotionally desiccated marriage, the systematic starvation of her soul—is not a foreign invader, an enemy discerned at the end of a spyglass, but rather is integral to Isabel’s structure of desire from the first. When Madame Merle brings Gilbert Osmond to impress and charm Isabel, their conversation is a kind of theatrical performance staged for an audience of one.

Isabel took on this occasion little part in the talk; she scarcely even smiled when the others turned to her invitingly; she sat there as if she had been at the play and had paid even a large sum for her place. Mrs. Touchett was not present, and these two [Osmond and Merle] had it, for the effect of brilliancy, all their own way. They talked of the Florentine, the Roman, the cosmopolite world, and might have been distinguished.
performers figuring for a charity. It all had the rich readiness that would have come from rehearsal. Madame Merle appealed to her as if she had been on the stage, but she [Isabel] could ignore any learnt cue without spoiling the scene—though of course she thus put dreadfully in the wrong the friend who had told Mr. Osmond she could be depended on. This was no matter for once; even if more had been involved she could have made no attempt to shine. There was something in the visitor that checked her and held her in suspense. (I, 355)

All of this language of being “at the play,” watching “distinguished performers,” of being “on the stage,” naturally underscores Isabel’s passivity. She is a seated member of the ticket-holding public, observing from amidst the hushed dark, while Merle and Osmond are virtuosic actors delivering their lines rapid-fire before the footlights, with all the artificiality and stagecraft of expert direction. It would seem that Isabel is a mere spectator, rooted in her assigned seat, and at a remove from what is transpiring before her. But as in the Wolf Man’s dream, there can be no true division of spectator and spectacle. Madame Merle breaks the theatrical fourth wall—she “appealed to [Isabel] as if she had been on the stage”—including her in the performance. And so Isabel’s “perverse unwillingness to glitter by arrangement” (I, 356) becomes a refusal seamlessly incorporated into the duo’s routine: not a spectatorial response, but a negative acknowledgment of a “learnt cue” in (mute) dialogue with other professionals. The artificiality, the touch of rehearsal, are addressed to Isabel, yes, but just as much are they her additions—the show being put on before her is not an indifferent, closed-off objectivity: she is herself included “onstage” through her very passivity and silence, through her very posture of removing herself therefrom.

The second half of this finely-honed act, Gilbert Osmond, is defined almost completely negatively. To Ralph, Osmond is “a vague, unexplained American... I don’t know his antecedents, his family, his origin” (I, 358). When Lord Warburton asks, “What is he besides?” Ralph answers, “Nothing at all.” (I, 427). To Mrs. Touchett (who believes she has intervened with Madame Merle to prevent the marriage), Osmond is “an obscure American dilettante, a
middle-aged widower with an uncanny child and an ambiguous income” (I, 394). Osmond’s own account of himself is just as recalcitrant and void: “Not to worry—not to strive nor struggle. To resign myself. To be content with little”—to “do nothing” (I, 381-2). Osmond is a blank screen. If Ralph says that on Madame Merle there is “nothing, nothing, nothing!” (I, 362) of discredit, then of Gilbert Osmond can be said that his substance is “nothing, nothing, nothing” of note (I, 391)—in his sister’s description of their family background.

Isabel of course converts this utter lack of quality as a tasteful covering. When Osmond has given a desiccated, audaciously bland capsule of his life: “This would have been rather a dry account of Mr. Osmond’s career if Isabel had fully believed it; but her imagination supplied the human element which she was sure had not been wanting” (I, 382-3). She brags to Caspar Goodwood, “I’m marrying a perfect nonentity” (II, 47). This is, of course, true. When Mrs. Touchett warns, “There’s nothing of him,” Isabel turns this into a virtue. “Then he can’t hurt me” (II, 54).

But Isabel never really conceives a grand passion for Osmond. Reflecting on her disposing of her inheritance, she rationalizes that “Unless she should have given it to a hospital there would have been nothing better she could do with it; and there was no charitable institution in which she had been as much interested as Gilbert Osmond” (II, 193). When I fall in love, I am never hoping to be compared to a hospital.

In turn, Osmond’s desire is characterized as that of being recognized—of returning, from within a frame, Isabel’s gaze, after lingering for years in the obscurity of the American colony in Rome. “If an anonymous drawing on a museum wall had been conscious and watchful it might have known this peculiar pleasure of being at last and all of a sudden identified” (II, 12).

*
I have spent a great many pages discussing who and what is “framed” and “placed” in the novel, how the subject is “included in appearance,” about what depth or “beyond” is “posited” behind a mirror/screen—not with the sterile aim of describing a masterpiece of literature point by point in Hegelian and/or psychoanalytic terminology, but because this is what the novel seems to be about. The burning questions that confront any reading—how to account for Isabel’s almost obstinate blindness in marrying Osmond, and for her returning to Rome at the very end when she has discovered every unsightly truth—are really variations on this essential question of recognition: how does the truth looks a moment before and a moment after it is disclosed?

The first part of this chapter has analyzed what I consider (in burning question number one) to be the priority of Ralph’s gaze over Isabel’s blindness. I now want to turn to the second question, the novel’s much-debated ending, which almost immediately follows the double revelation that Madame Merle married Isabel to her own ex-lover, for Isabel’s money, and that Ralph was responsible for his father’s will which made Isabel rich.

Beginning with the narrative leap (of some four years) taken between chapters XXXV and XXXVI (during which Isabel marries Osmond and loses a child, along with a number of illusions) the plot centers upon Osmond’s attempt to marry his daughter to Lord Warburton (and so not to Ned Rosier, with whom Pansy is in love), and Isabel’s debate in her conscience between loyalty to her husband’s plan and her creeping suspicion that Madame Merle is too involved in these affairs. Acting on this suspicion, Isabel spoils Lord Warburton’s candidacy, which has the double result of Madame Merle dropping her mask, and of Osmond sending Pansy back to a convent in Rome. At this point, Isabel learns that Ralph is dying in England, whereupon Osmond’s sister, the Countess Gemini, with the hope of inspiring Isabel to a total break with Osmond, tells Isabel what there is between Osmond and Madame Merle. Discovered
at last, and backed into a moral corner, Madame Merle’s parting shot to Isabel is to tell her the secret of Mr. Touchett’s will. And this is how everything hidden from Isabel in the first part of the novel finally comes out.

The truth is a matter of perspective, not of presence. Recognition is not just pointing at a self-explanatory objectivity. Trees in a magical forest don’t advertise themselves as containing the ghosts of slain lovers. Only the stupidest character in the entire book treats recognition as a matter of evidence and observation. Having laid bare the noxious underpinnings of Isabel’s misery, the Countess Gemini lectures her:

“Ça me dépasse, if you don’t mind my saying so, the things, all round you, that you’ve appeared to succeed in not knowing... Had it never occurred to you that he was for six or seven years her lover?”

“I don’t know. Things have occurred to me, and perhaps that was what they all meant.” (II, 365)

Contrast this with Madame Merle’s response to Isabel’s incredulity. The truth is not a matter of different knowledge, of additional information, but of where one sees it from.

“I don’t know why you say such things. I don’t know what you know.”

“I know nothing but what I’ve guessed. But I’ve guessed that.” (II, 388)

To return to the “house of fiction” metaphor, recognition is not a matter of getting a clearer view, switching windows, even of adjusting or wiping off one’s field glasses, but of the viewer’s implicit self-location within what she sees there. There is something to-be-illuminated because it is there already, in a state of disassembly. But everything is in disassembly: perception is not an ordering that comes upon a given scene, but is itself already mixed up with the being of things. And what is truly disassembled in this picture is Isabel herself.
The point is not to remove the framing to get an unobstructed view, but to see how reality itself includes the obstructions of perspective. This is why everything falls apart when Madame Merle reveals the identity of Isabel’s benefactor to be Ralph. The sustaining, ideal gaze for which Isabel performed her freedom, her destiny, and her loyalty to Osmond (keeping her own knowledge of her misery hidden from its view) is unmasked as belonging to her dying, disappointed relative. But this gaze is a perspective situated within appearance; it is not the same as Isabel’s perspective on appearance. The same is true for Isabel’s realization that her counterpart is not Madame Merle, her earlier model, but Pansy, the pawn of Merle and Osmond. Again, this is a shift of where Isabel finds her own image mirrored back to her, from “out there” where she is looking.

Like Little Dorrit, where Arthur Clennam’s identity and personal history collapse (along with his childhood home) under the light of recognition, the revelations that close The Portrait of a Lady don’t so much produce a substantial truth as they illuminate an emptiness, a determinate nothingness, where the protagonist ought to have been. At the end, Isabel no longer finds herself mirrored in the ideal of Madame Merle, nor is she the addressee of the Other’s impersonal gaze. She is denuded of these supports, and can locate herself only in identifying with the unperceived “little black speck” (apparently) nowhere to be found in Madame Merle’s past: Pansy. The recognitions that close the novel expose Isabel as entirely negated: not as absent or canceled, but as a negation present from the start and essential to the structure of her deception and illusions.

In this sense, James’s method in recognition is almost the opposite of Arthur Conan Doyle’s. In the Sherlock Holmes stories, we see a discontinuous and incomprehensible external investigation—oblique and seemingly irrelevant inquiries made, curious details ascertained—whose gaps and motivations are filled in only by Holmes’s concluding reconstruction of the case.
Being stuck in Dr. Watson’s perspective, Holmes’s method is as much a mystery to us as the crime at hand. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, we have access to the “investigating” consciousness, but it is just this that makes for the blindness and gaps in knowledge. The truth does not come about from being approached head on, nor from some refinement in Isabel’s subjective outlook—indeed, it is this subjective position which is annihilated. Unlike Sherlock Holmes, or Arthur Clennam, or Reverend Crawley, Isabel *doesn’t want to know*. The recognition comes about indirectly—not by pressing on the truth between Madame Merle and Osmond, but by the series of maneuvers around marrying Pansy. In other words, the truth emerges only through a groping, unsure intervention—not through any epistemological revision, nor by the churning of objective inevitability (as in “murder will out”). Everything proceeds not from a question whose answer she looks for, but from an uncanny impression she receives and unsuccessfully tries to file away.

Just beyond the threshold of the drawing-room she stopped short, the reason for her doing so being that she had received an impression. The impression had, in strictness, nothing unprecedented; but she felt it as something new, and the soundlessness of her step gave her time to take in the scene before she interrupted it. Madame Merle was there in her bonnet, and Gilbert Osmond was talking to her; for a minute they were unaware she had come in. Isabel had often seen that before, certainly; but what she had not seen, or at least not noticed, was that their colloquy had for the moment converted itself into a sort of familiar silence, from which she instantly perceived that her entrance would startle them... There was nothing to shock in this; they were old friends in fact. But the thing made an image, lasting only a moment, like a sudden flicker of light. Their relative positions, their absorbed mutual gaze, struck her as something detected. But it was all over by the time she had fairly seen it. (II, 164-5)

What makes this sight so disturbing? There is “nothing unprecedented,” “nothing to shock in this”—just two people talking in a room. Nonetheless, after seeing this, Isabel’s “soul was haunted with terrors which crowded to the foreground of thought as quickly as a place was made for them” (II, 188). In a word, the scene is uncanny. And, just as Freud’s autobiographical example of *das Unheimliche* is seeing his image in a mirror mounted on a swinging door, it is
Isabel’s *finding herself* in this tableau vivant, which is so disgusting to her. What a moment before was an ideal reflection (Madame Merle as model)—Isabel has just been telling herself, “the best way to profit by her friend... was to imitate her, to be as firm and bright as she” (II, 156)—suddenly becomes tense, startling, eerie.

And here Madame Merle is much too close, almost obscenely present. Although, it would seem there is no satisfactory distance at which to hold Madame Merle. Isabel, always resistant to Mrs. Touchett’s intimation that Madame Merle has made Isabel’s marriage, has becomes more so when that marriage has withered into a sarcastic stalemate. If earlier, “she couldn’t make a crime of Madame Merle’s having been the producing cause” of her knowing Osmond (II, 158), this soon degenerates into something less sure:

The fact of Madame Merle’s having had a hand in Gilbert Osmond’s marriage ceased to be one of her titles to consideration; it might have been written, after all, that there was not much to thank her for. As time went on there was less and less, and Isabel said to herself that perhaps without her these things would not have been. That reflection was instantly stifled; she knew an immediate horror at having made it. “Whatever happens to me let me not be unjust,” she said; “let me bear my burdens myself and not shift them onto others!” (II, 159)

To associate Madame Merle with [Isabel’s] disappointment would be a petty revenge... When a woman had made such a mistake, there was one way to repair it... to accept it. (II, 160-1)

So, does Isabel grant that Madame Merle made her marriage or not? She is not so much denying that this is the case (which she has on good information), as she is refusing herself the consolation of believing it, or dwelling on it. She is putting herself on guard, not against the *fact*, but against a certain angle of assault that it suggests. To give ground on this point risks slipping from “acceptance” into “unjustly” blaming her unhappiness on others—a trivial and unattractive consolation.

*But this is exactly what Madame Merle is herself doing from the other side.* Just prior to
seeing her husband communing with Madame Merle, Isabel could remark on her noticeable discretion and distance from Isabel’s affairs—“her old ally was different, was almost detached...

[In this matter of not wishing to intrude upon the inner life of the Osmond family it at last occurred to our young woman that [Madame Merle] overdid a little...; she had a dread of seeming to meddle” (II, 156-7). Madame Merle’s absenting herself from the Osmonds, washing her hands somewhat, concurs entirely with Isabel’s impulse to take all the blame on herself. As long as Madame Merle stays away, she and Isabel are working towards the same aim, mirroring each other. It is only when Madame Merle is thrust in front of her that this collaboration, the reflection of Isabel’s own self-protective denial, becomes suddenly grotesque.

It is as though Isabel recognizes in this tête-à-tête a nearly-identical composition (that she could not have seen) from earlier in the book, where Osmond and Madame Merle are arranging his marriage, strategizing with the same silent communication, the same “absorbed mutual gaze”:

[A]t a certain moment the element between them, whatever it was, always leveled itself and left them more closely face to face than either ever was with any one else. This was what had happened now. They stood there knowing each other well and each on the whole willing to accept the satisfaction of knowing as a compensation for the inconvenience—whatever it might be—of being known. (I, 346)

In other words, it is as though Isabel were witnessing the Norns cutting the thread of her own fate. But then, she hasn’t seen this earlier colloquy, and she doesn’t draw this conclusion (“my marriage was also made in this way by these fiends”).

The whole chain of the recognition might be represented as follows, with Isabel’s unconnected, abrupt response to what she sees, and the immediately-following conversation she has with Madame Merle, broken up by connections she does not presently make, in parentheses:

Here, where I thought Madame Merle was conspicuously absent from our family’s affairs (because of Osmond’s being so disappointed in the bride she procured him), I find her and
Osmond discussing Pansy’s marriage (as they had strategized over my own), in which Madame Merle is “much too interested” (II, 168) (for anyone not Pansy’s mother). That Osmond should prefer to marry Pansy to Lord Warburton than to Edward Rosier is not surprising (since Osmond sees this marriage too as a vulgar acquisition of funds), while Mr. Rosier’s troubling Madame Merle about the matter is evidently not to the point. “I don’t know what mysterious connection he may have discovered between me and Pansy,” says Madame Merle (II, 167). (In fact it is directly to the point, Madame Merle having a direct line to Osmond and being intimately involved in her nuptial arrangements.) But, being unwilling to publicly break from Osmond, my disastrous marriage being my own act and my own shame (but really being a conspiracy hatched against me by vile adventurers and liars), I should comply with this indifferent (but actually brutally materialistic) choice of a husband (against a poor suitor whom she loves in return, and in favor of a rich one who is disconcertingly still in love with me) for Pansy. (Having their daughter’s affairs in hand in such a heartless, manipulative, and cynical way, caring only for money and in despite of all decency, so, at some past time, they must also have spoken in this same pose about me, deceiving me, marrying me and robbing me of my fortune and my self-respect, while discourteously still keeping me in the dark, burdening me with the blame.)

Isabel’s reaction on the spot is, evidently, incomplete and fragmented. She plans to remain compliant with Osmond’s wishes, she draws no connection between this marriage and her own, and learns nothing definite. The scene in itself is nothing, but these gaps, what is unseen, and will only later be illuminated and filled in—this is what is horrible. And these parentheticals indicate, over and over, Isabel’s inscription in the scene, which is a repetition of how her own fate was decided. Isabel herself, the truth of her life, is this set of gaps and unperceived connections.
However little she puts everything together, this scene keeps returning to her, as a nameless discontent whose origin she can only vaguely place, scraping away at the already-precarious sense of where she stands in the world:

What set [these fears] in motion she hardly knew, unless it was the strange impression she had received in the afternoon of her husband’s being in more direct communication with Madame Merle than she suspected. That impression came back to her from time to time, and now she wondered it had never come before. (II, 188)

But even then she stopped again in the middle of the room and stood there gazing at a remembered vision—that of her husband and Madame Merle unconsciously and familiarly associated. (II, 204-5)

These returns play out against a shifting background. At first the dominant key is Isabel’s insistence, as we might say, that there is nothing to be illuminated in her situation. This outlook is bound up with an obstinate self-denial, a welling-up of unexercised energies, and certain dubious tenets of belief—elaborated at length in the famous “meditative vigil” before the fireplace in Chapter XLII. Glancing over the years since her marriage, Isabel heaps all the blame for its evident failure, not on Madame Merle or Osmond, but on herself. “[S]he had not read him right” (II, 192). “He was not changed; he had not disguised himself... he had been sincere” (II, 191). But Isabel—she has disappointed him, misled him, even, during their courtship. “[I]f she had not deceived him in intention she understood how completely she must have done so in fact. She had effaced herself when he first knew her” (II, 191). Thus, “she had been hypocritical... [Her character] was what she had kept in reserve; this was what he had not known until he had found himself... face to face with it” (II, 195).

These are bitter self-recriminations, harsh and unfair on herself, and Isabel is not only surveying a parade of facts—much of what we see her describing, surely she is also hearing for the first time, as it were. But she is also running in place. All these thoughts are bookended by the two (nearly identical) quotations above, where the vision of Osmond and Madame Merle
haunts her, prompting her introspection while refusing to yield its meaning. Her reflections begin and end at the same place, however crucial is her intervening penetration into Osmond’s malignancy and their “horrible life” (II, 202). She has discovered the falsity of the image of Osmond that was presented to her, in which her own ideals were mirrored and her place foreordained—nevertheless she is resolved to suffer being walled up, and to “conceal her misery” from Ralph; “She concealed it elaborately; she was perpetually, in [her talk with Ralph], hanging out curtains and arranging screens” (II, 203). But this deception is not only limited to Ralph, she is “playing a part” (II, 204) before the world. “[S]he believed she was not defiant, and what could be a better proof of it than that she should linger there half the night, trying to persuade herself that there was no reason why Pansy shouldn’t be married as you would put a letter in the post office?” (II, 205). In sum, she wants to hide the knowledge of her mistake from the Other, to go on as if she had perceived everything rightly and made no error. As yet this is only suppositional, but if she were to fix Pansy’s marriage to Lord Warburton, as Osmond had requested in the previous chapter, she would make this “as if” into an objective fact, proving—not to Osmond, nor to herself, nor to the encouraged Lord Warburton, nor to Madame Merle, nor to Ralph, who had not been “for a single instant a dupe” (II, 204), but to the searching but easily-fooled gaze of the Other—that she is a happy and compliant wife.

For all that Isabel re-experiences in this vigil, then, she is no closer to an epistemological breakthrough. (Many of her insights turn out to be wrong.) Nothing is illuminated here: nothing changes in her comprehension of the relationship between Osmond and Madame Merle, i.e. the startling impression that prompted her introspection. And for this reason, that all the language of discovery and epiphany here shows Isabel entering a scene, finally seeing how things really stand, being put before the thing itself:
But she had seen only half his nature then, as one saw the disk of the moon when it was partly masked by the shadow of the earth. She saw the full moon now—she saw the whole man. She had kept still, as it were, so that he should have a free field, and yet in spite of this she had mistake a part for the whole. (II, 191)

But when, as the months had elapsed, she had followed him further and he had led her into the mansion of his own habitation, then, then she had seen where she really was. She could live it over again, the incredulous terror with which she had taken the measure of her dwelling. (II, 196)

Isabel imagines that she is entering a new space, behind the image she first encountered—as one might discover a secret passageway behind a dusty painting in a Gothic novel. It is for this reason that I say there is “nothing to be illuminated” for her, because recognition doesn’t cast light on some heretofore-concealed annex, but upon just what is already there, obliterated by misprision. For Isabel at this moment, the truth-all-along was an elsewhere, literally the dark side of the moon.

No recognition, then, because she still does not see herself in the situation, she is still putting another “observer” there to look back out at her: the Other’s gaze for whom she is going to obligingly throw Pansy into the arms of Lord Warburton. Recognition only occurs when Isabel is no longer inserting this reflective “beyond” into her vision. As long as her desires are the desires of the Other—first, the idealized obligation to grandly and freely do, then the obligation to hide (and persist in) her failure and her entrapment—she overlooks her own role in the situation, thereby reproducing it. In plain language: to not know that Osmond married her for her money, to blame herself in all the erroneous ways we have just seen, is to blindly replay her own fate in Pansy’s.

It is only by a first, hesitant intercession that Isabel strikes upon the lever that will invert her perspective and bring about recognition. So, in the chapter following Isabel’s fireside reflections, she breaks out of the cynical “labyrinth” of Osmond’s “cynical intimation[s]” about Lord
Warburton (II, 188), putting the case clearly before Pansy’s suitor. Instead of working upon his lingering attachment to her, as Osmond had wished, Isabel jars Warburton out of his plans, by suggesting that Pansy’s affections lie elsewhere.

“You don’t mean that she cares for him [Rosier]?”
“Surely I’ve told you I thought she did.”
A quick blush sprang to his brow. “You told me she would have no wish apart from her father’s, and I’ve gathered that he would favor me—!” He paused a little and then suggested “Don’t you see?” through his blush...

[Pansy’s deference towards Osmond, Isabel concedes, is “a very proper feeling.”] Then at last she said: “But it hardly strikes me as the sort of feeling to which a man would wish to be indebted for a wife.” (II, 219-20)

Then, leaving the party, she tells Ned Rosier, “I’ll do what I can for you. I’m afraid it won’t be much, but I’ll do what I can for you” (II, 222).

All of this would seem quite removed from recognition as an epistemological reversal. Everything hinges on Pansy, whose role in recognition is threefold. 1) Pansy is Isabel’s counterpart or analogue; 2) in Pansy’s situation, Isabel can read the falsity and negation of her own; 3) this identity is also the fundamental contradiction upon which Isabel’s misprision and error (thus her entire situation) rest.

1) *Pansy as Isabel’s counterpart.* Of course, Pansy enters the novel almost as Isabel’s negative image: shy and recessive where Isabel is outgoing and opinionated, a “passive spectator of the operation of her fate” (I, 337-8) where Isabel is bent upon self-determination, without a dowry where Isabel is newly endowed, a little girl where Isabel is a marriageable woman. But everything that follows is to undo this opposition. Pansy is, after all, the consummate product of Osmond’s system, a human being polished down into an aesthetic object. “She was admirably finished; she had the last touch; she was really a consummate piece” (II, 90). Isabel, on the other hand, will wish to have made her “self a firm surface, a sort of corselet of silver” (II, 155). Pansy (to Isabel’s condescending observation) “was like a sheet of blank paper” to be “covered with an
edifying text” (I, 401), while Isabel in marrying Osmond imagines herself as “a polished, elegant surface” that will reflect his thoughts (II, 79). This is all implicit, however. In the novel’s second half, Osmond and Madame Merle’s arranging of Pansy’s marriage becomes for Isabel a déjà vu: the same manipulations, the same vulgar cupidity, the same aversion to love or pity, the same tendency to “make a convenience” out of persons.

2) *Pansy as Isabel’s cancelation.* But in seeing that her own marriage was “made” by Madame Merle in the same ugly way as Pansy’s is being made, Isabel sees her own image—not mirrored, but obliterated. The sinking realization is: I am that powerless, wretched creature.

Pansy... could be felt as an easy victim of fate. She would have no will, no power to resist, no sense of her own importance; she would easily be mystified, easily crushed: her force would be all in knowing when and where to cling. (II, 26-7, my emphasis).

Of course it is Isabel who, having told Caspar Goodwood, “I shouldn’t be an easy victim” (I, 224), then becomes one just as much as Pansy. If when Isabel first meets Pansy she finds her rather pathetic and pitiable, her opposite in so many ways, Isabel’s tragedy is to recognize that she is all these things, that she too was “easily... mystified, easily crushed.”

3) *Pansy as the fundamental contradiction in Isabel’s situation.* When Osmond asks Isabel to “cultivate the advantage she possessed” with Lord Warburton, to marry Pansy, this “was not an agreeable task; it was in fact a repulsive one” (II, 187). Even as Osmond plays upon the interchangeability of his wife and daughter, Isabel experiences her enlistment as a revolting compulsion: “It was what she was doing for Osmond; it was what one had to do for Osmond!” (II, 257). That Pansy’s situation repeats Isabel’s is not experienced by the latter passively—she is drawn into the ploy, made to suffer indignities, scorned for her sense of honor, accused of lying.

Pansy is also the literal, biological evidence of the Osmond-Madame Merle tryst. But this is not an inert secret, it is (as suppressed or implicit) part of how Pansy’s world is structured. So,
Madame Merle glibly disavows that she can help Mr. Rosier in getting Osmond’s ear: “I don’t know what mysterious connection he may have discovered between me and Pansy; but he came to me from the first” (II, 167). But it is this “mysterious connection,” and her real investment, that makes Pansy a sticking point and nexus around which all the flows of the novel coagulate.

How does Isabel sift out the truth from the confusions surrounding this action? She “seemed to wake from a long pernicious dream” (II, 323) only when Madame Merle finds Isabel directly blocking her plan to marry Pansy to Lord Warburton.

[Madame Merle] had suffered a disappointment which excited Isabel’s surprise—our heroine having no knowledge of her zealous interest in Pansy’s marriage; and she betrayed it in a manner which quickened Mrs. Osmond’s alarm. More clearly than ever before Isabel heard a cold, mocking voice proceed from she knew not where, in the dim void that surrounded her, and declare that this bright, strong, definite, worldly woman, this incarnation of the practical, the personal, the immediate, was a powerful agent in her destiny. She was nearer to her than Isabel had yet discovered, and her nearness was not the charming accident she had so long supposed. The sense of accident indeed had died within her that day when she happened to be struck with the manner in which the wonderful lady and her own husband sat together in private. No definite suspicion had as yet taken its place; but it was enough to make her view this friend with a different eye, to have been led to reflect that there was more intention in her past behavior than she had allowed for at the time... She moved quickly indeed, and with reason, for a strange truth was filtering into her soul. Madame Merle’s interest was identical with Osmond’s. (II, 322-3, my emphasis)

I mentioned earlier that repetition plays in the novel than in Freud’s theory of repetition-compulsion. Obviously, in the ending of the novel, when Isabel repeats her choice of Osmond, this is anything but a fatal, passive recurrence. But here, too, the uncanniness that Isabel is trying to label is that this has all happened before: “there was more intention in her past behavior,” too, than is comfortable. But what is so repugnant in this recurrence is Madame Merle’s “nearness”—the sudden, queasy inversion of the perspective of what had been an unobstructed, ideal mirroring. The effect that James is conjuring is not unlike the child’s game “Bloody Mary”: nothing is so horrifying, in a dark room, as seeing in a mirror an apparition at one’s side, already
within grasping distance. What Isabel experiences here is just this sickening anteriority and proximity.

Finally, the mask drops. Isabel sees, beneath her friend’s sophisticated and charming discourse and the enticing “verdant meads” of her appearance, the wall of “human bones that whiten all the ground,” where “human carnage taints the dreadful shore” of her Siren’s rock, visible to the uncharmed spectator.292

“Let him off—let us have him!”
Madame Merle had proceeded very deliberately, watching her companion and apparently thinking she could proceed safely. As she went on Isabel grew pale; she clasped her hands more tightly in her lap. It was not that her visitor had at last thought it the right time to be insolent; for this was not what was most apparent. It was a worse horror than that. “Who are you—what are you?” Isabel murmured. “What have you to do with my husband?”...

“What have you to do with me?” Isabel went on.
Madame Merle slowly got up, stroking her muff, but not removing her eyes from Isabel’s face. “Everything!” she answered.
Isabel sat there looking up at her, without rising; her face was almost a prayer to be enlightened. But the light of this woman’s eyes seemed only a darkness. “Oh misery!” she murmured at last; and she fell back, covering her face with her hands. It had come over her like a high-surging wave that Mrs. Touchett was right. Madame Merle had married her. (II, 326-7)

Leaving aside the recognition for a moment, what stands out here is the audacity of Madame Merle’s power over Isabel, her frank and unapologetic domination (with Osmond) of Isabel. If she drops her mask, she does so advisedly—it isn’t a slip-up. For me it is hard to read the first person plural, “let us have him!” without the overtones of Linda Blair in The Exorcist, which exactly complements the effect James is after: something unholy is being revealed here, moreover something insolent to all decency.

James has earlier prepared us for the form of this scene: Isabel is aware that about Madame Merle “there was a corner of the curtain that never was lifted; it was as if she remained after all something of a public performer, condemned to emerge only in character and in costume” (II,

292 Homer, Odyssey, Alexander Pope translation.
We know that Isabel has posited such a space behind the curtain, mask, what have you. There are early intimations of “an occasional flash of cruelty, an occasional lapse from candor” (II, 39). Isabel naively draws from these glimpses that Madame Merle “doesn’t understand” her, leaving Isabel “with a vague dismay in which there was even an element of foreboding” (II, 40). That is, Isabel assumes that if Madame Merle has an unseen side, other than the performative and narcissistically appealing (the song of the Sirens), that this unknown is totally other than Isabel and cannot comprehend her. But this truth, which Isabel has supposed to be held asunder, irreconcilable with her own truth, is in this scene disquietingly revealed to be a knowledge of Isabel that she herself lacks. As she reviews the past once more, it occurs to her now, with a certain detachment and flatness of tone, with an affectless weighing of options, what her marriage really is:

She found herself confronted in this manner with the conviction that the man in the world whom she had supposed to be the least sordid had married her, like a vulgar adventurer, for her money. Strange to say, it had never before occurred to her; if she had thought a good deal of harm of Osmond she had not done him this particular injury. (II, 330)

Recognition might be thought to clarify things. To know the truth of a situation ought to crystallize the possibilities for action, but Isabel is as mired in confusion as before. Defeated, left with the thin consolation of moral judgment, she retires to taste afresh her acid fate and handle these new facts. Osmond is still a formidable, deliberate obstruction, whose every action is “an elaborate mystification, addressed to herself and destined to act upon her imagination” (II, 348). She is left, one might say, confirmed in her hopelessness and lack of comfort. But further revelations await. Isabel has learned that Ralph Touchett, returned to England, is finally at death’s door, but under Osmond’s iron refusal, his “blasphemous sophistry,” “action had been suddenly changed to slow renunciation, transformed by the blight of [his] touch” (II, 356-7)—
she cannot bring herself to leave. Isabel would not go to England unless the Countess Gemini, mischievously forcing a break between her brother and his wife, asked her what she really knows about Osmond and Madame Merle:

“Had it never occurred to you that he was for six or seven years her lover?”
“I don’t know. Things have occurred to me, and perhaps that was what they all meant.”

(II, 365).

The whole thing takes about ten pages: that the first Mrs. Osmond had no children; how Pansy was born to Madame Merle but passed off as the dead wife’s child, somewhere in the Italian Alps; how the two lovers broke things off but remained in cahoots; how finally Osmond has tired of her after securing Isabel’s fortune; and that Pansy remains the one point where Madame Merle can be touched.

The swapping of Pansy’s live, illegitimate mother with a corpse really belongs to a more sensational book, something like *The Count of Monte Cristo* or *The Woman in White*. In that context, this secret would be the knot holding together all the strands of deception—the plot could not survive its revelation. In *The Portrait of a Lady*, though, this recognition is really a dead end. Isabel finds that she has been reified, made a commodity (“a convenience” [II, 410]), her agency and determination negated.

Isabel saw it all as distinctly as if it had been reflected in a large clear glass... She saw, in the crude light of that revelation which had already become a part of experience and to which the very frailty of the vessel in which it had been offered her only gave an intrinsic price, the dry staring fact that she had been an applied handled hung-up tool, as senseless and convenient as mere shaped wood and iron. All the bitterness of this knowledge surged into her soul again; it was as if she felt on her lips the taste of dishonor. (II, 378-9)

In other words, this recognition does not bring enlightenment, or dispel the shadows lowering over Isabel Archer. The “large clear glass” shows to her only its “crude light” and bitter things:

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293 In Dumas’s novel, Edmond Dantès reveals his identity only at the moment of attaining his vengeance, almost whispering his name into the ears of his betayers. In Collins’s sensation novel, Sir Percival Glyde is immolated in his attempt to cover up the fraud of his apparently aristocratic birth.
her own non-being and her hopes laid waste. How far from Arthur Clennam learning that his real mother was a creature of art and light, or Reverend Crawley hearing of his innocence and weeping, or Sherlock Holmes getting his man! Isabel is only confirmed in “the ruin of her happiness” (II, 327). This recognition confronts Isabel with her desires in their most heinous realizations, before which she recoils. *Aphanisis*—not identification.

A second recognition is required for Isabel to see, in this obliteration, her own desires (as both mutilated and realized). In Hegelian terms, recognition only occurs as the negation of the negation: Isabel cannot find herself in this wreckage until the very framework of her observation is also annulled.

“I’m going to ask you a strange question,” said Madame Merle. “Are you very fond of your cousin?” And she gave a smile as strange as her utterance.

“Yes, I’m very fond of him. But I don’t understand you.”

She just hung fire. “It’s rather hard to explain. Something has occurred to me which may not have occurred to you, and I give you the benefit of my idea. Your cousin did you once a great service. Have you never guessed it?”

“He has done me many services.”

“Yes; but one was much above the rest. He made you a rich woman.”

“He made me—?”

Madame Merle appearing to see herself successful, she went on more triumphantly: “He imparted to you that extra lustre which was required to make you a brilliant match. At bottom it’s him you’ve to thank.” She stopped; there was something in Isabel’s eyes.

“I don’t understand you. It was my uncle’s money.”

“Yes; it was your uncle’s money, but it was your cousin’s idea. He brought his father over to it. Ah, my dear, the sum was large!” […]

Isabel went to the door and, when she had opened it, stood a moment with her hand on the latch. Then she said—it was her only revenge: “I believed it was you I had to thank!” (II, 388-9)

At first this is only a dreadful irony—another twist of the knife. This is how Ralph has always felt it. In trying to give Isabel the key to a beautiful and free life, he really delivered her to a jailor. On learning of her marriage, “Ralph was shocked and humiliated; his calculations had been false and the person in the world in whom he was most interested was lost.” (II, 61) My reading has emphasized another aspect, however: this very interest and investment of Ralph’s,
his watching her through her long trial, as unconsciously already incorporated into her choices and failures. What Ralph sees of Isabel’s fate is fundamentally preceded by the fact of his seeing it, of her freedom being structured by his observation.

In discussing this reading with others, I have heard it said that I am “blaming” Ralph for everything that happens. Yes and no. Madame Merle is being sardonic when she tells Isabel that she has Ralph “to thank” for her marriage to Osmond—but she is not technically wrong. Isabel herself admits that, if not “for her money... she would never have done it,” i.e. never married Osmond (II, 192). But otherwise, no. For it is not Ralph himself, but Isabel’s interpretation of his (beautiful, generous) act—in fact, her elimination of her cousin from her horizon and substituting a transcendent notion of her grand destiny in the eyes of the world—that is to be blamed.

Paradoxically, everything goes wrong in Ralph’s absence from his gift to Isabel. “Who” is responsible is really the Other that Isabel installs in the place of that absence—and what she learns from Madame Merle is that this Other simply does not exist.

Isabel is all alone in making her momentous decision, which she (like James’s Maisie, Catherine Sloper in Washington Square, or Tita in “The Aspern Papers”) cannot expect to be further comprehended or externally ratified. (This is essentially Robert Pippin’s point in his book on James—there is no stable set of norms in “modernity” to which one can appeal.) This solitude is not a secure presence-to-self; what she faces is her own reduction and defeat. Isabel’s position after learning that Madame Merle and Osmond were lovers, that she had been married for her money, and so on, is worlds apart from her position a few pages later when she learns that all of this followed from Ralph’s self-disinheritance. The first case is only the completion of the debacle, the filling-in of the parenthetical gaps of Madame Merle’s ghastly betrayal of her trust. The second case is the razing of the entire illusory structure: Isabel’s story is not (just) one of
being ensnared by unscrupulous fortune hunters, nor of aesthetically objectifying herself—her ensnarement is her subordination to the gaze and desire of the Other. All of this is “for” another who disappears at the pronunciation of Madame Merle’s words—the only thing left is for Isabel to claim these horrors as realizations of her own wishes.

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As Isabel journeys back to England, the landscape of her past flits before her:

It was extraordinary the things she remembered. Now that she was in the secret, now that she knew something that so much concerned her and the eclipse of which had made life resemble an attempt to play whist with an imperfect pack of cards, the truth of things, their mutual relations, their meaning, and for the most part their horror, rose before her with a kind of architectural vastness. She remembered a thousand trifles; they started to life with the spontaneity of a shiver. She had thought them trifles at the time; now she saw that they had been weighted with lead. (II, 390-1)

The revelations that have been almost inflicted upon her continue to stretch out, to fold into themselves new connections, to overturn and reorganize—but the past is here almost literally another country, and Isabel pushes it to one side. “Yet even now they were trifles after all, for of what use was it to her to understand them? Nothing seemed of use to her today. All purpose, all intention, was suspended.” (II, 390-1). “There was nothing to regret now” (II, 391)—even the events of the early part of the novel now “came before here as the deed of another person” (II, 393).

But Isabel is not quite beginning with a fresh slate. She has promised Pansy to return, and even if she tells Henrietta Stackpole, “I’m not sure I myself see now” why she thus committed herself, still “my having promised will do” in the absence of a substantial reason (II, 398). But even this is not final: “she decided nothing; her coming itself had not been a decision” (II, 421).

Her last encounter with Caspar Goodwood decides her. This scene cannot be read too closely. Just prior, she is evidently in a state of undecided lassitude. “Her attitude had a singular absence
of purpose; her hands, hanging at her sides, lost themselves in the folds of her black dress; her eyes gazed vaguely before her” (II, 429). Caspar, coming before her in his unflinching frankness, launches into another assertive tirade. “You must save what you can of your life,” he tells her (II, 434).

Everything Isabel says is to contradict and resist his logic. Caspar asks, “Why should you go back—why should go through that ghastly form?”

“To get away from you!” she answered. But this expressed only a little of what she felt. The rest was that she had never been loved before. She had believed it, but this was different; this was the hot wind of the desert, at the approach of which the others dropped dead, like mere sweet aris of the garden. It wrapped her about; it lifted her off her feet, while the very taste of it, as of something potent, acrid and strange, forced open her set teeth. (II, 433-4)

The narrator adds: “I know not whether she believed everything he said; but she believed just then that to let him take her in his arms would be the next best thing to her dying” (II, 435). Then he does take her in his arms, and it is rather like dying: “So she had heard of those wrecked and under water following a train of images before they sink” (II, 436). But when the kiss is over, she flees back to the house. “She had not known where to turn; but she knew now. There was a very straight path” (II, 436). On the next page, we learn that she has gone to Rome, and then the book ends.

To Caspar, Isabel’s options are clear: on one hand, he can tell her, “You’re the most unhappy of women, and your husband’s the deadliest of fiends” (II, 432), and on the other hand, “If you’ll only trust me, how little you will be disappointed!” (II, 435). And without his help, she is utterly hopeless: “You’re perfectly alone; you don’t know where to turn. You can’t turn anywhere; you know that perfectly” (II, 433). Add to this that Isabel is suddenly overwhelmed with a sexual passion for this man, which is then entered into physical evidence, and that she also learns at this moment what it is really to be loved—many a reader has been frustrated that this series ends only
in her renouncing what we have been decidedly convinced by.

Now, Isabel’s character is an avowed enemy of this logic. She turned down Lord Warburton on the grounds that, as she says, “I can’t escape unhappiness... In marrying you I shall be trying to... I can never be happy in any extraordinary way; not by turning, by separating myself” (I, 186-7). She still holds to this deep into the stagnation of her marriage, telling “let me bear my burdens myself and not shift them upon others!” (II, 159). But I do not think this is the whole story (that Isabel has a principled stand of renunciation and causing herself to suffer alone). And we must take Isabel at her word when she says that her commitment to Pansy is vague and mutable. The final identification with Pansy is this, that in understanding at last what it is to be loved, she understands what Pansy has to lose. For Isabel, this is already lost—she is simply not going to be with Caspar, James never falters in telling us so—but Isabel, by not turning, not separating herself, can revive the future of her stepdaughter. Isabel’s going back to Rome is not owing to any binding promise to Pansy, no, but in doing so she will be standing in the way of a repetition of her own fate. Whereas, to take Caspar’s word at face value, to engage in flights of independence and unattached liberty, would be precisely to make the same error twice.

Remember: everything has already changed since Isabel started for England. That impulse was under the pressure of Ralph’s dying and Countess Gemini’s information. But before her departure (though still in Rome) Madame Merle related the secret of Isabel’s inheritance. The recognitions could not be more precisely staggered. So that (old) situation no longer exists. Madame Merle has gone to America; since Ralph is dead, she no longer has to hide her misery from him while he pretends to be believe her. Her choice is not, then, as Caspar would have it, between a new future with him, and a “return.” Paradoxically, this new situation exists only if she returns. On the other hand, choosing Caspar would be not “escaping unhappiness,” but only
“trying to.” It is just this possibility or attempt that she rejects—paying the price for clinging to her original desire (which she repeats in returning to Rome) by giving up what she knows is an impossibility (“It’s awful what she’ll have to pay for it,” Ralph had said [II, 433]): the sexual relationship she would have with Caspar. In doing so she refuses the illusion of some full, untainted domain of happiness (the very thing that first got her in trouble!) that exists in another dimension but can still be accessed—the illusion that motivates the ghost story “The Jolly Corner.” Isabel will instead persist in her original desire, repeating her choice of Osmond. Beyond the death of this desire at the hands of Madame Merle and Osmond, Isabel persists in the sense that she will now find herself in its chain of effects, in the parenthetical gaps that were enigmas before, and in identifying with Pansy as her counterpart.

In making his speech, Caspar tells Isabel, “The world’s all before us—and the world’s very big” (II, 435), recalling the last lines of *Paradise Lost*:

> Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon:  
> The world was all before them, where to choose  
> Their place of rest, and providence their guide;  
> They hand in hand, with wandering steps and slow,  
> Through Eden took their solitary way.²⁹⁴

Freedom, alas, is just this loneliness and loss and uncertainty. There is no avoiding of death and only increase of pain—this is what they have chosen in the Fall. But it is a new world. In going back to Rome, Isabel chooses certain hardship and an uncertain end. She also returns freedom to her early choice, insisting retroactively in her desires even where they were most fatal and most alienated, and have now been illuminated. Freedom, she knows, is being told, “Don’t come back.”

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Conclusion

In his book on Wagner, Adorno refuses the usual idea of the composer as presenting an archaic world of lost heroic values, by revealing at every turn the “taint of the commodity” in Wagner’s orchestral color, his use of the leitmotiv, and the theatrical gesture. Reification also turns up in the least likely of places, not only in the various arts that make up the Gesamtkunstwerk, but even in Wagner’s ratio of clarinets to flutes. To Adorno, Wagner’s art is deeply complicit in a passive, defeated affirmation of bourgeois dominion, such that for Wagner, “the task of music is to warm up the alienated and reified relations of men and make them sound as if they were still human.”

Adorno also criticized Wagner’s handling of recognition scenes, especially those in The Nibelung’s Ring, which he figures as a succession of clunky, even tasteless dramatic botches. “Secrets that have long since become public are confided in gossipy detail; Sigmund declares with pathos that Volsa is his father even though he has previously addressed him as such. Hunding instantly detects the resemblance between Sigmund and Sieglinde, yet the subsequent revelation that the two are brother and sister is supposed to shock.” He could have further added: when the magical love potion is dispelled, Siegfried recognizes Brunhilde as the love he has betrayed under its spell; Hunding discovers that the stranger stopping in his house for the night is the very enemy he has been tracking down to kill; Siegfried is able to hear Mime’s inner thoughts in his speech after he has tasted the dragon's blood. These recognitions are none of the most artful. In Aristotle’s hierarchy, they are plainly inferior since they rely on tokens and

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296 Ibid., 21.
297 Ibid., 25.
298 Ibid., 91.
299 Ibid., 63.
300 Ibid., 89.
301 Ibid., 118.
potions. (The same unabashed contrivance can also be found in the recognition scenes of Shakespeare’s late romances, *The Tempest*, *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, and *A Winter's Tale*.)

Adorno’s criticism of reification in Wagner, and Wagner’s use of recognition, raise all the most pressing questions about these two paradoxical and interpenetrating concepts. Why does recognition shade into identity and closure? Are reification and its form of subjectivity ontologically inevitable? And can recognition in art dispel reification in life?

*Why does recognition shade into identity and closure?* For Adorno’s “negative dialectics,” closure and identity are the worst of bad words. Recognition scenes could easily be read as a tool of conservatism, of preservation, of a difference that is no difference, an upheaval that leaves everything the same (as in Fielding’s eleventh-hour revelations). So, for Adorno, the conclusion of *The Nibelung’s Ring* is no conclusion at all, but an arbitrary cap or limit point imposed on the music from without. “The pretended infinity remains bad; it is no more than the husk of something finite.”

Wagner’s sonority has renounced “the unattainable claim to give meaningful shape to the passage of time,” settling for an indefinite postponement of tension and dissonance.

Closure and identity are for Adorno refusals of history, a ruse of a listless totality, ruled by complicit bad faith and postponement disguised as negation. “The fact that resistance is produced by the social totality has its corollary in the end, in the identification of resistance with domination: here is the outer limit of power of the *Ring* to interpret history, and from there it seeps away into the void... The totality itself... is the bad eternity of rebellion as anarchy and unrelenting self-destruction.”

*Are reification and its form of subjectivity ontologically inevitable?* Reification, as Adorno...
uses the concept, is at once central to his thinking and inconsistently (or not at all) defined. Reification for Adorno is a *severing*. In his book on Wagner, the term most often appears in paradoxical aphorisms, paired with “alienation,” befitting Adorno’s criticism of bourgeois society in which “all categories are objectified and become independent... they are cut off from the living subject which constitute the substance of concepts.” But Adorno is also intent on *preserving* this separation, of not collapsing thought into an easy identity with reality; this is his criticism of Lukács and of recognition. *History and Class Consciousness* “presupposes the reconcilement of subject and object and thus relapses into idealism,” that is, recognition is smuggled into and inscribed in reification from the start.

Reification for Adorno is a kind of conceptual alienation: the subjectivity determined by reification is one where concepts appear in the “wrong” place, as the properties of things. Basically, reification for Adorno begins in exchange-value: the forced equivalences and misaligned properties arising in circulation, rather than from (as in Marx and Lukács) the abstraction of labor in constituting values. Objectification (of value in commodities) “alienates” what is conceptually appropriate to use-values, giving rise to “identity thinking.” Thus for Adorno, reification “should not be conceptualized as a ‘fact of consciousness,’ a subjective or socio-psychological category,” because commodification is a kind of split or falsified immanence. However, this splitting of the concept extends *back into* subjectivity itself, which is in turn fragmented, as an extraterritorial “interiority.”

Thus, the best instance of Adorno’s sense of reification—as “the appearance of society, as if it

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307 Ibid., 40.
308 Ibid., 43.
had the properties to which the concepts refer”—would be the complicated dialectic between Wotan (as Will) and Siegfried (as ignorant resignation) in the demise of the world. Here “the opacity and omnipotence of the social process... is celebrated as a metaphysical mystery” whereby consciousness can only range itself “on the side of the dominant forces.” This is “reified” because the totality, consciousness, and negation all show up in the wrong places, separated from their conceptual immanence, “badly determined.” And subjectivity follows suit, not as representing something given to consciousness, but as itself alienated, isolated, dehistoricized and ambivalent (split over two characters).

*Can recognition in art dispel reification in life?* In the aesthetic realm, Adorno’s critique of reification as objectification leads to the criticism of the commodity-character of artworks. So, the “antinomy of aesthetic reification” takes this paradoxical form: “If it is essential to artworks that they be things, it is no less essential that they negate their own status as things.” As Timothy Bewes points out, reification (on this model) is therefore simultaneously always anxiety about reification. It is perhaps inevitable then that Kafka become for the Frankfurt School the exemplary artist of modernity, given his refusal of completeness and the “use-value” of comprehensibility—where even the non-publication of Kafka’s works becomes a heroic negation of the commodity status of mass-cultural artworks. Walter Benjamin observes, “No other writers has obeyed the commandment ‘Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image’ so faithfully.” This counts as “reification,” of course, not in any sense having to do with Marx’s categories of abstract and concrete labor in the value-form, but reification as “the thoroughly mystical concept

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309 Ibid., 47.  
311 Ibid., 130.  
313 Bewes, *Reification*, 245.  
314 Quoted in Bewes, *Reification*, 129.
of ‘idolatry’ by another name.”

In the following reading of recognition in Wagner’s *The Ring of the Nibelungs*, the drama turns in all its massiveness upon Wotan's never-uttered recognition of the Valkyrie Brünnhilde as the free “Other” who is simultaneously opposed to Wotan and enacting his will, which Brünnhilde takes upon herself. This identity in otherness produces no scene of discovery and cognizance, but this recognition silently undergirds the entire downfall of the Gods.

The scene in question is Act Two, Scene Two of *Die Walküre*. The god Wotan has been forbidden by his wife Fricka from aiding the hero he father, Siegmund. Wotan orders his daughter, the Valkyrie Brünnhilde, to break Siegmund's sword in the fray of battle—Brünnhilde, who tells Wotan she is nothing but his own “will”: “Zu Wotans Willen sprichst du.” Wotan, bound by the pacts and treaties that render him his might, bemoans the contradiction in his power and his will, that his deepest purpose can only be accomplished by an Other who will oppose his decree.

How can I create a free agent whom I have never protected, who by defying me will be most dear to me? How can I make that Other, no longer part of me, who of his own accord will do what I alone desire? What a predicament for a god, a grievous disgrace! With disgust I find only myself, every time, in everything I create. The Other man for whom I long, that Other I can never find: for the Free man has to create himself; I can only create subjects to myself. (II, ii)

Wotan's own actions, then, are caught in a perverse loop whereby his volition and omnipotence, by their very logic, are reduced to a mechanistic, objectified unfreedom (the servitude of mere automata). What Wotan comes to desire, however, is his own end, the wiping-clean of the Aesir slate. That is—and here we are not far from Hegel's master-slave dialectic—someone who will be an independent self-consciousness willing to oppose Wotan and thereby satisfy him.

But if recognition would consist in Wotan seeing this, finding his will fulfilled and

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simultaneously opposed by an Other, then we should be looking for a scene where Wotan acknowledges Siegfried, the accredited hero who brings about the longed-for catastrophe. However, the bold indifference and cross purposes of their meeting in the third opera hardly fulfill these expectations. I propose instead that Wotan sees in Brünnhilde the embodiment of a free agent who by opposing him and acting without his support, is also his own will. To look for a recognition scene, then, is stupid: the very terms laid out above stipulate that Wotan be separated from his agent, not support him or her. When he tells her, “I must shun you, no more may I share whispered counsels with you; parted, we may no more act in concert” (III, iii), this is not a continued misrecognition by Wotan. It is to the letter the separation he desired earlier. To be more explicit would be mere winking. In fact it would undo what is being precisely recognized: that Brünnhilde must henceforth act entirely free from Wotan. In his ostentatious disowning of the Valkyrie, he acknowledges by stages the congruence of every aspect of the free agent he was searching for. He only doesn't say this, since that would be a performative contradiction throwing them once more into collusion.

Wotan's severing of himself from Brünnhilde is therefore not a recognition scene in the “bad” Aristotelian sense of Sieglinde and Sigmund, who discover that they look so much alike; as with the Oedipus we have here the collapse of the recognizer’s “place” (the Götterdämmerung that abolishes Wotan's supremacy) and the retroactive illumination of the past’s significance. In confining Brünnhilde to the ice fortress, Wotan restores meaning to the course of events since Das Rheingold: Brünnhilde's disobedience is not the interruption of Wotan’s plan, i.e. one of a series of obstacles including Alberich’s theft of the Ring—this is the plan itself, the canceling of the restrictions and bonds that comprise Wotan:

Against myself I had turned myself in agony; above stunning sorrows I had risen in a rage; angry longing with its burning desires had formed my dread decision: in the ruins of
my own world I would end my endless sadness. (III, iii)

Wotan’s recognition here inverts the interpretive valence of the main act of the entire cycle, Wotan’s rupture with the law in stealing the Ring from Alberich. Previously, we had to read this as a tragic aberration and overstepping, as throwing the law out of a primal balance. After this scene with Brünnhilde, the unbalance (to be eradicated) appears not as the theft but as the law itself.

The next two operas should be read as unfolding the destiny of this recognition, all the way down to Brünnhilde’s immolation. Plainly, it is she and not the vapid Siegfried who brings about the downfall of the Gods, sets fire to Valhalla, frustrates Alberich and Hagen, returns the Ring to the Rhinemaidens, and fulfills Wotan’s will to destruction. But she does all of this in the name of her original, free defiance of Wotan, from which she never turns.

Your life I sheltered in Sieglinde’s womb; before she had borne you, I was your shield. So long have I loved you, Siegfried! ... I loved you always, for I divined the thought that Wotan had hidden, guessed the secret thought I dared not even whisper; I did not shape it, rather I felt it; and so I fought, urged by that deed, when I defied the god who conceived it; and then I suffered, slept on this rock, for that thought still secret, that thought I felt! Know what that thought was; ah, you can guess it! That thought was my love for you! (Siegfried, III, iii)

In the terms of Adorno’s criticism, then:

Recognition is no closure at all—Brünnhilde’s trajectory starts from this tenuous identity which is nowhere stated aloud. Recognition is not a terminus but a task. The same cannot be said of “recognition scenes”—when Gutrune learns of Siegfried’s first winning of Brünnhilde, her character is thenceforth mute.

GUTRUNE (breaking out in sudden despair): Accursed Hagen! By your advice I gave him the drink that made him forget! Ah, sorrow! My eyes are opened. Brünnhilde was his true love, whom through the drink he forgot. (Filled with shame, she turns away from Siegfried and, abandoning herself to grief, bends over Gunther’s body; so she remains, motionless, till the end.) (Twilight of the Gods, III, iii)
Just so, Siegfried lives only a couple of minutes after he regains his memory, promptly giving himself away to Gunther in another Aristotelian recognition scene. Brünnhilde’s recognition, however, is authentically tragic: first she is symbolically unmade, divested of Godhead, and two evenings later, hurls herself upon the flames, renouncing the renunciation Alberich made to gain the Ring in the first place.

Against Adorno’s reading, the Siegfried-Wotan identity is staged as a spurious one, a comic reprisal of Oedipus knocking Laertes upside the head on the way to Thebes. Far from a recognition, their meeting is an anti-climactic travesty of crossed signals, repeating (in reverse) the true violence of Wotan’s shattering of Notung in *Die Walküre* (his hand having been forced there by Brünnhilde’s disobedience). And when Siegfried arrives at the Gibichung hall, he is already an anachronism, such that he is immediately instrumentalized by Hagen and Gunther.

*Thus, reification is not ontologically inevitable* (as it might seem to be in the terms of “objectification” or “dialectic of enlightenment”). Reification is rather a *framework* of objectification. Reification (as in the Christian perspective Unhappy Consciousness) means the organization of the world as the work of the Essence/unchangeable Subject, the grind of the “beyond” that must “become flesh.” Reification is the bad infinity of this objectification, the “trap” of value’s ontology, capital making the world over in its image, bodying forth only an impotent chain of sameness, whether in Marx’s formula M-C-M, or Wotan’s plaint that he can create only slaves, but not a free subject. As God bodies forth Christ and Wotan the Volsung line, value bodies forth the commodity.

Finally, *art must go through reification*—not as “objectification” or the making of graven images, but in reification as a structure of misrecognition. This whole time, I have been discussing recognition as an aspect of plot, where reification appears in the cracks. But with

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Wagner, we are no longer dealing only with literary-dramatic mimesis. I wonder if these things are possible in music. Can we think an aesthetics of non-mimetic “recognition,” i.e. an aesthetics that meant negating the place where we start from in any transcendental framework, an art that undoes the bad determination, the skewed perspective—while revealing that it is this misrecognition that we also are?
Works Cited


