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Common Knowledge: The Epistemology of American Realism

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COMMON KNOWLEDGE: THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF AMERICAN REALISM

by

MARK SUSSMAN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, the City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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Abstract

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My dissertation, *Common Knowledge: The Epistemology of American Realism*, focuses on realist fiction (primarily the novel) at the end of the nineteenth century. Its motivating claim is that the central descriptive and thematic imperative of realism—to depict life “as it is” rather than in some idealized form—emerged in response to crises in the status of knowledge that resulted from an attempt by writers and readers to come to a common understanding of the relationship between private experience and an increasingly fragmented social world. While William Dean Howells’s definition of realism as a form of writing that displays “fidelity to experience and probability of motive” assumes a correspondence between writing and the real, my dissertation argues that realism’s primary aesthetic achievement was its response to a pervasive sense of epistemological uncertainty. Accordingly, *Common Knowledge* engages the tensions embodied in interpenetrating depictions of social conflict and shared knowledge. On one hand, much recent scholarship has been devoted to demonstrating realism’s commitment to documenting the intensified class conflict characteristic of the last decade of the nineteenth century. On the other hand, much scholarship has also been dedicated to portraying realism as an articulation of bourgeois gentility that remained largely ignorant of the stakes of such conflicts. In studies of the novels of Howells, Henry James, Harold Frederic, and Charles Chesnutt, I attempt to synthesize those two interpretations of American realism, preferring to read oscillations between social concern and reified class privilege as indications of a fundamental
ambivalence about the reliability of social knowledge. *Common Knowledge* entwines readings of fiction with elaborations on the critical, technological, and aesthetic discourses of epistemological uncertainty that emerge from them, documenting how recognitions of socio-economic, racial, and ontological difference both rely on and throw into question the possibility of a shared knowledge of the world.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Here’s something about the dissertation you don’t know until it’s too late: when you start writing one, you have no idea how to do it. Accordingly, the process of writing the dissertation was (for me anyway) as much improvisation as it was the result of careful planning, as much retrospective amazement (I can’t believe I actually finished that chapter!) as it was methodical and scholarly elucidation. No one writes anything of this length alone, and a host of people both at the Graduate Center and beyond its walls deserve acknowledgment.

John Brenkman’s example as a thinker and writer animates much of Common Knowledge. I am privileged to have worked with him and to count him as a friend. Morris Dickstein often asked the questions I spent pages trying to avoid—his constructive criticism brought the project back down to earth when it risked crash-landing on Mars. Everyone should have Wayne Koestenbaum read their writing at least once before they die. I remain grateful that he was willing to read mine many times, and to comment on it with such sinuous intelligence and occasionally shocking detail. Carrie Hintz provided moral support, solid advice, and laughs throughout my time at the Graduate Center. At the University of Arizona, Eric Hayot first made me think I might do well in grad school—his writing, teaching, and generosity remain inspiring. Elizabeth Alsop, James Arnett, Abe Rubin, and Jonah Westerman read parts of this dissertation and helped me think through and talk out ideas during crucial stages of its development. Zach Samalin’s wit and friendship were indispensable.

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Cristina Alfar and Hunter College’s English Department not only allowed me to teach advanced courses in American literature to its undergraduates, but also provided a teaching fellowship that helped me to complete early stages of this project. Thom Taylor’s superhuman competence helps make teaching at Hunter a joy. Parts of this dissertation were presented at conferences and panels hosted by New York University’s Colloquium on American Literature and Culture, the Henry James Society, and the Charles W. Chesnutt Society. The incisive questions and comments by panelists and conference participants improved the finished product immensely.

This dissertation would have been impossible without the love and encouragement of my grandparents, Ethel, George, Rae, and Mike. I will always regret that they did not live to see its completion. Howard Goldstein’s support kept me going through the rough patches. My brother and parents made their mark on what follows through their unstinting and gentle (though occasionally baffled) exhortations to get it done already. Jessica Suarez is responsible for whatever is good in here, though she may not realize the extent to which her brilliance, humor, and love influenced the final product. This is for her.
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Chapter 1
Introduction: Realism and the Epistemological Imaginary

Toward the beginning of Henry James's short story "The Real Thing" (1892), his narrator, a portrait painter looking to illustrate the cover of a new book, speaking of a good-looking couple hard up for money who comes to him asking for work as models, says,

I didn't easily believe in them. After all they were amateurs, and the ruling passion of my life was the detestation of the amateur. Combined with this was another perversity—an innate preference for the represented subject over the real one: the defect of the real one was so apt to be a lack of representation. I liked things that appeared; then one was sure. Whether they were or not was a subordinate and almost always a profitless question (Major Stories 235).

Here James and his narrator deal with the question of painterly realism handily enough, through the subordination of what "is" real to the appearance of realness, or, more to the point, to appearance itself, all in the name of profit. The amateur model's amateurism is a result not of an inability to look real (or perhaps to "act natural") but to "appear" to look real. The "appearance" of the thing rather than the thing itself serves as a safeguard for James's painter—one can be sure of the representation's fidelity to its status as an "appearance," but not, the narrator implies, of mimetic exactitude, of itself as an aesthetic object measured against the world. Reality, then, a notion of things "as they are," falls away in favor of a model that favors things as they appear, or, better, things as appearances.

So much the better for art, or rather so much to art's "profit," that our models share the mode of appearance with the medium in which the artist means to represent them. The gains made by James's portrait painter and his "perverse" hunger for appearance rather than reality provoke a further question: what is appearance? For James's narrator, again, the object's attitude
provides an answer: "she sat with great intensity, giving the whole of her mind to it, and was capable of remaining for an hour almost as motionless as if she were before a photographer's lens. I could see she had been photographed often, but somehow the very habit that made her good for that purpose unfitted her for mine" (241). That is, the model's fitness for the exactitude of photography renders her unfit for painting as a representational mode in which the inability to "appear" is a "defect." The "intensity," perhaps the model's stillness or concentration, correlates to her lack of a "variety of expression," hence, "she was the real thing but always the same thing." The real thing can "be" real when it is "always the same," but will not "appear" as real because the "appearance" of the real thing is always different. Repetition without a difference (that is, for Henry James as for his brother William, the activity of "habit" itself) signals a flaw in "appearance," an unfitness for painterly representation. "Appearance" requires "difference" in so far as "difference" signals variation from any singularly apprehensible standard against which we might judge a representation. One is "sure" when one has no standard against which to measure a thing, and "appearance" appears as the absence of such a standard.

James's short story serves as a kind of realist object-lesson, or perhaps a lesson in objects, a lesson in which we're meant to learn that some objects, no matter how beautiful, are not fit subjects for certain modes of representation, that representation of the "real" is the representation of the "appearance" of the real, that the mimetic pretensions embedded in the term "realism" are just that: pretensions. If we're to learn these lessons then realism requires an abandonment of the notion of the real in favor of the representation of the "appearance" of the real. If we read "The Real Thing" as a lesson in realism, we learn that in the epistemological distinction between "reality" and "appearance," "appearance" emerges as the favored term.
James’s story can be read as a proleptic allegory of his proclamation, made in the last year of his life in a letter to H.G. Wells, that, “It is art that makes life, makes interest, makes importance, for our consideration and application of these things, and I know of no substitute whatever for the force and beauty of its process” (Letters 770). It is not only that James and his narrator prefer representation over what it represents but that they believe in the primacy of the art object. The “real thing” of the “The Real Thing,” then, is what seems to represent the real but is, in James’s estimation, what grants the character of reality to the real in the first place. While this peculiar way of regarding the status of the art object has been characterized as quintessentially Jamesian, I will argue that the inversion of the mimetic relations between the represented and the real gives us access to the epistemological antinomies that structure literary realism writ large.

Does literature constitute a form of knowledge? Can it produce knowledge in a way comparable to the sciences or humanities? If it does produce knowledge, what does that knowledge do, exactly, or what is it good for? Interesting questions all, but the present work is not especially concerned with answering them. Rather Common Knowledge attempts to address the conditions through which epistemic difference and epistemological uncertainty are construed as both antagonistic to the project of American literary realism (if we can temporarily grant it the coherence and unity of a “project”) and as one of realism’s defining features. The ideal of American literature as an aperture through which readers could come to know the experiences and thoughts of others whose social being differed from their own took place through novels whose narrative techniques relied on the very concepts of epistemic uncertainty they were trying to erase. “Common knowledge,” then, comes to signify both the belief that the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of others are at least theoretically knowable, a belief that lends coherence to the
idea of realism, and anxieties about epistemic uncommonality, the fear or founding notion that socioeconomic, political, racial, and ontological differences are fundamentally irreconcilable.1

As Donald Scott has noted, by the 1830s and 1840s the boundaries between various writing professions were fuzzy at best. So while “author” emerged as a viable profession in the late eighteenth century, by the middle of the nineteenth century distinctions between “men of letters” and “men of science” seemed to matter little (96). By the end of the nineteenth century though, disciplinary distinctions had grown sharper, and imaginative literature had become a category distinct from other sorts of literature, with the result that the kind of “information” gleaned from the man of letters was understood to be qualitatively different from that gleaned from the man of science.2 My use of the term “epistemology” and its variants, then, tends to refer more to discourses and narrative techniques that revolve around issues of knowledge than to a formal philosophical theory of knowledge. Unlike a book such as Ann Banfield’s *The Phantom Table*, for instance, this dissertation does not claim to elucidate the impact of a given philosophy on a set of literary texts (with the possible exception of chapter two’s analysis of aesthetic theory in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*). There are any number of reasons to relegate formal theories of knowledge to the background of this study, but the most powerful is located in William Dean Howells’s *Criticism and Fiction* (1891), a text central to this dissertation. Howells’s emphasis on the writer’s duty to report “the phrase and carriage of every-day life” and the “the chance passer” in “the public square” as the writer’s true audience construes writing almost as a pragmatic endeavor, whereby a shared and public understanding of the structure and texture of lived

\[1\] Uncertainty and chance have emerged as the themes of two excellent recent books on American literature both before and after the Civil War. See Lee and Puskar, respectively.

\[2\] For an interpretation of American realism that places it alongside the burgeoning fields of sociology, psychology, and managerial science, see Barrish, *The Cambridge Introduction to American Literary Realism*. 

4
experience constitutes the test that “fiction” must pass in order to become “truth” (12).

Accordingly, Howells not only eschews formal systems of philosophy, as when he accuses Edmund Burke of occasionally belonging to “that droll little eighteenth-century world, when philosophy had got the neat little universe into the hollow of its hand, and knew just what it was, and what it was for,” but centralizes that rejection of systematic rationalism in favor of a view that aspires to a non-speculative, empirical basis for fictional representation (11). In diminishing that “droll little eighteenth-century world” and its “neat little universe,” Howells is not so much rejecting the idea that the world is knowable as he is looking askance at systematic models of knowledge. This drive against systematic descriptions of human experience, what Howells elsewhere refers to as “idealism,” both characterizes the epistemology of Howells’s realism and introduces forms of uncertainty into his work that lead him to question the stability of the social fabric he wishes to mend.

Chapter two will deal with this problem at length, but what seems most important is the bind presented by Howells’s attempt to write as though no mediating epistemology operated between the world and the act of writing. Realism’s supposed emphasis on what Howells calls “the externals of life” and the writer’s duty “to portray faithfully the outside of men and things” has lead to a remarkably persistent notion that realist literature consists of a form of copying or transcription, or what various critics over the years have tended to identify as “literalism.” In his influential article “The Novel and Its Future,” published by the Atlantic Monthly in 1874, George Parsons Lathrop warns of the encroaching “literalism” of novels that merely copy what they see before them, a literalism that seems to exclude the possibility of aesthetic merit (22). And as Donald Pizer notes, in the nineteenth century, “Realism ... is attacked as a literature of the ‘external,’ the ‘photographic,’ and the ‘epidermal’” (9). The charge seems to have stuck, because
even as late as 1991 we find Ronald E. Martin, in his *American Literature and the Destruction of Knowledge*, denigrating “the realists” for describing “so carefully the literal details of a neighborhood, say, or a room, a streetcar, or a snowstorm, and ... present[ing] those details as the truth itself—not as symbolic of something that was somehow higher or more significant.” While Martin finds “the literalist tendency” was not present in all realists, their supposed emphasis on the material to the exclusion of the spiritual, the worldly as opposed to the transcendent, makes them less than representative of what Martin calls “innovative writing in the age of epistemology” (110).

The literal, by definition, is understood to exclude something essential about the literary. My contention is not that the anti-literalist position is wrong, exactly, but that it assumes that there is such a thing as the direct, unmediated transcription of reality, an assumption that, ironically, Martin actually shares with Howells, despite his evident distaste for Howells’s writing. They both assume that, whatever kind of literature you prefer, there is at least one kind, the realist kind, that can alchemically transform the physical material of the streetcar and the snowstorm into the linguistic material of the realist text.

These sorts of claims have precedent not only within literary criticism, but seemingly in every domain where anxieties about ontological distinctions (original vs. copy, reality vs. appearance) seek their grounding in aesthetic and epistemological claims. One classic instance comes from Michael Fried, who, in his influential 1967 essay “Art and Objecthood” insists on referring to minimalist art as “literalist.”³ His overarching claim is that modernist painting, because of its simultaneous disavowal of traditionally mimetic representation and its

³ Many thanks to Jonah Westerman for bringing this example to my attention.
appropriation of shapes as a primary source of material, “has come to find it imperative that it defeat or suspend its own objecthood, and that the crucial factor in this undertaking is shape, but shape that must belong to painting—it must be pictorial, not, or not merely, literal.” In other words, the obstacle modernist painting must overcome is the possibility that, because it doesn’t attempt to represent the world, it might be mistaken for a mere object rather than an artwork. Literalist art, on the other hand, “aspires not to defeat or suspend its own objecthood, but on the contrary to discover and project objecthood as such” (151). Rather than attempting to signal its status as art and not an object, then, minimalism doubles down and fully invests itself in the indistinguishability of artwork and object, or, worse for Fried, in its objecthood to the exclusion of its artfulness. Fried’s conceptualization of the mutually exclusive domains of the object and the artwork suggested by his title (“Art and Objecthood,” not “Art as Objecthood”) clearly favors art over the object precisely because the two exclude each other and a decision must be made—if it’s an object, it can’t be art, and vice versa. One could easily get the sense, reading Fried’s impressive essay, that he is not simply articulating his own antipathy toward a particular mode of contemporary art but mounting a defense of the domain of art as such against a corrosive insurgency of conceptual philistines. As this dissertation is at pains to demonstrate, though, the presupposition of the mutual exclusion of art and object, of the literal and the literary, is not a defense of an a priori ontological difference but rather a construction of what comes to count as difference and a claim about the kind of political force categories like aesthetic legitimacy and creative originality exert over efforts to imagine epistemic difference and conceptualize shared and public knowledge.

The ontological shift between the materiality of things and the materiality of language, the snow of the snowstorm and the words of the literary description, reifies one of the central
anxieties this dissertation will examine, which is the increasing sense in the 1890s that the representational capacities traditionally aligned with human creativity might become mechanized and externalized. The transformation, in other words, between thing and word implies a kind of automatism in the writing subject, because if realism in fact demonstrates the possible continuity between the material world and the linguistic world, then the act of transformation between them would be more akin to the relationship between a camera and the thing it photographs than a painter and the landscape she paints. While Henry James, in “The Art of Fiction,” famously wrote that, “the analogy between the art of the painter and the art of the novelist is, so far as I am able to see, complete,” (Major Stories 574) critics like Nancy Armstrong (in the British context) and Stuart Burrows find that “realist novelists specifically saw consciousness in photographic terms” (Burrows 3).⁴ In both the classic instance of James and the contemporary claims of Burrows and Armstrong, the analogy between realism and its representational fellow travelers occurs at the level of artistic practice — painters, photographers, and realists have the same mimetic imperatives driving their work, or saw in photography a vision of what a truly mimetic art might look like. Yet the crucial distinction between the realist painting and the photograph, and the reason critics seeking to denigrate realism often compared its literature to photography, is that, while painting requires rigorous training that unites the perceptive capacities of the mind and the physical entrainment of the body, automation and mechanization are responsible for the photograph’s mimetic heft. Photography can’t be art because it replaces the mediating role of the creative mind with that of gears and triggers.

⁴ While Nancy Armstrong’s Fiction in the Age of Photography focuses on British rather than American realism throughout the nineteenth century, her insights into the centralization of the “image” in Victorian fiction afforded by the rise of the daguerrotype and the photograph resonates with the literature I am concerned with here. Her insistence that we “think of realism and photography as partners in the same cultural project” has resonances with my own view of the relationship between what we might consider a new “inscription” technology and its integration into the conventions of nineteenth century fiction (20).
At the heart of the literalist critique, then, is a claim about the automatization, hence the technologization, of the writing subject. If realist literature is merely transcriptive, even a machine can do it; if a machine can do it, it can’t be literature. Like Henri Bergson’s notion that laughter constitutes “something mechanical encrusted upon the living,” (39) an automatic response that subordinates soul to body, the realist impulse was seen to disclose the commitment of Howells and others to a form of materialism that had no need for transcendental conceptions of spirituality, morality, or mimesis. In that sense, realism as a mode of writing has taken on the very qualities of a photograph: highly mimetic, flat and requiring little skill to produce, symptomatic of the most worrying aspects of industrialization and modernity in general. Reflecting but not reflecting on the society that produces it, realism thus becomes a mindless literature, a meat grinder that turns the fleshy experience of the real into the cased sausage of realism.

What follows, then, argues against both a conception of realism that’s bereft of epistemic import and a conception of realism that would attribute a singular or univocal epistemic idea to what are actually a highly varied set of writers. Moreover, even within the work of a single writer, we often find that there is no one single conception of what constitutes thinking, no single marker of the work of knowledge acquisition and knowledge production, and no single route through which the epistemic activity in any text makes its way into narrative, form, and figures of the novel—there is no one conception of epistemology in the work of any of the writers I’ve studied, but rather a constellation of epistemic activities. I have tried to address the contradictory but mutually supplementary drives toward epistemological uncertainty and public knowledge with the notion of an “epistemological imaginary,” by which I mean the varied figural, narrative, rhetorical, and discursive strategies generated by anxieties over the tenuous status of knowledge
held in common. In other words, like the Lacanian “imaginary” that models the subject’s ego ideal on an externally-derived image of wholeness and completion, the epistemological imaginaries deployed by the texts I read structure themselves around the necessity of imagining the minds of others to be similar to their own, a necessity that has its origin in the obscurity of human motive and intention.

While recent work in the field of cognitive narrative theory has made much of realism’s reconstruction of the minds of others, *Common Knowledge* will not deeply engage that body of research. Rather than regarding the ways in which the highly focalized narrative techniques of realist novels “trick” the human brain into regarding characters in novels as other humans, I’m interested in looking at the forms of political, socioeconomic, racial, and technological discourse that subtend and necessitate the production of epistemological imaginaries. This entails avoiding recourse to the critical paradigm of “thinking” in the novel, with its demand that we either regard characters as “thinkers”—and thus as linguistic versions of human beings instead of textual features—or the activity of reading as a form of “thinking” that determines the phenomenological and ontological dynamics of the interpretive process, which often implies a universal and univocal “reading experience” that operates regardless of chronology, geography, politics, gender, or any of the other manifold variables that condition the cognitive, affective, and hermeneutic activities of “simply” reading a book. As useful as these approaches have been in helping me come to at least a provisional understanding of the place of epistemic difference in the realist novel, they tend to limit the epistemological field of the novel to the places in which acts of thinking are either described (with characters) or take place (with readers). The concept of an epistemological imaginary seems necessary in order to get at the ways in which the contested

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5 See, for example, Zunshine, Palmer, Aldama, Vermeule, and Boyd
status of knowledge operates in excess of the very presuppositions of realism itself, like the idea
that every reader is a chance passer in the public square whose intuitive knowledge of the texture
of reality equips him to evaluate the mimetic fidelity—which is the same as the aesthetic merit—
of any given novel.

In its emphasis on and complication of the relationship between knowledge, commonality,
and realism, this study also takes up the notion of an “aesthetics of the common” suggested by
Amy Kaplan as a way to address Howells’s increasingly prominent and problematic engagement
with social difference. But far from being restricted to Howells’s writings, the aesthetics of the
common becomes a way that realist writing in general attempts to come to terms with
increasingly disparate forms of social life experienced by Americans at the end of the nineteenth
century. In Kaplan’s thinking, “‘the common’ refers at different times to distinct and often
contradictory entities: to the lower classes—‘our common humanity’; and to ordinary life—‘the
commonplace.’ To resolve the tensions between these meanings, realism works to ensure that
social difference can be ultimately effaced by a vision of a common humanity, which mirrors the
readers’ own commonplace, or everyday life” (21). In this usage, “the common” becomes a
rhetorical assertion of essential similarity that tacitly acknowledges material difference—we only
assert our common humanity when the notion of commonality comes under threat. The idea that
“ordinary life,” which I take to mean not just the material differences that account for economic
definitions of class difference but the lived social experiences those economic differences imply,
might cease to signify as a coherent concept as social fragmentation progressed, Kaplan argues,
becomes an increasing concern of realist fiction. “Realism,” then, isn’t simply a term for fiction
that attempts to describe reality in a particularly accurate way, but, “a strategy for containing
social difference and controlling social conflict within a cohesive common ground” (23).
Kaplan’s analysis, then, inverts realism’s mimetic paradigm. Rather than observing a reality that took place before it, realism sought to serve as the grounds on which a more coherent notion of social reality might be constructed as a bulwark against increasingly violent class conflict. The “common,” with its echoes of both condescension and unification, presents the shifting foundation of the dynamics of identification and disidentification, of empirical observation and idealist speculation, of belief and cynicism that run through the realist literature of the period. Kaplan’s analysis provides an apparatus for both doing away with the literalist critique (because realism constructs the vision of reality it presents rather than merely reproducing it) and building a reading of realism that’s more attendant to the texts’ figurative and formal richness than preceding conceptions had permitted.

And yet even if realist literature in general is characterized by, as Kaplan asserts, “the problem of knowing and representing others,” that epistemological thread doesn’t seem nearly strong enough to support the weight of an entire genre (40). As Michael Davitt Bell, among many others, has noted, “It is hard to see Howells, Twain, and James—not to mention such successors as Sarah Orne Jewett, Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, and Theodore Dreiser—as constituting any single literary tradition or ‘school’ of literature; the differences among their characteristic modes are far more striking than the similarities. It is also virtually impossible to extract from their novels and manifestos any consistent definition of ‘realism’ (or of ‘naturalism’) as a specific kind of literary representation” (1). In Alfred Kazin’s view, “Realism came to America from everywhere and nowhere ... and it had no center, no unifying principle, no philosophy, no joy in its coming, no climate of experiment.” More than merely loose and baggy the realism of the 1890s “utterly lacked a coherent and dynamic orientation” (16). In general, the term “realism” has seemed most useful as a way to either designate Howells and a group of
writers he happened to like or as a strawman to advance arguments about the aesthetic
achievements of the “modernism” that superseded it.

Accordingly the question of the generic coherence of realism—whether or not the writers
traditionally gathered under the realist umbrella have enough in common to constitute a genre—
circulates throughout this dissertation, but not because I have made any attempt to address it
directly or determine whether or not realism really is a coherent genre. I have no investment
either way. What seems more interesting is the way in which attempts by various writers and
critics to either shore up or erode definitions of realism, to make it a more inclusive or exclusive
generic marker, transform “purely literary” concerns into political principles, and so make the
realist problem of “knowing and representing others” into a surrogate for political knowledge in
general. In fact such arguments, about who’s in and who’s out, probably in some way constitute
a feature of realism itself rather than its critical metadiscourse, as writers at the end of the
nineteenth century were often fond of declaring explicit allegiance or opposition to Howellsian
realism.

In that sense, realism “itself” occupies the same kind of hazy epistemological status as
the objects of knowledge many of the following chapters attend to. Aside from the question of
what we might call constructive and transcriptive models of realism—the former designating the
view of critics like Kaplan, the latter designating critics like Lathrop and Martin—there is the
referential problem of realism. While this study opts out of the thorny issue of realism’s
definition, it still opts into the realist designation—clearly “realist” must mean something. The
designation is safe enough in the case of Howells, but for the other three writers in this study,
Harold Frederic, Charles Chesnutt, and Henry James, things are more tenuous. Howells had
words of praise for each of these novelists at different times, but their own stylistic, social, and
political commitments often differ so widely from Howells’s own that it makes little sense to interpret his endorsement as evidence that they are “realists” in any meaningful sense.

By including Frederic, Chesnutt, and James in a study of realism, then, I mean to complicate (or, to be honest, gut) definitions of realism that would make critical accounts of the realist impulse in literature a matter of either claiming that realism has no meaningful defining features or a concrete set of aesthetic and thematic criteria. Discourses about realism tend to reproduce in the metacritical register the epistemological commitments they see in realism’s descriptive register. In Kazin’s account, which has become more or less critical consensus, while European realism develops out of Continental positivism, American realism develops out of “a generation brought face to face with the pervasive materialism of industrial capitalism,” a claim that has the twin benefits of being true and allowing Kazin to read realism as a form of materialism that uncomplicatedly reflects its materialist origins (15). While any account of realism would be foolish to ignore the material underpinnings of the writing, I’m wary of the critical gesture that identifies acts of cultural production too closely with conditions of economic production. By the same token, when Joseph McElrath finds that Charles Chesnutt’s writing lacks the psychologically mimetic aspects that would qualify it as realism, he implicitly asserts a set of criteria by which we can confidently distinguish a realist text from other kinds of texts. I engage McElrath’s critique more fully in chapter four, but this view seems to me to produce a similar problem to Kazin’s, which is that saying what realism is or isn’t simply becomes a matter of pointing at textual features on some imaginary checklist. If we tick off enough boxes: presto! Realism!

Both of these approaches construe realism as an untenable literary idea or ideal, a facile guiding principle, or a pragmatic category of analysis that elicits questionable payoff. In
Common Knowledge, I’ve tried to take two complementary approaches to this problem. The first is to acknowledge the really existing rhetorical force that claims for and against realism had in the 1890s—realism was the site of intense and explicit debate about the proper role of social conflict and mimetic representation in literature. While subsequent attempts to define and corral a highly divergent set of authors into the realist pen may now prove unsatisfying, at the time the discourse surrounding realism were quite active. The second approach is to claim that the energies surrounding the realist debate were in no way locatable purely in the literary domain. I’ve tried to remain attentive to the ways in which discourses of realism reflect, reproduce, respond to, attempt to negate, and sublimate new and old anxieties surrounding the implications of mimesis under the social, political, and epistemological conditions of the late nineteenth century. Literary realism but also writing systems like stenography became ways in which the possibilities of knowledge production and transmission were changing, opening new methods for communicating while closing off others.\(^6\) Literary realism but also discourses of miscegenation became sites in which latent epistemological anxieties took on an explicitly political character, and the use of the former to discuss the latter amplified the epistemic implications of both. Literary realism but also concepts of literary modernity in general become ways in which the discursive axes of mimesis and originality shift to encompass the changing role of uncertainty in the conceptualization of viable forms of public knowledge.\(^7\)

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\(^6\) For two rather different interpretations of the relationship between communicative technologies and realism, especially James’s “realism,” see Menke and Seltzer.

\(^7\) We might also think of Barrish’s analysis of what he calls “realist prestige,” by which he means the ever-shifting process through which realist text’s locate and champion a “reallest” version of the real, or a foundational reality, the description and centralization of which constitutes the realism’s self-appointed task. For Barrish, importantly, the idea is not that realist texts actually do have a greater access to “realist prestige,” but that they are perhaps more concerned than most with the identification of a fundamental and conditioning form of social experience. See his *American Literary Realism, Critical Theory, and Intellectual Prestige, 1880-1995.*
One of the overarching goals of this work, then, is to complicate the notion that realism simply served as a mouthpiece that had the dissemination of middle-class values as its origin and end. And of course the disseminating impulse goes hand in hand with the ideal of common knowledge—one way to talk about the possibility of an epistemological common ground is to identify shared values and aspirations or at least to claim those values and aspirations are shared. In a representative instance, Mark McGurl, using this idea to distinguish between the social functions of realism and those of the modernism that would follow it, claims that, “The self-appointed task of the realist project, most prominently represented in the United States by William Dean Howells, had been to universalize the values of the virtuous and industrious middle class as valid for one and all,” opposing Howells’s notion of “the commonplace” with modernism’s interest in producing “social distinctions and disagreements” (10). While this distinction (which is a distinction regarding the very idea of distinction in the novel) may prove useful as a literary historical marker, it functions by simply taking Howells at his word, by implying that the practice of realist fiction is wholly identifiable with the rhetoric of the realist debates. The universalizing impulse of realism, and the assumption that novelistic practice bears out the claims of polemical theory, tends to become a critical alibi that subordinates the aesthetic and epistemic complexities of realist novels to the empirical claims of realist rhetoric.

In some sense the trick of Common Knowledge, then, is that it runs the rhetoric of realism up against its literary practice, a practice which consists as much in placing the real under erasure as it does in attempting to reflect it. The chapters’ sequencing thus requires some explanation; I do not move chronologically through the novels that sit at the center of each chapter, going by publication date. Accordingly, this dissertation begins with one of the incontestably classic sites of a supposedly materialist American realism—Howells’s A Hazard of New Fortunes (1890)—
and ends with a novel that takes the epistemic implications of that materialism to their absurd and sublime logical conclusions—James’s *What Maisie Knew* (1897). Howells comes first because a discussion of his fiction and criticism is conceptually necessary in order to introduce and center the rest of *Common Knowledge*’s thematic and theoretical tentacles. The fact that *A Hazard of New Fortunes* is the earliest novel given critical treatment is incidental to its position in the dissertation. Chapters three and four focus on Harold Frederic’s *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (1896) and Charles Chesnutt’s *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), respectively, and the dissertation ends with James. So while there is a certain approximate symmetry in the chronological spread between the novels (a decade between the furthest two, with two others published about midway between them), what seems most important is the way in which the sequencing highlights thematic and rhetorical patterns that show the interrelation between the material conditions of realism’s mimetic impulse and the way in which that impulse supplements the texts’ epistemological imaginaries.

And mimesis specifically becomes the axis on which the possibilities of knowing and knowledge turn. The relationship between mimesis and epistemology, far from an original discovery of this dissertation, emerges as the lynchpin of the representation of reality in Erich Auerbach’s classic reading of Homeric and Old Testament narrative technique in the first chapter of his *Mimesis*. Describing “the basic impulse of the Homeric style,” Auerbach writes that Homer tried “to represent phenomena in a fully externalized form, visible and palpable in all their parts, and completely fixed in their spatial and temporal relations.” The same goes for “psychological processes,” of which none “remain hidden and unexpressed”; even when characters withhold their thoughts and feelings from each other, “they speak in their own minds, so the reader is informed” (6). In Auerbach’s analysis, there is no need to speculate or triangulate
in order to discern the motives of a given character—they are always, in one way or another, speaking their minds, rooted firmly in a “uniformly illuminated, uniformly objective present” (7). Like a game of chess, the Homeric style makes 100 percent of The Odyssey’s information available to the reader—the very rules of the narrative game demand total transparency.  

Contrast this, Auerbach tells us, with the equally ancient text of the sacrifice of Isaac from the Old Testament. In it we find an almost total absence of everything that characterizes the Homeric style: we are not told of the spatio-temporal situation of the story’s two initial speakers (Abraham and God), nor how God “appeared” to Abraham (Did he physically manifest or did he become apparent to Abraham in some other, more figurative way?), nor, perhaps most characteristically, of God’s motivation for telling Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Unlike The Odyssey, when characters speak in the Old Testament, it is to indicate the unsaid thoughts that linger beyond the narrative’s purview. Whereas everything is on the table in The Odyssey, “everything remains unexpressed” in the Old Testament (11). In one sense, the distinction between the two of them is a matter of style—Homer aims to please regardless of our belief in the metaphysics of Greek theology while the Old Testament is not “oriented toward ‘realism’” but “toward truth.” These two different approaches toward the orientation of the real in literature, then, suggest that the difference between a literature that locates truth on the plane of objective

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8 In linking melodrama to the realism of James and Balzac, Peter Brooks hints at the relationship between “the desire to express all” that constitutes “a fundamental characteristic of the melodramatic mode” (4) and the mythic world of Homer. In Le Père Goriot, for example, Brooks locates the text’s drama in what he terms “the moral occult,” which is “the domain of operative spiritual values which is both indicated within and masked by the surface of reality.” Further, since what the moral occult occludes is “the repository of the fragmentary and desacralized remnants of sacred myth,” we could suggest that melodramatic imagination at work in the fiction Brooks constitutes not a disavowal of Homer’s narrative strategies but an internalization and thematization of them. And if “the melodramatic mode in large measure exists to locate and to articulate the moral occult,” (5) we could further hypothesize that such a mode (and hence, in Brooks’s reading, the realism it helps to constitute) looks almost like an attempt to return to a state of Homeric plentitude.
representation and one that locates truth indexically (God is “out there” and the Old Testament grounds its narrative technique by gesturing to him) is a matter of politics as much as style: “The Scripture stories do not, like Homer’s, court our favor, they do not flatter us that they may please and enchant us—they seek to subject us, and if we refuse to be subjected we are rebels” (15).

Reading against the grain is an act of rebellion of the kind, Auerbach implies, that Lucifer committed against God, a literally heretical act. And like all heresies, this one consists of a form of skepticism, one that reflects back on the stylistic distinctions on which Auerbach founds his analysis. The difference between Homeric style and Scriptural style, after all, depends on the shifting ratios of the reader’s knowledge to the events described. What Auerbach’s analysis underscores is the degree to which the orientation of the Scriptural style toward transcendental truth supplements the lack of externalized descriptive content and the degree to which the Homeric style’s apparent disinterest in the reader’s belief permits that externalization to constitute the teleological end of the reading process. The amount of information given in the text, Auerbach seems to say, varies indirectly with the degree of transcendental belief it requires. The more knowledge it presents to us, the less it requires we know; the less knowledge it presents to us, the more it requires us to believe already. Asking what the Old Testament God is thinking would be a misguided question (or, if your name happens to be Job, a disastrous one), and asking what Odysseus is thinking would be an unnecessary one. In the former skepticism is untenable, in the latter it’s a moot point.

Knowledge and attitudes toward knowledge are not only included in Auerbach’s “Odysseus’s Scar,” the preliminary chapter in one of the masterpieces of modern literary scholarship and criticism, but seem to operate as one of the categories that undergird the entire endeavor. In one moment in particular, Auerbach telegraphs one of his major claims, one of the
major claims of all modern criticism, and one still very much in circulation as a guiding rationale for literary studies: “The concept of God held by the Jews is less a cause than a symptom of their manner of comprehending and representing things” (8). In a sentence the rest of the book is basically dedicated to adjusting, restating, and defending, we learn that it is not transcendental beliefs that determine the ways texts handle space, time, and the fullness of descriptive content, but precisely the reverse, which makes mimesis in literature in general (thinking back to Kaplan) not a reflection of the world but a heuristic trope that puts on display the terms through which a culture manifests the limits and possibilities inherent in its conception of the real. The mimetic impulses of a culture, those that purport to bring the materiality of the real into public view, serve as the location of its metaphysics—the real, paradoxically, constitutes our most charged and confounding confrontation with the desire to transcend the real.

Over and over, American realism portrays this confrontation through the same kinds of epistemic undercurrents Auerbach relies on in his analysis of two of Western culture’s foundational texts. Just to be clear: I’m not arguing that The Odyssey is in some way a realist text or even that American iterations of the realist impulse have all that much in common with European iterations. I mean to point out, and this argument will play over the course of the dissertation, that the epistemic imaginary active in American realism encodes, through its absorption and transmutation of the material elements of its milieu, the same kinds of externalizing and aspirationally transcendental symptoms that Auerbach locates throughout “the representation of reality in Western literature.”

The following chapters attempt to situate the epistemic implications of the tension between the external and the transcendent as problems that emerge from discourses about specific material aspects of American culture in the 1890s. Each of them locates the problem of
epistemic difference within a discourse circulating around highly charged iterations of the mimetic impulse. So while chapter two focuses on Howells’s novel *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, it approaches the text by asking both how the eighteenth-century discourse of the picturesque supplemented Howells’s anxieties regarding his inability to know the experiences of the urban poor, and how a parallel inability to discern who possesses aesthetic taste and who simply imitates the taste of others couches anxieties about social fragmentation within epistemologically fraught questions of aesthetics. In *A Hazard*, epistemic uncertainty serves as an analytic that allows us to see the problem of other tastes and the problem of other classes as different version of the same problem, which is essentially that of mimesis.

In the context of this dissertation, then, epistemic uncertainty has both a clarifying and a blurring effect. Clarifying because it can help to identify symmetries that, were they not viewed as effects or components of overarching epistemological concerns, might otherwise seem too disparate to bring into relation; blurring because it risks reducing every problem into another version of Berkleyan idealism or Baudrilliardian simulation or Wachowskian “But how do you know we aren’t in the Matrix?”-ism. After all, the Matrix question’s universal applicability is ultimately what makes it so boring; we can *always* respond to every local problem, textual or otherwise, with a larger, seemingly more ambitious question about the systems and institutions governing our perception and understanding of those local problems. In many ways, this is exactly what we’re trained to do as literary scholars: read seeming singularities as well-disguised instances of patterned behaviors and operations put into motion by concealed networks of power. This is a laudable exercise, and something this dissertation attempts to do. But I want to remain
wary of the methodological impetus to view localities as allegories of globalisms, which risks erasing economies of scale and the texture of idiosyncrasy from critical consciousness.⁹

In writing *Common Knowledge*, I’ve tried to mediate the dizzying parallax that attends keeping one eye on global theoretical phenomena and the other on local textual idiosyncrasy. This dissertation attempts, cyclops-like, to see large-scale, publicly-articulated abstractions (realism, poverty, race, literary modernity, technology) and their textual counterparts with a unified vision. Nobody can claim to possess a totally unblinkered, objective, or “external” view of realism’s involvement with the real, of course, and I’d be a liar or a fool to claim I’m any different. But I do at least have ambitions to change the terms through which that involvement is understood. If the future of American literature’s past is not doomed to repeat the mistake of underestimating the epistemic force of that writing, it must at least nod to the interpenetration, and not the mutual exclusion, of thought and materialism evinced by that literature.

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⁹ For a more expansive discussion of the role of scale in conceptualizations of literature, see Hayot, *On Literary Worlds*. 
Chapter 2

Tenement Aesthetics: Knowing the Poor in A Hazard of New Fortunes

“I defy any man to show that there is pauperism in the U.S.” Andrew Carnegie, 1887

Late eighteenth-century Königsberg seems an odd place to begin a dissertation about late nineteenth-century American realism, but it was the home of Immanuel Kant, whose reflections on taste will help to illuminate the place of aesthetics in literature that would appear one hundred years later and a continent away. Taste, in Kant’s estimation, may depend on common sense, but there is nothing commonsensical about Kant’s conception of taste. And while we tend to think of taste as peculiarly private—a thing there’s no accounting for—Kant’s analysis in Critique of Judgment (1790) construes it as a mode of judgment enabled by the possibility of its public communication: “we might define taste as the faculty of judging what makes our feeling in a given representation universally communicable without the mediation of a concept” (125). In a moment, I will outline the relevance of this insight for the analysis of epistemic difference in the realist novel, but it’s worth staying with Kant for a bit in order to get a sense of the stakes. Kant, after all, has a deep investment in the universality of the faculty of judgment, one that militates against precisely the forms of social difference realist literature at the end of the nineteenth century was so interested in describing. For Kant, it is not only important to distinguish the sense in which he uses “common” to designate “public” from the use of “common” to designate “vulgar,” it is absolutely essential. For just as Kant bemoans that the double meaning of common “makes it amount to what is vulgar” in everyday discourse, he wants to emphasize that, “by the name sensus communis is to be understood the idea of a public sense, i.e. a faculty of judging

which in its reflective act takes account (*a priori*) of the mode of representation of everyone else, in order ... to weigh its judgement with the collective reason of mankind” (123). An argument on behalf of the *sensus communis*, then, ought to stand as an argument on behalf of the possibility of a common knowledge, on behalf of the possibility that we can come to terms of mutual understanding not only within the terms of our own class-based social being, but across lines of socioeconomic disparity—hence Kant’s insistence on negating the “vulgar” connotations of the “common.”

This chapter will argue against that idea, or at least try to complicate it to the degree that it comes to mean something very different when it plays out in literature. While Kant tries to expel the implication of vulgarity, and hence socioeconomic distinction, from the realm of the *sensus communis*, my argument in this chapter is that it is precisely acts of aesthetic judgment that enable and give shape to articulations of epistemic difference within the American realist novel. While Kant’s analysis posits the *sensus communis* as an abstraction necessitated by the non-conceptual nature of judgment, this chapter will consider what happens when the public sense takes material shape, both through the tropes of realist writing and through the phenomena that writing purports to describe. Taking William Dean Howells’s *A Hazard of New Fortunes* as its point of departure, this chapter initiates a set of ideas and discourses that the subsequent three chapters will take as themes or objects of inquiry. In transitioning from the question of the immanence of aesthetic theory in the novel’s epistemological imagination to the epistemic crises provoked by the socialization of taste, this chapter introduces epistemology as a part object, a narrative factor that provides the mimetic groundwork for the representation of the real and a constructed object of critical inquiry determined as much by social, political, aesthetic, and ontological commitments as by its analogy to embodied acts of thinking. No one argued more
vigorously than Howells that literature was not only, in Henry James’s terms, “analogous” to the art of realist painting, but possessed of an equal measure of mimetic force, that a linguistic and narrative act of figuration could rival the visual impact of realist painting.

While this chapter will not emphasize the relationship between painting and writing—a relationship that was often described as competitive in the 1890s—it will draw on a body of theory that was, at least initially, developed to talk about paintings. That Howells himself often compared his own writing to painting, encouraging such comparisons even within the frame of his novels, suggests that painterly aesthetics is not without relevance to his work. But rather than emphasizing the substantive points of comparison between realist writing and the picturesque paintings Howells was fond of, this chapter will look to theories of picturesque painting to help unravel the tightly wound relations between poverty, epistemology, and aesthetics in Howells’s work.

In the opening chapters of *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, while Basil and Isabel March are in the midst of a seemingly endless search for a suitable Manhattan apartment, the sight of a “decently dressed person” with the “hard hands and broken nails of a working man” eating discarded food off of the sidewalk almost provokes Isabel to flee the city (59). She can’t understand why New York seemed so much cleaner and less poverty-stricken on their last visit, whereas now decent folk are literally starving in the streets. Basil explains,

“No, you don't starve in parlor-cars and first-class hotels; but if you step out of them you run your chance of seeing those who do, if you're getting on pretty well in the forties. If it's the unhappy who see unhappiness, think what misery must be revealed to people who pass their lives in the really squalid tenement-house streets—I don't mean picturesque avenues like that we passed through” (60).

Basil’s explanation offers the terms through which the middle-class experience of the poor appears not only as a symptom of political and social tensions, but also as a problem of
knowledge for the bourgeois travelers who encounter them. First, the physical distance between the “first-class hotels” the Marches patronize and the tenements they pass by makes an encounter with the truly impoverished unlikely. Second, even if one does encounter the poor, only “the unhappy … see unhappiness,” only the miserable see misery, and so the experiences of unhappiness and misery that characterize poverty risk invisibility because the middle-class traveler lacks the faculties to recognize those experiences.

Knowing the experience of the poor, then, would seem to require experiencing what they experience. Though, as Isabel points out, the Marches are not “unhappy,” they are “serious,” and this seriousness allows for a certain knowledge of the poor (60). While the knowledge of unhappiness and misery causes Isabel to contemplate fleeing the city entirely, Basil provides an opposing term that allows for the possibility of visibility without revolt. “Picturesque avenues” appear comparable to “squalid tenement-house streets” but require differentiation from them—Basil finds it necessary to say that when he mentions the “squalid tenement-house,” he doesn’t mean the “picturesque avenues” with which Isabel might confuse them.

If Basil perceives that the squalid might get confused with the picturesque, his need to clarify the difference between them reflects the history of the “picturesque” itself. From its origin in debates over landscape paintings and English gardens in the late eighteenth century to its employment to describe the New York tenements a hundred years later, the aesthetics of the picturesque were frequently aligned with visual qualities that defy the more canonical categories “beautiful” and “sublime.” Defined by William Gilpin in 1794 as “that particular quality, which makes objects chiefly pleasing in paintings,” the picturesque stood at the center of a series of debates over the ways in which we know and enjoy representations of the landscape, and in particular those aspects of the landscape that exhibit “roughness,” “ruggedness,” the “craggy,”
Theorists of the picturesque like Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight constantly argued over the terms by which a mutilated, dilapidated, burnt-out, or otherwise damaged object might fall short of the criteria of the beautiful while still providing pleasure for the viewer.

Debates over the picturesque often consist of haggling over which objects exhibit such qualities as might be called picturesque, but for Knight, Joshua Reynolds and others, questions arose as to whether picturesqueness was a quality of the object or a quality of mind, a particular feature of the landscape to be represented or a particular way of representing a landscape. Further, Gilpin uses the term picturesque to define “such objects, as are proper subjects for painting,” and so inverts the terms through which mimesis is traditionally understood (36). We recognize the picturesque in nature because we recognize it from paintings, presumably paintings of nature: the mise en scène of the picturesque takes place en abyme.

We might see in this confusion between the object represented and the means of representing the object a proleptic form of the Marches’ descriptions of unhappiness and misery. Just as one must know misery in order to perceive it in the world, one must know the picturesque in order to locate it in a natural object. Basil’s distinction between the squalid and the picturesque, then, seeks to solve the epistemological problem of knowing the poor through a common misery with the aesthetic solution of recognizing the poor as possessing picturesque qualities. To “think what misery must be revealed to people who pass their lives in the really squalid tenement-house streets” is a substitute for the revelation of misery to those who live in it, while to recognize other tenements as “picturesque” is an implicit claim to knowledge. Basil’s explanation, then, reproduces the terms of the picturesque debates—not only does he claim to locate the picturesque in an object (certain tenements) rather than a faculty, he pairs this claim
about concrete knowledge with a denigration of speculative knowledge about the poor. Insofar as the poor fall within the purview of the picturesque, they and their living conditions become viable and desirable objects of knowledge; insofar as the poor exceed or fall short of the picturesque, the novel relegates them to the status of the unknowable and undesirable.

This chapter will concern itself with the ways in which Howells attempts to negotiate the problems of knowledge posed by the poor—How can “we” know them? What would it mean to “know” the experience of the poor? What are the terms through which the experience of poverty becomes legible?—through aesthetic strategies. While Howells’s espousal of literary realism would seem to provide the perfect terms through which the experience of poverty could come to the page, his reliance on aesthetic theories found in the romances he abhorred implies that realist aesthetics were not up to the task of representing every kind of reality. Later critics of the American novel like Richard Chase simply took the relationship between the romance and the picturesque as a given, but the marginalization of the picturesque in critical discourse surrounding the realist novel, while understandable in general, means that a major element of a major American novel has remained more or less invisible.² This chapter will seek to remedy that invisibility, as well as to suggest ways that Howells’s novel participated in an array of strategies designed to characterize, describe, represent, or otherwise render into discourse the experience of the poor, strategies that I will call “tenement aesthetics.”

While later chapters consider the ways in which critics have reinscribed problems of knowledge at work in the novels of Harold Frederic, Charles Chesnutt, and Henry James into the critical discourse about those novels, this chapter must necessarily view the problem of the

² One, and perhaps the only, exception is Carrie Tirado Bramen, who finds in Howells the deployment of an “urban picturesque” vision that embodies the tension between an aesthetics of distance and spatialization and a sympathetic impulse that is much in line with our own “postmodern sensibilities” (“William Dean Howells” 85).
representation of the poor through a more varied set of discursive exchanges than the text-critic
dyad. The poor are not a “textual problem”—they’re not a “problem” at all. Poverty is a problem,
the poor are a fact. The differences of scale between the individual poor person and the abstract
problem of poverty, then, represents not only an epistemic problem for Howells’s thinking about
socioeconomic difference—it also develops into a formal problem for his conception of realism.
For if it is true, as he implies in his “Altrurian Romances,” that for Howells poverty is best
solved through a wholesale political reorganization of American society, then this proposed
solution to large-scale poverty does little to diminish the intensity of the one-on-one, street-level
encounters with the poor that Howells invests so much energy in describing and employs the
language of picturesque painting to describe.

If the poor pose a problem of knowledge in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, then, it is a
problem of knowledge related specifically to the problems of representation raised by the
picturesque. Further, the linkage between the poor and the aesthetics of the picturesque does not
remain exclusive to the novel itself. The late nineteenth century saw an explosion of visual,
literary, and legal representations of poverty. Jacob Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives* (1890)
paired descriptions of the conditions of the tenements with photographs emphasizing the
crammed, grimy conditions of the Lower East Side tenements, while painters of the Ashcan
School set to work documenting the cultural life of the same. The Tenement House Act of 1867
required that buildings have exterior fire escapes, and another version of the act in 1879 required
that each apartment have windows facing outward (though they often looked “out” onto airshafts
full of festering garbage)—architectural features that would prompt Howells to use the aesthetics
of the picturesque to characterize them. The practical reasons for these architectural features
were related to public safety and health concerns, but the upshot was the framing of poverty as
the object of visual experience. From Howells’s Marches, to Riis’s photography, to the newly fashionable pastime of slumming that swept New York in the 1880s, the poor were consistently engaged as objects of visual attention, and the aesthetic frame most frequently used to make sense of the visual fascination with the miserable, the dirty, and the rough was the picturesque.

Accordingly, the poor were not so much visible as exposed to visibility. Because the tenements were the only viable living arrangements for those that lived there, and because those living arrangements were subject to regulation by the state, the terms of their visibility were, more often than not, beyond their control. In his memoir *Jews Without Money* (1930), Mike Gold recalls “a big sightseeing bus” rolling through the tenements: “A gang of kids chased it, and pelted rocks, garbage, dead cats and stale vegetables at the frightened sightseers … What right had these stuckup foreigners to come look at us? What right had that man with the megaphone to tell them lies about us?” (55). Rebelling against the uptown slummers, the gang responds to the visual exposure of the sightseeing tour with the literal substances of poverty. While the tourists come to make visual contact with the poor, to expose them to vision and to aestheticize them, the gang throws the materials of poverty back at the tourists and denies the priority of visual experience with the things themselves. By framing visibility as a matter of “rights,” the exchange between an aestheticizing vision and an aestheticized subject becomes an issue of representational inequality that emerges in tandem with the problems of public health seemingly endemic to the tenements themselves. ³ In Gold’s terms, being seen is an injustice, one related to

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³ Here and throughout the chapter I use the term “tenements” to refer both to the actual apartments that housed the poor on Manhattan’s Lower East Side and the zones around the apartments where the poor lived and worked. Texts like *Jews Without Money* often treat the neighborhood and the apartments as related features of an all-encompassing world, with very real but permeable boundaries constituted by geographical markers (in Gold’s account, a Jewish kid doesn’t dare wander into the Italian section of the Lower East Side, and vice versa), buildings, rooms, hallways, and windows. Each boundary has its metaphorical and physical dimension—an intersection is both the meeting of two streets and the contact point between two social worlds, both of which fall under the domain of the tenements.
the visual dynamics of the tenements, tenements that were often so “picturesque” that they virtually invited the gawking of the middle class.

While the picturesque provides the terms through which the poor become an object of knowledge in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, for Howells it leaves the problem of knowing the poor unsolved. In the nonfictional texts of the same period gathered in *Impressions and Experiences* (1896), and especially in his meditations on the ethics of charity, Howells negotiates the problem of knowing the poor through reference to his own encounters with them on the streets and in visits to their homes in the tenements. His attempts to determine the proper way to consider the poor, to behave toward them, but above all, his tracing out of the particular cognitive difficulties particular to encounters with the poor result in the improvisation of writerly techniques that exploit an incommensurability between the hallowed “probability of motive” and “fidelity to experience” that characterize Howells’s description of literary realism. These techniques are only one element in a constellation of strategies and forms that attempted to represent the poor in the 1890s. The issue of critical interest is not the “success” or “failure” of these forms, for apart from whatever statistical data survives, they are all we have of that era, and so they serve as an index not only to the people they sought to represent, but also to the ways in which representation came to modulate, supplement, and stand in for those people, and so became a constitutive way of “knowing” them.

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4It’s worth noting that Howells himself grew up quite poor in Ohio, with his father continually starting, abandoning, and restarting newspapers and businesses. But while he grew up with no money, his father’s tireless dedication to the abolitionist cause both in person and in print ensured his brilliant son would eventually have political connections (both Rutherford B. Hayes and James Garfield were friends of the family). An enterprising Ohio newspaperman who lionized John Brown in his columns couldn’t have done much more to attract the attention of Republican politicians. So while William Dean Howells may have started out life on the geographical and economic outer reaches of the nation, he was also in an important way at its center, especially after composing a popular campaign biography of Lincoln. The sense of alienation evoked by the urban poor in Basil March, then, is not so strange when one considers the way they are poor as contrasted to the way Howells was. See Goodman and Dawson, *William Dean Howells: A Writer’s Life*. 

31
I.

In the massive catalogue of William Dean Howells’s fiction, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* stands as an exception. Not only is it one of the few Howells novels that is still regularly read, taught, and written about, it deals with a broader social canvas than any of his other work and, 120 years after its publication, provokes a sense of recognition rare for any American novel of that era. As a social novel dealing with both workers’ rights and economic impoverishment, it operates in a dual register, describing both small-scale conflicts over philosophical principles and large scale social conflicts that result in a clash between police and striking street-car drivers, which was inspired by an actual strike that unfolded in New York as Howells was writing the novel.

*A Hazard* focuses on the Marches, characters first introduced in Howells’s *Their Wedding Journey* (1871), who move from Boston to New York so that Basil can take a job as the fiction editor of *Every Other Week*, a new literary journal. As the journal is threatened by internal clashes between Dryfoos, its virulently anti-union financier, and Lindau, a pro-union, German war hero hired by March, the politics of the strikers begin to contaminate the genteel atmosphere of the literary magazine. After the strike claims the lives of both Lindau and Conrad, Dryfoos’s saint-like son, the novel draws to a close as a comedy, with the marriage of the editor Fulkerson and the commitment of the social reformer Margaret Vance to the life of a nun.

While *A Hazard* ostensibly resolves conflicts between characters either by killing them off or marrying them, the experience of the poor provides a tension that’s not so easily done away with. Speaking to Basil about the “sketches” of New York life that Basil intends to write for *Every Other Week*, Conrad Dryfoos tells him, “If you can make the comfortable people understand how the uncomfortable people live, it will be a very good thing, Mr. March.
Sometimes it seems to me that the only trouble is that we don't know one another well enough; and that the first thing is to do this” (132). In telling Basil that the “first thing,” the most important thing, is to make the “comfortable” understand the “uncomfortable,” Conrad implies that problems of economic inequality result from epistemological inequality. While the comfortable have more money and resources, the uncomfortable know what the lack of those resources means, and to help the comfortable towards an understanding of this lack constitutes literature’s mission. Conrad’s view of literature, then, answers Basil’s explanation of the difficulties of knowing the misery of the poor. If only the unhappy can know unhappiness, Basil’s earlier proposition that Isabel must “think what misery must be revealed to people who pass their lives in the really squalid tenement-house streets” frames “thinking” as a substitute for “understanding,” while Conrad proposes literature as an activity that can transform thinking into understanding.

Yet Basil himself seems to misunderstand the weight of Conrad’s remarks, for he responds approvingly that “those phases of low life are immensely picturesque,” and that it is necessary to “try to get the contrasts of luxury for the sake of the full effect” (132). While Conrad thinks literature must alleviate the epistemological disparity between the rich and the poor by educating the rich, Basil views the “contrast” itself as a desirable aesthetic effect, one he classifies specifically as “picturesque.” The distinction between literature that would produce social effects by eliminating epistemological discrepancies and literature that would produce aesthetic effects by emphasizing social discrepancies seems governed by an attitude toward “contrast” itself. Conrad and Basil aren’t exactly talking at cross purposes—both seem to understand “contrast” as necessary and desirable—but the terms of their disagreement emerge in the conceptual register as an implicit clash over the supposed ends of the literary object.
Moreover, Basil’s consideration of contrast extends to the practicalities of gathering material for his sketches. It “won’t be easy” to peer into the lives of the rich: “You can't penetrate to the dinner-party of a millionaire under the wing of a detective as you could to a carouse in Mulberry Street, or to his children's nursery with a philanthropist as you can to a street-boy's lodging-house” (132). While one can go slumming by enlisting a detective to take him through rowdy Lower East Side parties or tagging along with a philanthropist making a house call, there is no equivalent activity through which one can observe the social practices of the rich. In some ways, then, the rich serve as a problem of knowledge equal and opposite to that of the poor; if Conrad thinks literature ought to “make the comfortable people understand how the uncomfortable people live,” Basil notes the difficulty of knowing how the extremely comfortable live in the first place.

To equate a lack of knowledge of the poor with a lack of knowledge of the rich, though, presupposes that the effects of those lacks are equal. For Basil, an aesthetic understanding of the literary sketch requires an equal access to and knowledge of both the rich and the poor, for to deny representation to either would be to diminish the force of contrast and so to lose what is picturesque in the sketch. In this sense, the demands of the picturesque not only determine what is to be represented, they determine the ways in which “contrast” forecloses the possibility of a literary practice that would find its ends in the elimination of an epistemological inequality that Conrad locates as the source of social inequality.

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5 As Heap notes, the term “slumming” didn’t always carry the negative connotations it does today: “In its most demeaning formulation, some affluent white pleasure seekers no doubt used the term consciously to reinforce their sense of social and moral superiority over the residents of the districts that they visited. But following the precedent of its British origins, slumming also lent itself to more well-meaning uses, whether describing the benevolent work that charitable organizations undertook in impoverished urban neighborhoods or the practice of living among the residents of the slum in settlement houses or religious missions” (11).
For Basil, then, the picturesque demands an equality of representation that doesn’t seek to illuminate the experience of the poor so much as generate a sense of contrast. And the way in which Basil deploys the term implies that the picturesque itself is a mode of representation rather than a quality to be represented. Here Basil’s usage of the term lines up with Richard Payne Knight’s contention that pleasures taken in picturesque beauty “are from the minds of the spectator; whose pre-existing ideas are revived, refreshed, and re-associated by new, but correspondent impressions on the organs of sense.” For Knight, the fundamental error of theorists of the picturesque like William Gilpin and Uvedale Price is “seeking for distinctions in external objects, which only exist in the modes and habits of viewing and considering them” (194). The picturesque, in Knight’s conception, requires an act of judgment—in order to perceive the picturesque, we need an understanding of what constitutes it in the first place. Viewing a picturesque image or reading a picturesque sketch “revives” a perceptive faculty we already possess—seeing the picturesque, or producing a picturesque image, requires an act of recognition rather than an act of discovery.

Like Knight, Basil would seem to understand the picturesque as a way of seeing or, as Christopher Hussey puts it, a “point of view.” Just as Basil proposes the picturesque as a strategy through which he can represent two different unknown social strata, its absence also governs the terms by which something can be perceived at all. As the Marches happen into a neighborhood that is “not the abode of the extremest poverty, but of a poverty as hopeless as any in the world,” they are unable to stand the sight of it:

The time had been when the Marches would have taken a purely aesthetic view of the facts as they glimpsed them in this street of tenement houses, when they would have contented themselves with saying that it was as picturesque as a street in Naples or Florence and with wondering why nobody came to paint it; they would have thought they
were sufficiently serious about it in blaming the artists for their failure to appreciate it, and going abroad for the picturesque when they had it here under their noses. It was to the nose that the street made one of its strongest appeals, and Mrs. March pulled up her window of the coupé. “Why does he take us through such a disgusting street?” she demanded, with an exasperation of which her husband divined the origin (55).

While the Marches might have taken “a purely aesthetic view” in the past, the actual stench of the street forces them to turn away from the tenements. Where they “would have” been able to appreciate the picturesqueness of the tenement, their proximity to it and the smell emanating from it prevent Isabel from understanding it as an aesthetic phenomenon, despite the similarity of the picturesque and the disgusting in eighteenth century aesthetic philosophy. 6 Again, the squalid and the picturesque appear in tandem as two equally possible ways of understanding the same phenomenon. For Isabel, the picturesque constitutes not only the most relevant aesthetic category to the phenomena of poverty, but the only available way through which they can be perceived—without an “aesthetic view,” the poor are unbearable.

After pulling up the window, though, Basil imagines that the driver is “a philanthropist in disguise,” who is attempting to show them how the other half lives (and smells). While the Marches find their conditions disgusting, “[the poor] don’t seem to mind it,” and Basil claims not to have seen “a jollier crowd anywhere in New York.” He goes on: “I wonder what they think of us, making this gorgeous progress through their midst? I suppose they think we’re rich and hate us—if they hate rich people; they don’t look as if they hate anybody. Should we be as patient as they are with their discomfort?” After guessing that none of them possess a bathtub, he supposes they “wouldn’t know what to do with the bath anyway” (55). Without an aesthetic frame to allow them to see the poor, the Marches turn away from them, and Basil speculates about how the poor see the Marches. It is as though the lack of aesthetic framing, in this moment, allows Basil to

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6 My thoughts about the uses of the disgusting and the squalid that follow would be unthinkable were it not for Zach Samalin. See his dissertation *The Masses Are Revolting: Victorian Culture and the Aesthetics of Disgust.*
engage in a kind of epistemological fantasy, to think through the perspective of the poor and attempt, however feebly, to see himself from outside himself.

However this attempt to think from the perspective of the poor comes freighted with an assumption about what constitutes thinking for the poor. In the attribution of feelings (joy and hate) to a mass of people, Basil attributes a kind of collective subjectivity to them. He imagines their thoughts and feelings as unified and homogenous (“I wonder what they think of us”); one can be in the “midst” of them, as though the tenements constituted a uniform atmosphere in which the Marches are an alien element. This imagined form of collective thinking emerges in the descriptive register of the novel as well. The streets are “swarmed with children,” and a “peddler of cheap fruit … mixed his cried with the joyous screams and shouts of the children and the scolding and gossiping voices of the women,” while “the burly blue bulk of a policeman defined itself at the corner” (54). Here Howells’s own description evinces the same concern with contrast—the distinct “blue bulk” of the cop against the indistinct mass of the voices—that becomes the subject of Basil and Conrad’s description later in the novel. The terms of the contrast, again, provoke what we “would” recognize as a picturesque description, were it not for the fact that we’re explicitly told in the next paragraph of the disgusting smells emanating from it.

While the Marches disavow the tenement as an example of the picturesque because of its scent, Howells’s descriptions accord with one of the most central qualities of picturesque representation. For Knight, the justification for locating the picturesque as a quality of mind comes by way of the development of mimetic painterly technique. Painters, in Knight’s account, initially “pretended to exact imitation” of nature. They tried to “distinguish the several hairs of the head, and the pores of the skin.” When they attempted to paint a landscape, “it was by copying distinctly every blade in the grass, every leaf in the trees, and every stone or brick in the
buildings.” The crucial shift came when painters stopped copying “what the mind knew to be”—that is, the distinctness of hairs, blades of grass, and bricks—and attempted to reproduce “what the eye saw”—the head of hair, the field of grass, the brick wall (145). Thus a mode of representation that attempted to reproduce landscapes and people in an atomistic fashion, as composed of distinct entities, gave way to a technique of “massing” (146). Through massing, painters, “blended and melted [their lines] together with a playful and airy kind of lightness, and a loose and sketchy indistinctness not observable in the reality, unless under peculiar circumstances and modifications of the atmosphere.” These qualities and objects, says Knight, constitute what “we properly call picturesque” (147).

The shift from what the mind knows to what the eye sees, then, gives rise to the aesthetic mode of the picturesque. In Knight’s description, the picturesque requires a disavowal of knowledge in favor of experience, a transition from a painterly technique that reproduces the world as an object known rationally to one that reproduces the world as an object known experientially. The particular quality of visual experience is one that eliminates individuality in favor of masses, groups, and clumps, all important features to gardeners and picturesque painters. The underlying philosophical move in Knight’s analysis of the picturesque, though, depends on construing the picturesque as an inborn quality of mind rather than a quality of object—for, as he points out, objects themselves aren’t blurry, muddled, or indistinct. And while his point is maybe philosophical, it emerges out of an historical analysis, for until “painters had adopted some distinct manner of imitating nature, appropriate to their own art, men could have thought of

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7 Accounts of the central issues and problems relating to the picturesque vary greatly depending on who’s describing them. My account takes up only those issues I see as germane to A Hazard of New Fortunes and other nineteenth century representations of the tenements. I’ve found Christopher Hussey’s The Picturesque: Studies in a Point of View, Sidney K. Robinson’s Inquiry into the Picturesque, Nikolaus Pevsner’s Visual Planning and the Picturesque, Stephanie Ross’s “The Picturesque: An Eighteenth-Century Debate,” Mavis Batey’s “The Picturesque: an Overview” and Kim Ian Michasiw’s “Nine Revisionist Theses on the Picturesque” very helpful, but not even my account of alternate accounts is anywhere close to comprehensive.
distinguishing any object or class of objects by an epithet signifying after the manner of painters: since, unless painters had some peculiar manner, such epithet could mark no peculiar discrimination, nor have any distinct meaning” (147; emphasis Knight’s). So while calling an object “picturesque” may entail a mode of seeing or a representational choice, such a choice was only possible once a rationalistic, knowledge-based stance toward the world was abandoned and an experiential stance was adopted and implemented through painterly technique. Only then did the “picturesque” become available both as a term appropriate to the technical means of representation, like massing, and a nominative distinction, like calling something “picturesque” rather than “squalid.”

When he sets a singular policeman against an indistinct group of tenement dwellers, then, Howells participates in a form of massing that suggests his use of the term picturesque is in no way coincidental. Howells describes the tenements using picturesque techniques while explicitly denying that the Marches experience the tenements in the same way, ostensibly granting the reader the “pleasing” experience the Marches are refused. The lack of differentiation among the poor, as an aesthetic strategy, implies a lack of knowledge—as individuals, they mass into a clump of people who defy rational contemplation and submit only to the visual sense: their visibility provides the terms of their unknowability. The contrast between the police officer and the tenements dwellers, functions not only to frame a picturesque scene but to privilege the encompassing description of the urban landscape over the Marches who, in “making this gorgeous progress through their midst,” risk becoming a part of the atmosphere that surrounds them, risk acquiring the grime of the streets, which grow more squalid the closer you get.

Contrast, then, both in Howells’s novel and in theories of the picturesque, serves as a figure that modulates the way readers and characters understand the objects they look at as
pleasurable rather than squalid or disgusting. The rhetoric of contrast, the ways in which characters and descriptions in the novel handle differences between rich and poor, individual and mass, and the squalid and the picturesque take on specific valences of meaning, provides the terms through which the poor become either legible or illegible. The rhetoric of contrast also seems central to the aesthetic mode Carrie Tirado Bramen has called the “urban picturesque.” For Bramen, the task of the urban picturesque in the late nineteenth century was “to demonstrate to the middle class reader that ‘richness and variety’ were part of the metropolitan experience” rather than a detriment to it (“The Urban Picturesque” 447). In this reading, the picturesque becomes a way for writers both to valorize cultural heterogeneity and to maintain an aestheticized distance from it, allowing them to complicate conceptions of American identity while reserving a privileged mode of national identification for themselves. Howells’s engagement with the urban picturesque, his desire to sympathize with the immigrant poor and distance himself from them, took the form of a struggle to envision ways that New York’s immigrant population could point toward a future with less inequality instead of more social fragmentation.

For Bramen, then, the urban picturesque provides Howells with a way to unify the disparate social groups of the tenements into a whole. But while the shift from the picturesque to the disgusting occurs against the backdrop of a homogeneous tenement scene, Basil March later emphasizes the radically various and individuated nature of the tenements. On a train ride downtown to Chatham Square, he contemplates his preference for the East Side over the West Side of Manhattan. The variety of people in his car is “unfailingly entertaining,” and the

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8 Christophe den Tandt has claimed that the novel’s attempt to “present a total picture of its social relations” and its denial of the fragmentation of urban life in the late 1880s leads it to switch between realistic and romantic narrative modes (24). While I agree that *A Hazard* clearly displays elements of romance, den Tandt’s larger argument that it participates in an aesthetics of “the urban sublime” ignores a wealth of evidence that can help us understand the novel’s aesthetic modes in more complex ways (23).
residents of the East Side are “never quite so squalid” as those of the West Side. As he considers the eventual “numerical subordination of the dominant race” to the various new immigrant communities of the East Side, he begins to consider these immigrants as subjects for his literary sketches:

If they do not outvote them, the people of Germanic, of Slavonic, of Pelasgic, of Mongolian stock outnumber the prepotent Celts; and March seldom found his speculation centered upon one of these. The small eyes, the high cheeks, the broad noses, the puff lips, the bare, cue-filleted skulls, of Russians, Poles, Czechs, Chinese; the furtive glitter of Italians; the blonde dullness of Germans; the cold quiet of Scandinavians—fire under ice—were aspects that he identified, and that gave him abundant suggestion for the personal histories he constructed, and for the more public-spirited reveries in which he dealt with the future economy of our heterogeneous commonwealth. It must be owned that he did not take much trouble about this; what these poor people were thinking, hoping, fearing, enjoying, suffering; just where and how they lived; who and what they individually were—these were the matters of his waking dreams as he stared hard at them, while the train raced farther into the gay ugliness—the shapeless, graceful, reckless picturesqueness of the Bowery (163).

Through “identifying” racialized physical characteristics, March constructs both individual narratives for the people he sees and a vision of a “heterogeneous” national future that will emerge from their integration. Whereas the “disgusting” tenements he visits with Isabel are described through the gathering of the various residents of the tenements into a homogeneous mass or group, the “gay ugliness” of the picturesque Bowery occasions a whittling of larger racial groups down to particularized experiences (thought, hope, fear, joy, suffering), to the imagination of “just where and how they lived.” In the disgusting tenements, particular differences blend together into a unified mass; in the picturesque Bowery, homogeneous groups lead to the imagination of particularized differences. Even though March’s “waking dreams” provoke him to imagine the particular experiences of individuals, he must access them through an act of “speculation” that proceeds from the observation of race and class difference. While he
wants to know the particularities of the experiences of the poor, he must still know them as “poor people” first and foremost. The terms through which March first attempts to differentiate individuals from their groups proceeds from an initial act of recognition of the group itself.

Ironically, then, in seeking to individuate the mass, March reaches the limitations of his own knowledge. While he can imagine and speculate as to the specifics of poor people’s lives, he cannot gain access to them. The closer he gets to the specific person, the less he is able to comprehend, the more he is forced to rely on dreams and speculations. It is as though Knight’s pre-picturesque idea of individuated phenomena that are known rationally but not experienced visually defines March’s epistemic limitation—there is no further one can go in empirical investigation, in the gathering of data, and so March takes his inability to gather further knowledge as the starting point of the literary imagination. Not only a heightened consciousness of the poor but a corresponding recognition of March’s (and, as we will see, Howells’s) inability to know them makes them fit subjects for literature.

II.

Rather than serving as a description of an aesthetic mode, the recurrence of the term “picturesque” names an act of aesthetic framing and selection that serves as the precondition for the knowledge of the poor. Unless they are recognizable as picturesque, the poor fall into the category of the squalid, and are no longer suitable objects of contemplation. Not all of the poor are fit aesthetic subjects, then, just as the squalid West Side is unsuitable for Basil’s waking dreams and speculations. It is only through becoming visible within the purview of the aesthetics of the picturesque that the uncomfortable can lead the comfortable to want to know more, and so
to engage in the exposure of the conditions of poverty that characterize the aesthetics of the tenement.\(^9\)

March’s attempts to know the poor fall along a kind of spectrum, where distance makes possible the contemplation of the poor as an aesthetic phenomenon and proximity forces either the rejection of the poor as a fit subject for contemplation or the recognition of the limitations of his own knowledge. Late in the novel, after witnessing the strike and the violence that ensues, he thinks back on the decently dressed man eating food off the ground, Basil tells Isabel “When I see how readily the sensibilities of the passing stranger can be worked in New York I think of taking up the role of that desperate man on Third Avenue who went along looking for garbage in the gutter to eat. I think I could pick up at least twenty or thirty cents a day by that little game and maintain my family in the affluence it’s been accustomed to.” Thinking of the ease with which passers-by are stirred by the sight of the poor, Basil is suddenly alive to the possibility that there might be frauds among them who are simply engaging in a little freelance beggary to supplement their income.\(^10\) That is, by novel’s end, March finds common experience with the poor not by being miserable as they are, but by imagining that they are actually as comfortable as he is. While he won’t claim that the beggar is actually an impostor, he asks Isabel what she thinks “of a civilization that makes the opportunity of such a fraud? That gives us all such a bad conscience for the need which is that we weaken to the need that isn’t” (398).

\(^9\) This tension between the unfitness the novel claims and the fitness it practices, as well as the modulation between the massing required by the picturesque and the individuation encountered by March on the El line, resembles what Jacques Rancière calls “the distribution of the sensible.” According to Rancière, the “distribution of the sensible” refers to “the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it,” and so “establishes at one and the same time something common that is shared and exclusive parts” (12).

\(^10\) Stories about “rich beggars” tend to crop up periodically in the news, both in the form of urban legends and documented stories. The phenomenon, whether as a rumor or a fact, seems to have existed for at least as long as the modern city. For a recent example see, “Affluent Beggars’ with Three Children Draw Public Attention.”
“The need that is” and “the need that isn’t” appear indistinguishable from each other, and so expose a problem of “civilization”: poverty makes both the wallet and the conscience vulnerable to the abuses of the unscrupulous. And clearly in his ambivalent attitudes toward the poor, charity, American capitalism, realist literary practice, and in his curiosity about New York City, Basil March bears more than a passing resemblance to Howells himself. March’s discomfort with his own comfort in the face of poverty mirrors Howells’s own, as does his association of poverty, conscience, and civilization. Howells’s own encounters with the poor appear to have been extensive, and just as those encounters surely inspired large parts of *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, so did the particular aesthetic problems the poor raised. Just as the problem of differentiating the individual from the mass uses the picturesque to attempt to solve an epistemological problem, Howells resorts to the picturesque as a mode that makes poverty both visible and bearable, a form that provides refuge from a knowledge of the poor too nearly indistinguishable from the actual experience of poverty.

In his essay “Tribulations of a Cheerful Giver,” Howells presents begging and giving as cognitive difficulties as much as social problem:

The whole spectacle of poverty, indeed, is incredible. As soon as you cease to have it before your eyes,—even when you have it before your eyes,—you can hardly believe it, and that is perhaps why so many people deny that it exists, or is much more than a superstition of the sentimentalist. When I get back into my own comfortable room,

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11 Besides his habit of slumming, Howells’s curiosity about the city extended to his living arrangements. Between 1888 and 1897, he occupied no fewer than seven separate apartments in Manhattan. See Ambruster, “List of Addresses.”

12 In a famous 1888 letter to Henry James, Howells wrote, “I’m not in a very good humor with ‘America’ myself. It seems the most grotesquely illogical thing under the sun; and I suppose I love it less because it won’t let me love it more. I should hardly like to trust pen and ink with all the audacity of my social ideas; but after fifty years of optimistic content with ‘civilization’ and its ability to come out all right in the end, I now abhor it, and feel that it is coming out all wrong in the end, unless it bases itself anew on a real equality. Meantime I wear a fur-lined overcoat, and live in all the luxury money can buy” (Anesko 272).
among my papers and books, I remember it as I remember something at the theatre. It seems to be turned off, as Niagara does, when you come away (163).

The poor seem to disappear once you look at them—the hard realities of poverty find themselves transformed by memory into a “spectacle” indistinguishable from a performance. Even when Howells has the poor “before [his] eyes,” he cannot quite believe what he is seeing, and when he leaves the scene of poverty, he imagines that it disappears. Here again, the poor are not fit objects for contemplation—as visual phenomena and representations in the mind, they seem to actively resist contemplation. Moreover, Howells’s attempt to perceive and contemplate the poor provokes an equal and opposite epistemological reaction—when he tries to reach out to see and know the poor, the attempt results in a solipsistic inability to believe in their existence at all.

Howells’s inability to believe in poverty once it leaves his eyes, though, finds its counterweight in his insistence on contextualizing individual experiences of the poor within the frame of political economy. When he encounters a beggar sitting silently on a stoop with his arms extended, Howells perceives that he has, “no hands, but only stumps, where the fingers had been cut off close to the palms.” Howells finds this silent and unobtrusive begging “rather fine,” and that, “except for his mutilation” there is nothing about him “to offend the taste.” Howells resolves to give him money, but finds that he only has a half dollar coin, and it is “manifestly wrong to give half a dollar … to any sort of beggar.” Strangely, though Howells is willing to commit “a small act of incivism,” he cannot “flout political economy,” even to the tune of a half dollar. He resolves to get change, but can’t find anyone on the street. Eventually he dashes into a restaurant and, because he is “ashamed” to ask a waiter to change a half dollar, he buys a pack of Sweet Caporal cigarettes, which are a “pure waste” because he doesn’t smoke. Yet Howells feels he has chosen correctly because “it was better to buy them and encourage commerce than to give the half-dollar and encourage beggary.” On the way back to the man, “feeling that [he has]
political economy” on his side, he decides only to give fifteen cents, which he balances “on one of his outstretched stumps” (153).13

Though Howells’s account of the debacle is told with ironic humor, his “interaction” with the beggar portrays giving as the meeting place of political economy and conscience. Though Howells realizes he “could go on and ignore the incident” without giving any money at all, the thought of “the bad conscience [he] should be certain to have” prevents him from abandoning the beggar entirely. While his concern for the health of commerce and the maintenance of civilization itself determines that he must limit his giving, beggary threatens his conscience so that he knows he must give something, even if the value of what he gives (fifteen cents) is barely more than the “pure waste” of the cigarettes (ten cents). Between the spectacle of poverty that fades into theater when it’s recalled in memory and the competing demands of conscience and the market, Howells’s perceptions of the poor appear mediated through some ethical or political imperative, or get consigned to the unthinkable.

With the sort of realist gestures that Frank Norris would later deride as “the tragedy of a walk down the block,” Howells’s run-in with the fingerless beggar dramatizes everyday anxiety (“A Plea” 215). But it also inflates that anxiety to the point where it takes on (if only in a joking way) political and philosophical significance, almost like a genteel demonstration of Kant’s categorical imperative. While the poor seem to disappear as soon as you turn your back, the philosophical problems they provoke for Howells resonate far beyond the simple interaction between beggar and giver. While visiting an East Side tenement, Howells again invokes the countervailing impulses to give and not give money. It occurs to him that he should give money

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13 Hildegard Hoeller has recently called attention to the role of the gift in nineteenth century American fiction, and in Howells’s work in particular. See her “Capitalism, Fiction, and the Inevitable, (Im)Possible, Maddening Importance of the Gift.”
to a family of impoverished tenement dwellers, but “presently I began to fancy an unseemliness in it, as if it were an indignity added to the hardship of their lot, and to feel that unless I gave all my worldly wealth to them I was in a manner mocking their misery. I could not give everything, for then I should have had to come upon charity myself, and so I mostly kept my little coins in my pocket” (Impressions 145). Following the familiar pattern, Howells attributes his unwillingness to give not to a failure of conscience but an excess of it—to give and not give all is a kind of insult, as an act of charity implicitly values the recipient at less than the worth of the giver. But to give and give all would impoverish Howells and his family, and lead to no net gain in the fight against poverty, since Howells would impoverish himself to the exact degree that he enriches another. The invocation of this zero-sum logic of charity depends on the conceptualization of poverty as a problem scaled to the size of “civilization” itself, and one in which individual poor people are parts of a larger, encompassing whole rather than individuals who might benefit materially from some sorely needed money. Rather than giving to a poor person, then, Howells always seems to be giving to “civilization,” and therefore always giving nothing, since he and the recipient of his charity share equally in their relationship to society as a whole. One reaches the conclusion that in Howells’s interpretation of the economics of charity, giving is impossible.

It seems in no way coincidental that between A Hazard of New Fortunes and the sketches in Impressions and Experiences, Howells embarked on his utopian “Altrurian Romances,” which consist of two novels and a series of “letters” documenting the arrival of “Aristedes Homos” in the U.S. from the recently-discovered country of Altruria.14 Homos, accustomed to Altruria’s perfectly-functioning socialist democracy, travels around the country evincing, alternately,

14 The first novel, A Traveler From Altruria, was serialized in The Cosmopolitan in 1892 and 1893. The second, tellingly titled Through the Eye of the Needle, was published in 1907.
disgust and amusement with the stupidity and charms of American life and governance. Throughout the course of the Altrurian novels, Homos offers the comparative advantages of Altruria, answering the objections of American capitalists and politicians with point-by-point elaborations of Altrurian culture, government, and economic policy. In a way that no other Howells works do, the Altrurian romances engage fully with utopian fiction, the kind of genre work that Howells, with one or two exceptions, derided as “unrealistic.” In the Altrurian romances, it is as though Howells’s commitment to “the phrase and carriage of every-day life” led him to the inexorable conclusion that his microscopic depictions of reality were out-sized by the macroscopic social forces that shape and determine them (*Criticism* 12). While his decision to temporarily abandon realist narrative for utopian fiction may have been partially in keeping with the fashion of the times—he, like seemingly every educated liberal of his day, admired Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888)—it also marks the point at which the violence and poverty of the “every-day life” depicted in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* assumed such an extreme character that it had become unrecognizably warped. If Howells’s realism, in Amy Kaplan’s formulation, “both articulates and combats the growing sense of unreality at the heart of middle-class life,” then the realist novel, as a literary form, also seemed to buckle under the pressure of a reality it was never meant to support (9). “The tragedy of a walk down the block” increasingly risked turning into an actual tragedy.

And yet the temporary disavowal of realist-scale narrative in the Altrurian romances retains the economic and social logic that compelled the disavowal in the first place. In the “letters” later collected under the title *Letters from an Altrurian Traveler*, Homos takes it upon

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15 The edition of Howells's complete fiction issued by University of Indiana Press gathered these letters together, but Howells himself never produced an edition.
himself to describe the U.S. to folks back home. Describing the New York tenements, he writes that, “the edifices are decorated with the iron balconies and ladders of the fire-escapes, and have in the perspective a false air of gayety.” Inevitably, Homos turns to the question of how the rich can let the poor live in such conditions. The answer, of course, depends on the way in which conscience finds itself circumscribed by the logic of capitalism and the monumentality of poverty:

None but the short-sighted and thoughtless in a plutocracy can lastingly satisfy themselves even with a constant giving, for the thoughtful know that charity corrupts and debases, and that finally it is no remedy. So these take refuge from themselves in a willful ignorance, sometimes lasting, sometimes transient, of the things in their life that disturb and displease them. It is the only thing to do here, my dear Cyril, and I will not deny that I have come to do it, like the rest. Since I cannot relieve the wrong I see, I have learned often to shut my eyes to it, with the effect, which most Americans experience, that since there seems to be no way of righting the wrong, the wrong must be a sort of right. Yet, this infernal juggle of the mind operates itself in me, too, at times, so that I doubt the reality of my whole happy life in the past, I doubt Altruria, I doubt you (247).

For Homos as for Howells as for Andrew Carnegie, the spectacle of the poor produces its own negation: “wrong” becomes “right.” Acts of charity provoked by conscience prove unsustainable and finally result in willed ignorance on the part of both would-be capitalist altruists and even the Altrurian himself. Just as Isabel March turns her head in disgust after close contact with the tenements, prolonged exposure even to the bare facts of poverty's existence results in a corresponding disavowal of knowledge of the poor and a kind of radical skepticism that proceeds from the seeming impossibility of things ever getting better. The problem of the poor is so
monumental, all-encompassing, and systemic, that the memory of a place in which things were not so signals the failure of memory itself: if the poor are not present, the memory is false.16

It is almost as though, for Howells and his fictional surrogates, the poor themselves appear as knowledge's opposite—they are phenomena exceeding the epistemic limits of anyone wishing to think about them. In Howells's fiction and “impressions” of the 1890s the poor rarely appear without these epistemological dilemmas. In an important way, Howells's attempt to represent the poor consists also of his attempt to represent processes of negation and disavowal. While firsthand experience of the tenements provoked Howells to describe scenes of poverty over and over, those experiences also unfailingly signaled the inadequacy of his cognitive faculties to comprehend the actual phenomena of poverty. Howells's efforts, first, to describe the “picturesqueness” of the tenements as “repulsive … except at a distance,” and, second, to view the poor as personifications of poverty rather than viewing poverty as a metaphor for the poor,17 point to his need for a concept that would substitute itself for the negative space generated by the experience of poverty (Impressions 278).18 These two strategies offer a way around the cognitive

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16 Joseph Alkana has traced Howells’s introduction to “altruism,” a term coined by Auguste Comte, to his friend the historian philosopher John Fiske’s use of it in his Outlines of Cosmic Philosophy (1874). See Alkana, The Social Self.

17 The Oxford English Dictionary’s entry for “poverty, n.” lists a separate subheading for this figurative use: “c. Destitution personified, esp. as applied to a person, or people generally, in whom it is exemplified.” That this figurative use of personification requires its own definition and cites examples as early as the late fourteenth century indicates not only the rhetorical power of viewing instances of poverty as examples of an abstract phenomenon rather than constitutive elements, but also the historical precedents for this trade-off between embodiment and abstraction. It’s obviously untrue that Howells invented this particular way of personifying poverty, but it is crucial that he makes the rhetorical choice to personify when the epistemological problems emerging out of encounters with the poor become overwhelming.

18 Lionel Trilling defended Howells's fiction as an antidote to “our contemporary impulse to enlarge all experience, to involve it as soon as possible in history, myth, and the oneness of spirit” and the “danger of making experience merely typical, formal, and representative.” But his alignment of Howells with the material, “denotative” aspects of society and day-to-day life, I think, ignores the degree to which Howells himself seemed to keep his inflationary, enlarging tendencies on retainer, so to speak (93). In fact, critics' association of Howells with precisely the kind of
impasse of the poor. Tenement aesthetics—the utilization of the picturesque and the figuration of
the poor as manifestations of a larger, more “real” abstraction—thus provide Howells a way out
of the problems of knowledge he unerringly encountered when among the poor.

III.

Howells continued to think and write of the poor as a monumental, timeless totality. In a
1903 defense of Mary Eleanor Wilkins’s novel The Portion of Labor, he wrote, “Poverty is the
same everywhere; like slavery it is still a bitter draught. But the physiognomy of the poor varies
from land to land and from age to age. It expresses patience, and despair, or oblivion everywhere,
but in our country there is conjecturable also a certain surprise” (Criticism 343). The poor, in
other words, are only individual instances of the global, transhistorical fact of poverty—“poverty”
is the cause of “the poor.” In his insistent substitutions of poverty for the poor, then, Howells
effects a kind of rhetorical blurring, a Knight-like “massing,” of individual instances into an
undifferentiated socioeconomic sketchiness. The conceptual commonalities between the
representational imperatives underpinning Knight’s analysis of the picturesque and Howells’s
descriptions of the poor suggest that the aesthetics of the picturesque, far from remaining
confined to the descriptive register of Howells’s writing, suffuses his very thinking about the
poor. If the picturesque serves as a way to make the poor palatable and representable by
imposing an aestheticizing distance between bourgeois observers and objects that are otherwise
“squalid,” “disgusting,” and “repulsive,” personification serves a similar purpose by dislocating
poorness from the epistemologically troubling, physical, “denotative” solidity of poor people to
the abstract, speculative realm of poverty.

denotative, “realistic” aesthetic he espoused speaks more to critics’ insistence on reading Howells denotatively than
it does to Howells's insistence on writing denotatively.
While aestheticizing the tenements provides a way out the epistemological trap of poverty, it also highlights the dangers that aesthetic trappings pose in the middle-class search for housing. One of the most remarkable features of *A Hazard of New Fortunes* is its apartment hunting section. As Adam Gopnik has noted, and as the handful of New York-based Howells readers I informally surveyed readily attested, “Howells’s description in ‘A Hazard’ of New York, and of New York apartment-hunting … remains uncannily contemporary” (184). For the Marches, the first difficulty presented by the city is the presence of the poor. The second, though, is finding an apartment. If the tenements present March and Howells with phenomena utterly alienated from the domain of everyday cognition, phenomena requiring an “aesthetic view” in order to make them comprehensible, the apartment ought to present a place of refuge free from the socioeconomic antinomies presented by the poor. Betsy Klimasmith writes, “representations of the tenement home render it a spectacle so porous that it threatens the reassuring boundaries protecting individuals and classes,” while middle-class apartments often figure as impermeable spaces that shore up the boundaries between rich and poor (104).

Yet Basil’s first encounter with the fully furnished apartment rented out by Mrs. Grosvenor Green in which he and his family will eventually settle is full of aesthetic discontents. While the place is “rather pretty and even imposing,” “wherever you might have turned round she had put a gimcrack.” Each door has “a portiere with large rings on brass rods,” the shelves and mantles are full of more gimcracks, and the corners covered over by still more portieres and even more brass rings concealing gimcracks yet again. An upright piano has “what March called a short-skirted portiere on it, and the top was covered with cases, with dragon candlesticks, and with Jap fans, which also expanded themselves batwise on the walls between the etchings and the watercolors.” The description of Green’s apartment goes on relentlessly documenting the
gaudy variety of tchotchkes she favors: Arab scarves, numerous clocks, a brass sunflower, china
dogs, a brass peacock, “red Japanese bird-kites,” and so on (42). Even Grosvenor Green’s name,
with its alliterative collection of g’s and the consonant traffic jam of “sv” in the middle, seems
rife with excess.

For Basil, Grosvenor Green’s decorative profusion amounts merely to “a waste” of the
space the apartment’s architects had tried to economize. But Howells’s descriptive energies here
seem devoted to making as much of the waste as possible: the description of the apartment’s
contents alone occupies 402 words, almost an entire page in my edition of the text. Basil
“comforted himself by calling the bric-a-brac Jamescracks,” and this show of “disrespect”
emboldens him initially to turn the apartment down, despite its astoundingly reasonable rent.19
Wasteful, deserving of insult, the things in Grosvenor Green’s apartment take up space but fail to
enrich, like aesthetic junk food that staves off an insatiable hunger for decoration but bloats and
impoverishes the apartment in one stroke.

Grosvenor Green’s decorations, in other words, violate Basil’s sense of decorum, as they
take up what could be functional, lived-in space with mere ostentation. As a space that gives
itself over to ornament at the expense of life, the apartment spatializes the opposite of realism’s
ethic of “fidelity to lived experience,” crowding out life with dreck. It is not only the quality of
the knick-knacks but the quantity that bears the markings of a life misprioritized around art as
acquisition. Bill Brown’s distinction between “objects” made legible by a set of interpretive
codes and “things” that resist hermeneutic transparency seems useful here. In Brown’s reading,
“We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us …when their flow

19 As many critics have noted, “Jamescracks” seems to be a little wink at Henry James, whose texts, by 1890, were
steadily acquiring the descriptive extravagances that would characterize his “major phase.” But to dismiss the
passage outright as only a loving burlesque of James misses the crucial importance of interior spaces in the novel.
within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested momentarily” (“Thing Theory” 4).20 A thing “denotes massive generalities as well as particularities,” the “concrete yet ambiguous within the everyday.” The Marches’ confrontation with the kitschy things in Grosvenor Green’s apartment conveys their understanding that the objects are meant to receive aesthetic attention, but they refuse to grant that attention.21 Under Basil and Isabel’s disdainful gaze, the art object becomes the art thing, reminiscent of art but without art’s ability to transcend its materiality through provoking aesthetic experience. As art, the things in Grosvenor Green’s apartment don’t quite work.

If art things are not quite legible as art objects for Basil and Isabel, they at least announce themselves as indicators of some kind of taste, no matter how grotesque. On the Marches’ first visit to the nouveau riche Dryfoos’s Forty-sixth Street brownstone, the drawing room becomes a space where, in contrast to the exaggerated idiosyncrasy of Grosvenor Green’s, tastefulness itself seems to indicate a lack of taste:

The drawing room …was delicately decorated in white and fold, and furnished with the a sort of extravagant good taste; there was nothing to object to the satin furniture, the pale soft rich carpet, the pictures, and the bronze and china bric-a-brac, except that their costliness was too evident; everything in the room meant money too plainly, and too much of it; they conjectured from what they had heard of the Dryfooses that this tasteful luxury in no wise expressed their civilization. “Though when you come to that,” said March, “I don’t know that Mrs. Green’s gimcrackery expresses ours” (135).

20 My brief excursus into Brown’s “Thing Theory” doesn’t do justice to the richness and complexity of his work on things in American literature. See his A Sense of Things.

21 Pierre Bourdieus’s claim that the act of perceiving an art object as an art object requires a complicity between the artist’s application of “the pure intention of an artistic effort” and the aesthete’s “unlimited receptiveness” has relevance here. Whether or not an object was produced by an artist, Bourdieu implies, the aesthete has at his command the ability to aestheticize an object merely by regarding it as an aesthetic object. The beholder is always primed for art, is always ready to recognize “the pure intention of artistic effort,” which is also to recognize a work’s participation in institutionally defined aesthetic criteria (Distinction 30). The Marches’ refusal to regard the art things as art objects, then, signals a kind of institutional ineptness or nonchalance on Green’s part, a flouting of the rules of art that results in a decidedly non-aesthetic experience for those credulous towards art institutions like museums and literary magazines.
The Dryfoos’s decorations are too easily interpretable as indicators of wealth. Not despite but *because* of its eminent tastefulness, the drawing room means too little. But even this poverty of meaning translates to an excess, because while there is “nothing to object to,” the “costliness was too evident.” While the apartment confronts the Marches with too many illegible art things betraying Grosvenor Green’s bad taste, the very tastefulness of the Dryfoos’s art objects bores the Marches with too few interpretive possibilities.

They may not have taste, but at least the Dryfooses possess “civilization,” or so the Marches hear. But the troubling prospect that taste may not serve as a reliable indicator of civilization reflects back onto the Marches themselves, who are forced to acknowledge that Green’s “gimcrackery” doesn’t express anything about them. The appearance of the Dryfooses forestalls any further consideration of the relationship between décor and the overdetermined Howellsian deployment of “civilization,” but Basil’s comment on his own (rented and furnished) apartment suggests an anxiety regarding the efficacy of cultural capital. If Dryfoos’s room speaks too loudly and too plainly of the money that it represents, to the extent that it (a) represents *only* money and (b) obscures the thing it *ought* to represent (“civilization”), Basil perceives that the relation between, in Bourdieu’s terms, cultural capital in its objectified state and the symbolic values that cultural capital is meant to express might be severed (“The Forms of Capital” 242). On the one hand, the Dryfooses’ wealth and newly purchased social position demands they put their cultural capital on display. On the other hand, that cultural capital’s inability to withstand the scrutiny of a refined aesthetic sensibility renders the display not only ineffective but dangerous in that it raises the possibility that any such symbolic displays might not actually “symbolize” anything about the person who displays them.
So while, maybe to the March’s relief, the “gimcrackery” of Green’s apartment doesn’t “express” anything about them, it also suggests that art might never express anything about the character of its owners. When, earlier in the novel, Isabel remarks that no poor child “born and brought up in [middle-class flat] could have any conception of home” because “poor people can’t give character to their habitations,” she describes the condition of the poor as incapable of expressing taste at all. Middle-class renters, though, can give “character” to a flat because flats can be “made to meet their tastes, or their supposed tastes; and so it’s made for social show, not for family life at all.” But ultimately in Isabel’s estimation, “tenements are better and humaner than these flats” because the shared space of the kitchen allows the family “consciousness of its being” while the flat “abolishes family consciousness” because there is no communal space large enough for everyone (57).

Renters “give character” to flats and decoration “expresses” the taste of the flat’s denizens. In the Marches’ thinking, the flat operates as a display case allowing visitors to consider not so much the objects themselves, but either the tastes possessed by its inhabitants or the tastes those inhabitants understand that they ought to possess. While the flat may abolish family consciousness, it does so in order to consolidate cultural capital by allowing flat visitors to access and judge the tastes of the flat’s inhabitants. As a space designed as much for display as for living, then, the decorated apartment ideally functions as an access point allowing guests to experience the fusion of everyday life and aesthetic distinction the bourgeois couple strives to create. Moreover, it invites guests to imagine a fully aestheticized life, invites them to imagine that the apartment in some sense reproduces the thickened atmosphere of a life lived from within its own taste.
Isabel’s favorable opinion of the tenements over the apartments, then, describes a preference for a form of knowledge or self-conception (“family consciousness”) over a flat that possesses “character” basically by displaying objectified cultural capital. Here the characterization of the apartment through the expression of taste occurs to the exclusion of family consciousness. Within the economies of space and taste, the middle-class flat consolidates character through capital while inhibiting the formation of familial identity. It is as though the willed formation and appropriation of aesthetic judgments displaces unwilled (because natural) family relations as the basis of self-conception. When you can decorate, you can afford to give and receive character in the form of taste, whereas when you have neither cultural capital nor capital capital, you have to rely on family as a form of self-conception. The apartment, and the ability of the apartment to communicate (though not too directly) the tastes of its inhabitants, becomes the locus of externalized self-knowledge, but a self-knowledge that is equally available to the self and to those who enter the apartment and are savvy enough to read its signs.

This relationship between “tastes” or “supposed tastes,” and the way in which “social show” socializes the personal or supposedly personal possession of taste emerges in the novel as an uneven phenomenon. While any cultured observer might, as the Marches do, enter an apartment and read something of the apartment’s owners out of its decorations and art, no observer can apparently discern whether that interpretive gesture correlates to “tastes” or “supposed tastes.” While the apartment seems to present access to the sensibilities and

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22 Though it seems not to occur to Isabel just how conscious of her family she would become were they crammed into a tenement.

23 James Salazar traces this externalizing function of character back to Locke, providing a useful link between what he terms “the rhetoric of character” in Gilded Age America and Enlightenment epistemology: “Even in such classical models of character formation such as that depicted in John Locke’s early treatise on education … it is the child’s ability to externalize and socially mediate its relationship with itself through the ‘reputation’ it perceives in the face of others that is critical to the reflexive interiority that is the hallmark of liberal character” (26).
“civilization” of the owners, it presents as equally plausible the idea that the owners are only performing a certain sensibility they’ve, in a sense, rented rather than displaying something they own. In its obscurity, the difference between the genuine expression of taste and the knowing performance of taste seems to evaporate, as the display of art might always be just for show.

Questions surrounding the instrumentality or sincerity of display, the unclear degree to which displays of taste index actual taste or serve as simulations of taste, introduces epistemological uncertainty into the hermeneutics of house calls. And yet, despite the seemingly highly situated, location-specific nature of this problem of knowledge, the question of the motivations underlying displays of taste emerge even in the most intimate exchanges between Basil and Isabel. After the Marches meet Margaret Vance for the first time, Isabel tells Basil, “I kept thinking, ‘Now he’s pleasant to her because he thinks it’s to his interest. If she had no relation to Every Other Week, he wouldn’t waste his time on her.’” Basil complains,

I wish you wouldn’t think of me in he, him, and his; I never personalize you in my thoughts; you remain always a vague unindividualized essence, not quite without form and void, but nounless and pronounless. I call that a much more beautiful mental attitude toward the object of one’s affection. But if you must he and him and his me in your thoughts, I wish you’d have more kindly thoughts of me (248).

The beauty of a mental attitude, in other words, requires a disinvestment in the substantializing imperatives of grammar. Isabel becomes, in Basil’s thoughts, a kind of atmosphere or environment rather than a person, an essence devoid of the physical, objective, or thingly qualities of a person. Isabel’s questions about Basil’s motivations, his self-interest, immediately provokes a meditation on the necessity to desubstantialize in order to maintain the aesthetic qualities of thought itself. The object of one’s affections is more properly an anti-noun than a pronoun.
Embedded within Basil’s reply to Isabel’s question concerning motivations is an implicit claim about the superior beauty of the mode of thought that un-nouns its object as opposed to one bound by grammar. In Basil’s aphorism on the antithetical relations between beauty and grammar, then, we can find a riposte to the substantializing role of the apartment that gives character to taste. If the apartment spatializes a person’s taste into a form of social currency and thereby obscures the expressive dimension of displays of taste, aesthetic thinking generalizes persons into essences enabling the beauty of thought to inhabit another person like a cognitive apartment. So while personification describes the too-empirical poor as an expression of abstract poverty, a beautiful and beautifying mental attitude depersonalizes too-solid people into vague essences.

For Basil, the role of aesthetics within the middle-class world of apartment visits and interior decorating serves to mediate anxieties about the communication of an aesthetic mindset. Even within a single socioeconomic sphere, though, the deployment of aesthetics proves irreducible to a single political purpose—rather it exemplifies the antinomies at work when sensibility becomes instrumentalized. Looked at more broadly, the deployment of specific aesthetic discourses (like the picturesque) concretizes the problems of scale that Howells’s realist principles encounter when “reality” is expanded beyond the scope of the ordinary, while aesthetic thinking desubstantializes the everyday hermeneutic activities of determining the social import of art.

IV.

Returning to the terms offered by Isabel March, aesthetics, in Howells’s writing about life in New York, tell us something about character. Aesthetic sensibility can grant character to apartments and apartments can attempt, however insufficiently, to express the character of their
inhabitants. Character, in Isabel’s usage, seems to signify in both the moral and aesthetic registers; “character” is what an apartment has when it demonstrates both the “civilization” of its inhabitants and their taste. The entwinement of the moral and the aesthetic produces the sense of an individual, a specific person whose apartment is a unique expression of their interior self.\textsuperscript{24}

Insofar as the tenements cannot express “character,” their occupants are not legible as individuals; insofar as apartments can express “character,” their occupants are. And yet, in an economy where money and taste become almost indistinguishable, the status of individuality comes burdened with skepticism, because the taste on display could just as easily have been rented as actually possessed by the apartment dwellers.

Lest we doubt the importance of the correspondence between character and taste, Howells himself, in his essay “The Man of Letters as a Man of Business,” drives home the point. Noting that literature, “cannot impart its effect through the sense or the nerves as the other arts can” but is “beautiful only through the intelligence,” or, put differently, it is “the mind speaking to the mind.” Moreover, this literature-as-telepathy has to work in a uniform way: “It cannot awaken this emotion in one, and that in another.” Literature must carry with it an intentional impulse, for “if it fails to express precisely the meaning of the author, if it does not say \textit{him}, it says nothing, and is nothing” (\textit{Criticism} 299). Literature is “nothing” unless it communicates “\textit{him},” the author’s meaning and his character, which come to the same thing. Meaning is only the communication of character, the correspondence of the mind of the writer and the mind of the reader.

\textsuperscript{24} Deidre Shauna Lynch has argued forcefully against identifying the category of the literary character with the rise of liberal individualism, and I have no wish to argue back. But in the American context, by the end of the nineteenth century, as Salazar and others have shown, such an identification seems warranted. See Lynch, \textit{The Economy of Character}.
In Howells’s description, then, literature functions something like an apartment, a space granted meaning through the communication of the character of its owner. That literature functions primarily as a communicative act, that it “says nothing, is nothing” without the successful transmission of an author’s intended meaning, highlights Howells’s investment not only on the mimetic fidelity of realism, but also on its hermeneutic transparency. To say that literature, when it fails to provide access to the author’s mind, becomes “nothing” is to say that literature that fails to express its author’s character confronts us as an art thing rather than an art object, a piece of writing that doesn’t work.

In Howells’s thinking, literature, and specifically fiction, is bound to character in two ways. First, it relies on the character of its author, because that is what is being “said” through literature, and second, it relies on the use of characters as coherent narrative units, because they provide the means through which the author is spoken to the reader: character is both the medium and the message. To take matters further, one could read the personifying strategies bound up with tenement aesthetics, Basil’s de-personifying “mental attitude” toward Isabel, and anxieties about taste and expression endemic to apartment living as features of an overarching discourse of character in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. In all of these instances, character provides the terms through which the novel portrays scenes of epistemological access and closure—character allows the reader access to the mind of the writer, provides the source of taste that middle-class apartments either display or counterfeit, and describes the thing that the poor precisely are not, insofar as they exceed the epistemic limits of Howells and his surrogates.

At times it appears as though the bestowal and withholding of character serves to index the humanity of the poor, as though their personifying function stood in for their lack of personhood. But far from a simple kind of class-based chauvinism, Howells’s uneven
distribution of epistemological access displays tensions characteristic of the nineteenth-century realist novel’s incorporation of democratic multiplicity. As Alex Woloch has written, “the asymmetric structure of realist characterization—which rounds out one or several characters while flattening, and distorting, a manifold assortment of characters—reflects actual structures of inequitable distribution,” while “the claims of minor characters on the reader’s attention—and the resultant tension between characters and their functions—are generated by the democratic impulse that forms a horizon of nineteenth-century politics” (31). Minor characters, Woloch argues, only manage to lay claim to our attention in the first place through the novel’s internalization of the nineteenth-century’s newly invigorated democratic politics. Further, the minorness of minor characters—their lack of development and of what we might term mimetic resources—reifies the material poverty of the masses. Minor characters are the poor of The Novel, which may explain why the poor are so often merely minor characters in novels.

But are the poor of *A Hazard of New Fortunes* minor characters? Do they even count for that much? Woloch calls the *Iliad*’s Thersites, who disrupts the social order by “quarreling with kings,” “perhaps the first truly minor character in Western literature” because he does not simply play “a subordinate role” in the narrative: his “striking fictional identity emerges through, and revolves around, this subordinated position.” The *Iliad*, which calls Thersites “the ugliest man who came beneath Ilion,” can “dismiss him only by emphasizing him … he is not simply shameful and ugly but the most shameful and ugly of men” (4). Shameful and ugly, Howells’s decently dressed man with the hard hands and broken fingernails might qualify as one of these minor characters—he certainly disrupts the Marches’ stroll, while his shabbiness sticks in Basil’s craw enough that he mentions him again several hundred pages later. And it is precisely what Basil *doesn’t* know about the beggar that occasions his saying “I think I could pick up at least
twenty or thirty cents a day by that little game.” Basil’s contemplation of the relative ease with which he could disguise himself as a beggar provides insight into the character-space afforded to the poor and the ease with which minorness enables the exploitation of conscience. Ignorance of motive here serves as the key to the imagination of interiority, provoking an epistemological fantasy that grants readers access to a hypothetical person.

While this particular model of the minor character serves us in thinking about the few poor individuals who distinguish themselves as characterized persons in Howells’s writing, it does not do much for those massed multitudes of the poor who fall short of individuation, indeed whose registration depends on their lack of individuation. For them we might do better to consider another kind of minorness that Woloch highlights in the Iliad, that of the Catalogue of Ships. In Woloch’s reading, the armies that exceed the text’s descriptive capacities (“I could not tell over the multitude of them nor name them / not if I had ten tongues and ten mouths”) exposes a “distinction between seeing the number of soldiers and being able to name them,” a distinction that “occurs precisely at the fault line where an individual ceases to command attention as a qualitatively distinct being and begins to be to be viewed as a quantitative unit, absorbed into a larger number” (5). Woloch’s reading of these two kinds of minorness hinges on the temporary disappearance of Achilles from the narrative. But, reading the distinction back onto Howells’s writings, the shift from qualitative beings to quantitative units occasions the redrawing of epistemological boundaries as well as figurative ones. Whereas, for the Iliad, the arrival of the multitude on the scene provokes the speaker to confess his own insufficiency, for Howells it occasions new forms of descriptive invention. Rather than being subsumed under “the lords of the ships, and the ships’ numbers,” the poor are refigured as the socioeconomic concept of poverty.
From the *Iliad* to *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, the multitude’s position of subordination indexes the available means of literary and social representation. Howells has an entire descriptive and technical vocabulary available to him that was not available to the speaker of the *Iliad*. For the *Iliad*, insufficiencies of speech provide an alibi or excuse for non-characterization of the poor, while aesthetics provides Howells with a language that transvalues the inability of the novel’s narrative economy to characterize the poor into an occasion for aesthetic display.

In aligning the poor of *A Hazard of New Fortunes* with the armies of the *Iliad*, though, we risk painting over political economy with the brush of narrative economy. A comparison between the two texts helps to isolate a representational problem that has persisted from 800 B.C. or so up until the present, but it does so at the expense of the political context of those problems. We might, with another nod to Woloch, read the treatment of tenements and apartments as more stratified elaborations on “character-space”—the amount of narrative attention devoted to a particular character. When *A Hazard of New Fortunes* enters the space of the apartment, it reverts to analyses of particular characters; when it turns its eyes to the tenements, character reverts to masses and clumps. As the distinction between the isolated, characterized middle-class apartment and the characterless tenement house suggests, the transition between qualitative persons and quantitative units emerges in Howells’s novel as a problem of scale. Large numbers, events on a large scale, occasion picturesque techniques that are inadequate to represent granular, everyday experience. Just as a picturesque technique blurs distinct lines despite the fact that objects aren’t blurry, the number of characters demanding representation strains the mimetic resources available to the novel and to its characters.

Howells was not merely aware of this problem. In fact, he writes his initial calls for realism in reaction to it: fiction ought to “judge [literature] by nature” rather than by “a standard
taken from … authors,” because to derive representations of reality from other representations diminishes realism. Moreover, Howells first introduces the idea that “fidelity to experience and probability of motive are essential conditions of a great imaginative literature” by way of a long passage he quotes from Edmund Burke’s *On the Sublime and the Beautiful*. Critics, says Burke, “have generally sought the rule of the arts in the wrong place; they sought it among poems, pictures, engravings, statues, and buildings. But art can never give the rules that make an art.” Further, the poets, “have been rather imitators of one another than of nature; and this with so faithful an uniformity, and to so remote an antiquity, that it is hard to say who gave the first model” (XX). For Burke, art falls into error when it attempts to derive its rule from other arts rather than from the direct observation of nature. Here the infinitely regressive qualities that David Marshall identifies as central to the picturesque serve for Burke as the antithesis of what Howells would come to appropriate as realist aesthetic imperatives.

In using Burke’s distinction, Howells not only differentiates realism from the picturesque, but opposes them to each other. Nature provides a stable source of material from which critics and poets alike can derive their models, while the use of other representations as models initiates a vertiginous plunge into an obscure past, where original and copy become hard to discern from each other. The disavowal of the picturesque in favor of the “real” betrays an anxiety about the sources of mimetic representation, an anxiety that mirrors the problem of Howells’s inability to believe in the existence of the poor after they leave his sight, and one that Howells actually relies on in order to incorporate them into his novel.

The aesthetics of the picturesque confronts the mimetic claims of realism not as an antagonist external to it, but from within, as a threat immanent to realist practice. It comes freighted not only with a particular aesthetic history, but also with the epistemological and
narrative baggage of the subjects it would represent. If Howells’s persistent valorization of realist practice has conveyed an implicit claim to knowledge—that we can know the everyday reality of a person through representing it—then the aesthetic techniques Howells uses in order to represent the poor would constitute a tacit claim to ignorance, one that is not so much a “flaw” in the realist novel, but central to it. If *A Hazard of New Fortunes* sought to represent more various forms of social life than Howells had before attempted, it came at the price of a sacrifice of certain aesthetic principles. That he would never again, after his *Altrurian Romances*, deal with a social panorama that wide implies that such a sacrifice was untenable, or perhaps that Howells couldn’t sustain the critical attitude that the social panorama occasioned for any length of time.

Claims to ignorance, and their disavowal through various representational and critical techniques, often enough structure the very discourse surrounding American novelists of the 1890s. For Howells, these forms of ignorance and epistemic limitation required the utilization of precisely the kind of techniques his writings on realism sought to disavow. The fact that Howells wrote so explicitly and so often about what he thought fiction ought to do provides us with a way of intermingling narrative, aesthetic, and social conflict in an analysis of the novel. But few writers were as prolific as he was, and few had the bully pulpits he had. Writers with fewer or no explicitly stated aesthetic principles provide a different sort of critical problem, one that comes freighted with its own epistemological baggage.
Chapter 3

Manners, Motives, and the Novel: Cynicism and Literary Modernity in 
*The Damnation of Theron Ware*

For a man who authored a best-selling novel (and several others that held their own), wrote for years as the European correspondent for the *New York Times*, knew dozens of prominent writers and politicians on both sides of the Atlantic (including Grover Cleveland, who he championed early and loudly), and counted Stephen Crane among his closest friends, Harold Frederic remains something of an enigma. The hard facts are readily available. We know the details of his life, we know more or less what his expense accounts for the *Times* looked like, and one surviving letter, published in the *Times*, sets the record straight on the habits and habitat of the catfish. But for someone who produced as much as he did, who lived as much as he did, and whose novel *The Damnation of Theron Ware* (1896) remains a classic, we know little of his motivations, literary or otherwise.¹

Part of this dearth we can attribute to the fact that Frederic was not a “literary” letter-writer. Much of his correspondence consists of dashed-off notes to Charles Miller, his editor at the *Times*, concerning his expenses and coverage, letters to other newspapers concerning European politics, and brief back-and-forths between friends like Crane and Benjamin Paul Blood. The occasional item of interest crops up—a fascinating letter to Cleveland, the catfish—but for the most part his letters are functional, quotidian, and unremarkable. He seems to have

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¹ It’s become ritual by this point to note Frederic’s unlikely obscurity. In the first line of his study of Frederic’s work, Austin Briggs writes that, “When Harold Frederic died in 1898, it seemed certain that he would be long remembered” (1). Briggs’s first chapter goes on to catalog the embarrassments, snubs, and humiliations Frederic has endured at the hands of sloppy or indifferent critics. This chapter shares Briggs’s conviction that something is generally wrong with the way Frederic has been read, but lacks his bile.
kept no journals or notebooks, leaving no clue as to his aesthetic goals or literary aspirations. It’s possible that, between churning out novels and columns, maintaining (to use the word loosely) two families, and generally keeping his plates spinning, he just didn’t have time.

In the articles and books about him, most of what we know of him comes through the words of others—he seemed to have little interest in self-definition. By all accounts, he possessed a relentless will to impose himself on the world. His journalism, especially his reporting on a cholera epidemic in France and a series on the suppression of Jews in Russia, pioneered a first-person subjective style of reporting later writers like Jack London would adopt. None of the three (very thin) biographies mention any abiding interest in philosophy, though he was clearly attuned to contemporary work in anthropology and sociology. Though he was quite familiar with the ways in which the American novel was changing shape in the 1890s—his most productive decade and his last—one of his biographers writes, “He did not find in naturalism, or in realism, a suitable vehicle for his ideas. He took what he wanted from them and discarded the rest. What was left, as the most important influence upon his fiction, was his newspaper training” (Bennett 5).

Frederic was hardly the only American novelist to cut his teeth on journalism, but he was the American novelist who maintained the most fidelity to the demands of journalistic description. Frank Norris, for example, covered the Spanish-American War in Cuba but looked to Zola’s naturalism for a model of human motivation and behavior that would shape characters like McTeague and Vandover. Though the prose of his novels may reflect the stylistic hallmarks

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2 In a review of Frederic’s posthumous novel The Market-Place for the Pittsburg Leader, Willa Cather wrote, “[Frederic] won his place in England much as [the novel’s central character, Joel Thorpe] won his, by defiance, by strong shoulder blows, by his self-sufficiency and inexhaustible strength, and when he finished his book he did not know that his end would be so much less glorious than his hero’s, that it would be his portion not to fall manfully in the thick of the combat and the press of battle, but to die poisoned in the tent of Chryseis” (710).
of his era’s journalism, their narrative logic seems predicated on a kind of vulgar Darwinism that was *de rigeur*. In his polemical “A Plea for Romantic Fiction” (1901) Norris looks askance at realism. It “notes only the surface of things. For it, Beauty is not even skin deep, but only a geometrical plane, without dimensions and depth, a mere outside.” As though explicitly coupling literary realism with the journalist’s imperative to observe, record, and report incidents as they occur, he derides realism because, “It goes no further than the Realist himself can actually see, or actually hear.” Most famously, for Norris realism is “the drama of a broken teacup, the tragedy of a walk down the block, the excitement of an afternoon call, the adventure of an invitation to dinner” (“A Plea” 215). The romance, on the other hand, creates room for “the unplumbed depths of the human heart, and the mystery of sex, and the problems of life, and the black, unsearched penetralia of the soul of man” (220).

At the time of its publication, Norris’s distinction between a highly mimetic but impoverished realism and a fanciful but speculatively rich romanticism may have looked like a line in the sand. In hindsight though, Norris’s description of romance simply sounds like a better-written (or at least more interesting) version of what most people now refer to as literary realism. In the Venn diagram of literary history, the overlap between the spheres of realism, naturalism, and what Norris considered “romance” is nearly total.  

If Norris’s plea for romance attempts to create a generic distinction literary history has subsequently erased, it does convey a sense of the aesthetic dissatisfactions that spurred his own transformation of American realism. Rather than a geometrical plane readily available for

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3 Norris himself seemed to think of genre in the same spatialized, diagrammatic fashion, or he at least thought other people did. In “Zola as a Romantic Writer,” he writes, “For most people, Naturalism has a vague meaning. It is a sort of inner circle of realism—a kind of diametric opposite of romanticism, a theory of fiction wherein things are represented ‘as they really are,’ inexorably, with the truthfulness of a camera. This idea can be shown to be far from right, that Naturalism, as understood by Zola, is but a form of romanticism after all” (1106).
representation, Norris regarded “reality” as a veil of civility draped over a seething mass of motivations: greed, ambition, domination, sex, and schadenfreude in its most ghastly form. In figuring human behavior as the visible effect of deeper, irrational motivations, Norris’s novels both mystify and demystify everyday life. They mystify because we cannot know how and when contingent and irrational impulses will irrupt into the smooth plane of daily life, breaking up its surface. They demystify in that we can at least pin those irruptions on the beastly instincts we’ve inherited from our animal ancestors—they are fundamental to our being.

“A Plea for Romance” expresses in aesthetic terms the oppositions (surface versus depth; familiarity versus alienation) Norris would use to construct his fiction. While the irrational core of man’s motivations may resist analysis and reason, they make compelling material for a novel. I use Frank Norris as a convenient example, but the same could be said for any number of prominent writers at the turn of the century: Henry James, William Dean Howells, and Mark Twain, to name a few, all provided rich bodies of formal, aesthetic, cultural, and/or social commentary that allow the modern reader a glimpse into some of the driving concerns at the heart of their fiction. Whether or not one believes that, say, *Criticism and Fiction* provides an adequate explanation for the aesthetic and social concerns of *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, one at least has it there to argue to with—it provides traction.

While the previous chapter described the way that aesthetic discourses supplement the epistemic limits posed by class in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, this chapter will view the forms of social fragmentation described in *The Damnation of Theron Ware* as an occasion to consider the mutually refractive relationship between discourses of cynicism and discourses of literary modernity. This chapter differs from others in the dissertation by virtue of the prominence accorded to contemporary criticism—in a sense, it is as much about contemporary debates
concerning the hermeneutics of suspicion as it is about the late nineteenth-century’s epistemological imaginaries. However, by chapter’s end I propose to show how the way critics conceive of the epistemic groundwork of novels is often conditioned by attitudes toward literary modernity that reflect the pervasiveness of suspicious reading.

The dearth of critical work produced by Harold Frederic in his lifetime, then, has some consequences for the reception of his fiction, if not in his time, then certainly in ours. Frederic’s neglect of broader questions concerning form and aesthetics is at least partially responsible for his own neglect at the hands of later critics. Without a critical legacy to prop it up, Frederic’s work, with the single exception of The Damnation of Theron Ware, has remained perennially out of print. This is not solely due to Frederic’s own negligence or lack of interest in producing a body of critical writing. Early fictions like In the Valley and “The Copperhead” are regionalist works, historical novels and stories that betray little of the excitement, ambiguity, and broader social engagement of later novels like Theron Ware and The Market-Place. In the early works, Frederic’s social vision remains constricted mostly to upstate New York, and is mostly of historical interest to upstaters. While it seems easy enough to pin the waning of Frederic’s reputation on the subsequent rise of modernism, writers like Sinclair Lewis—maybe not a “modernist” but definitely modernish—and F. Scott Fitzgerald have made reference to Frederic’s influence on their writing. Certainly the pessimism on display in parts of Theron Ware and The Market-Place has found a more durable home in writers like Lewis, Henry Adams, and Nathanael West.

The absence of a grounding aesthetic statement still looms large and accounts in large measure for Frederic’s near-disappearance from the scene of American literature. My claim is by

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4 For some recent entries in these debates, see Best and Marcus, Love, and Felski.
its nature speculative—“absence of evidence is not evidence of absence” and all that—but it is suggested by a complex network of internal evidence in the novels and broader theoretical problems at work specifically in *Theron Ware*. It’s difficult to know where one stands in a Harold Frederic novel. Despite the fact that they are narrated from a reliable third-person perspective, the degree to which we’re encouraged to sympathize with or criticize his characters remains perpetually up in the air. Writing of *The Market-Place*, one critic notes that a possible “reason behind the differing critical estimations of Frederic is that he was a skilled journalist, so the disinterested narrator, though primarily focused on [protagonist Joel] Thorpe, complicates efforts to find the novel’s moral or the author’s views” (Rizza 55). Another, writing of *Theron Ware*, claims that “Frederic keeps his protagonist floating in a narrow yet uncertain range of awareness, between that of the unseeing victim in determinist fables, and the self-consciousness favored in James and Howells. Plot contrivances in *The Damnation* keep Ware’s judgment off balance and out of either condition” (Michelson 61).

“Floating in [an] … uncertain range of awareness,” “off balance,” without access to moral views: these terms encapsulate our relationship to Frederic’s novels just as well as they do Ware’s baffled consciousness. We remain at sea, adrift in novels of morals that refuse to throw out a buoy to instruct the reader. Edmund Wilson was impressed by *Theron Ware* but found it “rather repellent.” What seemed to bother him was the way characters who are “supposed to like” Theron seem to poke fun at him, visit unnecessary cruelties on him, and then, “When they see what is happening to Theron as a result of their ‘illuminating’ him … wash their hands of him with cold contempt and without a word of pity or counsel” (125). We have no access to the mind of those characters, no clue as to their reasons or motivations. What we see, rather, is “the surface of things”; the behavior of characters is motivated but we don’t know by what, exactly.
The problem of motivation in *Theron Ware*—we’re not quite sure why certain characters do certain things—and the problem of Harold Frederic’s motivations—we’re not sure why he wrote fiction or what he thought his fiction was—seem to merge in critical readings of the novels. Unable to plumb the depths of Frederic’s heart or those of his characters, unable to access the unsearched penetralia of their souls, the project of reading Harold Frederic turns from one of textual interpretation to a kind of epistemological speculation, one that results in a corresponding epistemological confusion. Insofar as criticism has revolved almost unerringly around questions of motivation, whether Frederic’s or his characters’, it participates in an ongoing play of cynical reading, in which questioned motivations, pessimism, and self-interest are both the thematic concerns most salient to critics and the attitudes most frequently taken up by those same critics. Accordingly, whether or not *Theron Ware* is read as a cynical novel, or a novel featuring cynical characters, or a novel written by a cynic turn out to be questions that both frame his works as novels of social concern and disallow any final social vision.

While Frederic’s critics insist on his social concern, the formal and epistemological dynamics of his novels disrupt that social vision. Attempts to project motivations onto Frederic prove unconvincing, attempts to infer them from his characters fallacious, and attempts to do without them unsatisfying. Yet the fact that his journalism has served as the form of writing most salient to considerations of his novels has led most to consider them as merely two iterations of the same thing. It seems to me less useful to think of the novels as an extension of Frederic’s journalism than an arena in which he could speculate on those interior aspects of human nature traditional journalism is ill-suited to consider and for which the novel sometimes seems custom-designed.
*The Damnation of Theron Ware* (published as *Illumination* in England) most prominently displays those qualities falling outside the purview of traditional journalism. The provincial Ware’s “illumination” by some ostensibly cultured citizens of Octavius (a fictionalized version of Frederic’s native Utica, New York) provides the occasion for Ware’s speculations on the nature of his own newly-discovered knowledge, which is the kind of problem journalistic modes of representation—the “unbiased” presentation of information—are not equipped to handle. Though journalism may well have exerted influence over his fiction, this chapter will argue that the representational work performed by *Theron Ware* belongs squarely within the tradition of the modern novel.

And while most critics comment on the inauthentic nature of Ware’s illumination, none have analyzed Ware’s belief in its authenticity. While he emerges from his encounters with the town’s cultural elite believing that he is one of them, everyone else knows better. In the novel, “illumination” designates self-consciousness without self-awareness, Ware’s sharpened attention to “the mechanism of his own brain” without an ability to perceive how that mechanism might look to others (*DT* 38). Throughout the course of the novel, Ware’s attention to his thoughts signals his distance from them—the process of thinking about them yields no substantive knowledge about them. In Peter Sloterdijk’s memorable formulation, cynicism is “enlightened false-consciousness,” that “modernized, unhappy consciousness on which enlightenment has labored both successfully and in vain”; Ware experiences falsely-enlightened consciousness, a kind of para-cynical attitude in which enlightenment’s failure results in the empty mimicry of rationality—it is both a pose and a process (5).

Despite the prominence of cynicism in the critical literature surrounding the novel, it has emerged as an index of more vexing problems of interpretation. Insofar as the accusation of
cynicism implicitly calls into question motivations (those of both characters and novelists), the very structure of that accusation itself exhibits a kind of cynicism. Rather than a theme to be located or an attitude to be diagnosed, the appearance of cynicism on the critical scene marks a moment of epistemological fantasy, in which the critic implies a form of access to the motivations of the cynic. The accusation of cynicism, then, poses as a gesture of unmasking, one requiring a concomitant cynicism on the part of the critic: it is only through a form of instrumentalized criticism that instrumental motives may be revealed. As a problem of modern consciousness, then, cynicism emerges not as a position to be taken, a problem to be diagnosed, or even an attitude, but rather as an epistemological structure seeking a form of access to authorial and characterological motivations that demand the satisfactions of verification.

I.

The plot of *The Damnation of Theron Ware* turns on the “illumination” of its titular character, an earnest, newly married, and newly ordained Methodist minister who, because of an accidental slight of a church elder, finds himself assigned to the rather undesirable outpost of Octavius, New York. Despite his universally admired talents as an orator, Ware is relatively uneducated and green. He finds himself unprepared for the social dynamics of the town and prone to the mistakes of a new husband. Finding himself unequipped to negotiate the needs of his wife, Alice, and the demands of Octavius’s civic leaders, Ware encounters a number of characters who alter his manner of thinking about his relation to Octavius and the world at large.

As the novel progresses, Ware grows more and more distant from his wife, becomes more and more enamored of concepts and ideas to which he had had no previous exposure, and finds himself rebelling against the constraints of the provincial life of the small-town minister. As his ambition outstrips his intellectual capacity, though, Ware finds himself falling into
error—treating his townspeople with contempt and mismanaging his relationships with the intellectual elite of Octavius (in the person of the Catholic priest Father Forbes, the retired scholar Dr. Ledsmar, and the wealthy aesthete Celia Madden), his supposed illumination leaves him ostracized, alienated, and miserable. At the novel’s end, with the help of the free-thinking, pragmatic Sister and Brother Soulsby, he and Alice flee the mess he’s made of his ministry in New York for a political career in Oregon.

The novel begins in a manner that seems a perfect instance of Norris’s concerns about realism. Frederic’s description of “the closing session of the Nedahma Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church” reflects a concern for both surface-level representation and the dramatization of the inconsequential. Information comes to the reader almost exclusively in visual or spatial terms; we get church procedure and the seating arrangements, apparitions of faces in the crowd and general visual “perceptions.” The “sight” of the church elders “was good to the eyes, conjuring up … pictures of a time when a plain and homely people had been served by a fervent and devoted clergy” (DT 2). Ware and every other character appear at first as instances of a type, having meaning only insofar as they exemplify part of a larger social totality. The “citified” members of the congregation are “specimens”; surrounding them are “middle-aged men, generally of a robust type”; Ware looks like an antebellum “American Senatorial type” (DT 3, 6). Not only are these, at the novel’s outset, “characters” in only the loosest sense of the term, the sociological distance Frederic’s narrator maintains overlays the Nedahma Conference with a kind of grid, identifying, categorizing, and organizing its members.

Any indicators of individual consciousness find themselves likewise organized into sociological strata: “The effect of the faces as a whole was toward goodness, candor, and imperturbable self-complacency rather than learning or mental astuteness” and “the impress of
zeal and moral worth seemed to diminish by regular gradations as one passed to younger faces, and among the very beginners, who had been ordained only within the past day or two, this decline was peculiarly marked” (DT 3). On one hand, the narrator can locate a generalized impression of feeling projected from the faces, as though they were subject to a kind of mean average. On the other hand, the “effect of the faces on the whole” is divisible into smaller “gradations” that fall along lines determined by age. In the novel’s opening chapter, individuals are easily absorbed into a broader communal fabric which is itself visible to the reader. This fabric can be cut along lines of class (the elder clergy and the citified specimens), age (the robust middle-aged men and the newly ordained), or, like Ware, an individual who, despite the novel’s eventual interest in him, at this moment appears embedded in a typology.

In other words, at the outset there seems to be no better example of the social novel than The Damnation of Theron Ware. At least as far as chapter one is concerned, individuals appear integrated into broader categories of age, class, and “type,” and the “impress of zeal and moral worth” shines forth from their faces in neatly delineated groups. A sociological impulse (Frederic was acquainted with modern sociologists like Lester Ward) fused to journalistic-realist narrative techniques project the image of a balanced, homogeneous totality (Ziff 209). Everyone is accounted for and all taken into account.

From chapter two on, the novel shifts abruptly out of this mode and into another that maintains a closer watch on Ware. Rather than a description of Ware’s ascent from a small town know-nothing to an eloquent church orator, we find that “He was conscious of having moved along—was it, after all, an advance?—to a point where it was unpleasant to sit at a table with the unfragrant hired man, and still worse to encounter the bucolic confusion between the functions of knives and forks” (DT 15). Ware’s consideration, narrated as internalized mental activity,
emerges as the locus of narrative interest. An account of social totality narrated with a sociological or journalistic disinterest shifts abruptly to an account of the internal experience of social “advancement” (though the novel remains skeptical of the charms of fragrance and flatware). From the perspective of chapter two and beyond, the narrator’s sociological interest in its subjects in chapter one appears parodic, as though the novel were mocking the stability and assuredness of its own initial narrative perspective.

By and large, *The Damnation of Theron Ware* shies away from the externalized perspective of chapter one and maintains a more subjective interest in Ware’s mental processes, almost to the exclusion of anyone else’s mind. Insofar as the opinions of the citizens of Octavius—their motivations, thoughts, and desires—remain obscure to Ware, the novel emphasizes that obscurity through making Ware’s mind correspondingly transparent. The spotlighting effect of a close third-person narration was, by this time, a common feature of novels in general, but in *Theron Ware* this spotlighting is not only a novelistic convention, one that concretizes *Theron Ware*’s thematization of ignorance and knowledge. If Ware’s new distaste for the “unfragrant hired man” at the dinner table expresses a desire for social mobility tethered to a changing sense of his own aesthetic refinement, and this new distaste comes to us through a narrative mode foregrounded by its difference from the one used in the novel’s opening chapter, then the narrative construction of Ware’s internal experiences articulates both the discomfort of his position within a larger social structure, and a broader skepticism about the

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5 One of the most unaccountable moments in the book occurs in the deployment of a first-person pronoun to an otherwise third-person-seeming narrator: “Theron’s tongue dallied for an instant with the temptation to comment upon these old-wife fables, which were so dear to the rural religious heart when he and I were boys” (*DT* 28, emphasis added). It’s hard to know what to do with this, except to say that it indicates the degree to which the convention of the disinterested third-person narrator, though common, was in no way codified into a solid rule by the turn of the century. Or it could well be an allusion to the opening chapter of *Madame Bovary*, in which Flaubert implies both that his narrator knew Charles Bovary as a young medical student and also knew nothing about him. In any case, Frederic’s loose adherence to the third-person here only emphasizes his rigorous adherence to it in the first chapter. While the first-person appears as an oddity in chapter three, it would have been nonsensical in chapter one.
novel’s ability to represent collective experience. In a kind of meta-irony, these combined qualities—social discomfort and skepticism towards the representation of social totality—tend to provoke responses in critics that characterize the novel itself as unsettling, willfully inconclusive, and morally ambiguous.

The novel’s plot follows along a similar back-and-forth motion between mockery of Ware’s antagonists and Ware himself. Loren Pierce, “a rich quarryman” and one of the town trustees, appears as a zealot and a crank who “don’t take no stock in all that pack o’ nonsense about science,” decries “departin’ from the ways of our forefathers, an’ puttin’ in organs an’ choirs, an’ deckin’ our women-folks out with gewgaws, an’ apin’ the fashions of the worldly,” and rails against Ware’s use of the “outlandish” word “epitome” in church (*DT* 28, 35). Pierce’s rage is ridiculous, but it comes with consequences, for he is one of a few men in charge of Ware’s employment, salary, and line of credit. A xenophobe, he complains that Octavius is “jest overrun with Irish” and that “that church of idolatry’ll be the ruin o’ this country if it ain’t checked in time” (*DT* 29). As a figure for who the slightest hint of the outlandish or worldly provokes outrage, Pierce epitomizes a hyperbolic doctrine of conformity and insularity; he’s a kind of provincial id who demands total satisfaction without compromise. As the maniacal apotheosis of social cohesion, Pierce stands at the outer edges of the logic of social totality, envisioning totality as totalitarian.

Further on in the novel, there are indicators of Frederic’s interest in Octavius as a bellwether for wider social and cultural shifts. When Ware enters a bookstore, its owner complains of falling profits due to the encroachment of “Thurston’s,” a department store that threatens to shut down every small business in Octavius. Besides complaining of his inability to lower prices, the bookstore owner claims that, while he stocks books of great quality, Thurston’s
“dealt with nothing save the demands of the moment, and offered only the books which were the
talk of the week. Thus, in plain words, the book trade was going to the dogs.” Thurston’s arrival
announces the “citification” of Octavius not only economically, through the dominance of bigger
businesses with wider profit margins, but also through the dissemination of popular tastes:
“Equally of course, [Thurston’s] was destroying the book business and debauching the reading
tastes of the community” (DT 55). Just as Pierce decries the introduction of “outlandish” words
in the church as a threat to Methodist orthodoxy, modern department stores threaten the integrity
of taste in Octavius. Whereas Pierce’s rabid insularity seeks to close off Octavius from all things
foreign and highfalutin, the bookstore owner seeks to save Octavius from the vicissitudes of
disposable popular literature. Pierce and the bookstore owner (he remains nameless) defend the
extremes of high and low culture, each of them citing the violation of their own particular sphere
of interest as an indicator that Octavius is changing. These are the two poles that will tug back
and forth at Ware as the novel progresses—church orthodoxy and the appeal of a more expansive
cultural and aesthetic knowledge appear as counterforces, destabilizing Ware’s ostensibly secure
position as the town minister. Thus, even before the appearance of the “three tempters,” as
Wilson calls them, Frederic suggests that Ware’s illumination embodies larger social tensions
(rather than a moral failing or “damnation”), that in fact his impending epistemological and
spiritual crises are the grounds, maybe the only grounds, on which social conflict can take place.

Frederic’s mockery of Pierce’s virulent provincialism, though, in no way aligns the novel
with Ware and against his antagonists. Nor does he imbue Ware with an anti-corporate ethos that
would position him explicitly against the incursion of Thurston’s. Even before his “illumination,”
Ware’s naïve self-consciousness appears ineffectual, unable to penetrate to the core of its own
processes:
Theron Ware was extremely interested in the mechanism of his own brain, and followed its workings with a lively curiosity. Nothing could be more remarkable, he thought, than to thus discover that, on the instant of his formulating a desire to know what he should write upon, lo and behold! There his mind, quite on its own initiative, had the answer waiting for him! When he had gone a little further, and the powerful range of possibilities in [Abraham’s] revolt against the idolatry of his father, the image-maker, in the exodus from the unholy city of Ur, and in the influence of the new nomadic life upon the little deistic family group, had begun to unfold itself before him, he felt that the hand of Providence was plainly discernible in the matter. The book was to be blessed from its very inception (DT 38).

Ware’s “interest in the mechanism of his own brain” betrays his own inability to comprehend it. The novel figures the gulf between Ware and his own mind as impassable, and it remains that way throughout the novel. Unable to account for creative processes, he attributes them to divine guidance. Ware’s “interest” denotes a kind of thinking without instrumentality—despite the fact that his mind must have generated the idea of a book about Abraham, Ware’s inability to subject his own processes of thought to scrutiny portray him as a dilettante of self-consciousness, happy to skim along the surface of consciousness rather than plumbing its depths.

The passage itself conveys many of the qualities that Wilson found repellant in the novel and in the “sour flavor” of the work that followed—it seems to make fun of Ware not despite his earnestness but because of it. The exclamation points in the passage’s second sentence bear the markings of an unsophisticated rube possessed of gee-golly wonderment. If Frederic isn’t resorting to outright mockery here, his perspective on Ware at this point remains at least slightly condescending. In essence, Wilson’s complaint seems justified in that, from the reader’s perspective, the novel resorts to a kind of cynicism. What it seems to find worthy of ridicule is Ware’s belief that his ideas come from God, that their spontaneous appearance signifies the divine hand of providence, that God has imbued his thought with meaning.
This belief about the nature of meaning and its relationship to epistemology serves as the lynchpin of both the interest and distaste of “the three tempters.” All three seem simultaneously amused by Ware’s belief in the divine origin of meaning and disdainful of it, and all three seek to “illuminate” him more to amuse themselves than to do right by him. On appealing to Father Forbes and Dr. Ledsmar for advice on his stalled-out book, both attempt to disabuse him of his belief in the literal existence of the biblical Abraham. When Ledsmar clues him in to the existence of the Higher Criticism, offering to lend Ware “Baudissin’s ‘Studien zur Semitischen Religionsgeschichte’” and the work of “several other important Germans—Schrader, Bunsen, Duncker, Hommel, and so on,” Ware laments that “unluckily” he doesn’t “read German readily” (DT 68). Forbes, for his part, tells Ware he is “taking our friend Abraham too literally” and that “Modern research, you know, quite wipes him out of existence as an individual. The word ‘Abram’ is merely an eponym … Abram is not a person at all: he is a tribe, a sept, a clan. In the same way, Shem is not intended for a man; it is the name of a great division of the human race,” and so on to the demystification of several other biblical persons. Even when Ware, expressing, in equal measures, wonderment and an attempt to save face, supposes that the theories are “very new,” Forbes refuses to let him off the hook, saying that “Epicurus and Lucretius outlined the Darwinian theory more than two thousand years ago. As for this eponym thing, Saint Augustine called attention to it fifteen hundred years ago,” a correction no less devastating for its wobbly accuracy (DT 69).

What is it about the help and advice they offer that makes it come off so mean? Shouldn’t Ware be demystified? Aren’t they doing him a favor, giving him what he asks for? When Ware asks for information from them that will help “round out one’s conception of the individual,” the two “[steal] a furtive glance across the young minister’s head” (DT 69).
Communicating literally over his head, their refusal to acknowledge Ware’s ignorance of modern scholarship and thought is both polite and cruel, cruel because it is so polite. Good manners, as always, provide ample cover for condescension. Good manners entail, for Ledsmar and Forbes, an assumption that Ware shares their sophisticated, post-Darwinian, thoroughly enlightened perspective on the Bible, though they must know that he does not. It is an assumption regarding Ware’s epistemology—in treating Ware as though he shares their epistemological position, they practice a kind of epistemological violence on him.

In fact the experience that leads Ware to seek out Forbes and Ledsmar is one of epistemological uncertainty, that is, uncertainty regarding not only the facts (who Abraham was, where he came from, and so on), but in the very “mechanism” through which those facts could take on meaning. Sitting before a “beautiful pile of white paper, still unstained by ink,” struggling to begin writing, Ware finds himself confronted with an “unsuspected and staggering truth”: that he is “an extremely ignorant and rudely untrained young man, whose pretensions to intellectual authority among any educated people would be laughed at with deserved contempt” (DT 59). This truth leads to a kind of negative revelation, one parallel and opposite to his earlier “lively curiosity” toward his own mind, his wonderment at God’s role in producing his thoughts:

Now all at once his eyes were open; he knew what he had to do. Ignorance was a thing to remedied, and he would forthwith bend all his energies to cultivating his mind till it should blossom like a garden. In this mood, Theron mentally measured himself against the more conspicuous of his colleagues in the Conference. They also were ignorant, clownishly ignorant: the difference was that they were doomed by native incapacity to go on all their lives without ever finding it out. It was obvious to him that his case was better. There was a bright promise in the very fact that he had discovered his own shortcomings (DT 59).

At the passage's beginning, ignorance is "a thing to be remedied," a lack of knowledge that Ware can remedy. Yet by the passage's end, Ware indicates that "native incapacity" is a barrier not just
to eliminating ignorance, but to recognizing it. Ware, then, narrates the transition of "ignorance" from a contingent to an inborn state; it is not so much a function of what you know but of who you are. Moreover, with the revelation of his own ignorance, he comes to recontextualize knowledge not as a function of his relationship with God, but in comparison with the knowledge of other men: in the space of an instant, “all at once,” knowledge is socialized. Whereas previously God inhabited the gap between Ware and his own mind, now we find only his relation to other men. Instead of wondering at the power of providence, Ware discovers his own natural superiority to others. Thus, strangely, even before being let in on the discoveries of the Higher Criticism and Darwin, Ware transforms himself into a vulgar materialist.

The nature of this particular revelation seems important in that it alters not just Ware’s receptive capacities, but the definition of what counts as knowledge. Knowledge is no longer knowledge of things, but knowledge about knowledge. Thus even the knowledge of ignorance becomes a kind of epistemological gain. But most critics regard this gain as a loss: Ware’s “illumination” results eventually in his downfall, his doomed attachment to Celia Madden, and his eventual suicide attempt. Subsequently, most criticism devolves into a kind of game where the reasons for Ware’s downfall gets pinned to various intra-textual causes. Thus one claims that “Sister Soulsby manipulates the young Methodist minister to her materialist purposes. She is Mephistopheles to his Faust” (Donaldson 442). Another both picks up the Faust allusion and assigns “blame” to Soulsby, finding “Frederic intends Sister Soulsby, the materialist, to function as a Mephistophelian tempter of Theron’s soul and a minion of spiritual darkness” (Luedtke 89). All of them fail to notice that, (a) if Ware is “tempted” into a kind of materialism, the above passage, occurring before he makes the acquaintance of the Soulsbys (despite the undeniably Faustian resonance of the name), demonstrates that Ware discovers a form of materialism all on
his own, and (b) even if he needs help along the way, Forbes and Ledsmar are more than happy to provide it before Soulsby does. I raise these objections to the curiously moralistic strain of criticism that seeks to “blame” Sister Soulsby for Ware’s downfall not because I want to rehabilitate the reputation of a fictional character, but because moralism itself seems to have blinkered the faculties of otherwise perceptive critics, and because such moralism leads directly to certain presuppositions of Frederic’s intentions and motivations regarding the novel.

While critics like Donaldson and Luedtke seem eager to link Ware’s abandonment of naïve spirituality to dangerously relativistic forms of pragmatism and materialism they associate with Soulsby, it should be noted that the initial nature of Ware’s revelation regarding his own ignorance is more classical than pragmatic: what is “the knowledge of one’s own ignorance” if not the formula of Socratic wisdom? As Bruce Michelson has written, Ware’s “disaster fails to fit neatly into ideological categories, because his problem has more to do with his idea about ideas. What can be affirmed about his mistake is that his ‘damnation,’ because it grows from a misconception of what thinking now is, defies reduction to Methodist, Darwinian, aesthetic, or other nineteenth-century ideological terms” (71). Ware’s realization of his own ignorance reorients his very notion of knowledge. What counts as knowledge is no longer facts or historical data but something like a form of self-consciousness through which he is able to compare himself with a larger, cosmopolitan community, a shapeless, factless kind of thinking that Ware insistently figures as “knowledge.”

Ware’s thinking on the pragmatic, non-traditional life of the Soulsbys reflects this shift. His thoughts drift and he finds himself “all at once” wondering “if they were actually married.” No sooner does the thought occur to him than he reflects that “a citizen of the intellectual world should be above soiling his thoughts with mean curiosities of that sort, and he drove the query
down again under the surface of his mind. He refused to tolerate, as well, sundry vagrant imaginings which rose to cluster about and literalize the romance of her youth which Sister Soulsby had so frankly outlined” (*DT* 183). Gaining citizenship in the intellectual world requires the repression of “worldly” thoughts. It requires a conscious control over thought and resistance to what he formerly recognized as the divinity of spontaneous thinking. If he was once amazed (“lo and behold!”) by spontaneous thinking, he now guards against it, wary that his loss of control will disenfranchise him from the intellectual world. Belonging to a world thus becomes a function of thinking.

For Ware, then, membership in “the intellectual world,” a society of like-minded thinkers existing in no particular place, reorients not just the gist of his thinking, but all of the social arrangements in which that thinking is embedded. Octavius, as a small town in the throes of technological, ideological, and economic change, fades away in Ware’s mind. In its place appears an idealized cosmopolitan world of which Ware now imagines himself to be a member. If we were to trace out the novel’s conceptual movements, we might say that Ware flees the material realities of the world. In “illuminating” himself first in a minor sense, by learning of the social tensions in Octavius, and then in a major sense by reorienting his entire epistemological viewpoint *away* from those tensions and toward the maintenance of itself, Ware practices enlightenment as a form of mental isolation. His interactions with Celia Madden clarify the relationship between this attempted refusal of the social and his failed enlightenment.

II.

Every scene in the novel featuring Celia Madden exudes significance—one could easily spend a chapter analyzing her place among the New Woman novels of the late-nineteenth
century. She’s clearly one of Frederic’s most fascinating characters—her reappearance in a much less exuberant form in his *Gloria Mundi* (1898) attests to Frederic’s own infatuation with her. I choose to limit myself to two scenes from *The Damnation of Theron Ware* featuring Madden, because their juxtaposition highlights both the clash of manners central to Ware’s illumination and his subsequent internalization of an imagined social world that wrenches him away from the social conditions of the world.

Scene One: Wandering around Octavius in the evening, Ware succeeds in “running into” Celia Madden as she leaves Father Forbes’s house, and, seeking her pity, tells her that he is “really very ill and weak—and unhappy!” She invites him to her room in order to play music for him, for Chopin “is the real medicine for bruised and wounded nerves” (*DT* 187). Inside, while smoking a cigarette, Madden tells Ware, “I divide people up into two classes, you know—Greeks and Jews. Once you get hold of that principle, all other divisions and classifications, such as by race or language or nationality, seem pure foolishness. It is the only true division there is. It is just as true among negroes or wild Indians who never heard of Athens or Jersusalem, as it is among white folks. That is the beauty of it. It works everywhere, always” (*DT* 194). As several critics have noted, Madden is here regurgitating Matthew Arnold’s distinction between “Hellenic” and “Hebraic” forces from *Culture and Anarchy*, which reveals both that Madden is up on her contemporary cultural criticism and that she is a bit too coy about her sourcing. When Ware asks which he is, she replies “Both.” Immersed in the decadent atmosphere of Madden’s room, listening and watching through the haze as she plays Chopin for him, he tells Madden that he has experienced “an event,” to which she replies that, “We are Hellenizing you at a great rate” (*DT* 197). After so much aesthetic experience, Ware more or less swoons and she pours him a glass.

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6 See Gail Cunningham, *The New Woman and the Victorian Novel*. 
of Benedictine liqueur. As they part, he tells her “You open to me a whole world that I had not even dreamed existed” (DT 202). When he awakens the next morning, he finds that “both he and the whole world had changed overnight” (DT 204). He has fallen in love with her.

Scene Two: Ware spends the rest of the novel watching his marriage to Alice deteriorate, condescending to his congregation, bemoaning the “ignorant and unimaginative clod of dirt” he formerly was, preening over the “illuminated” world-citizen he has become, and silently fantasizing about running away with Celia and her money. After discovering that she has left Octavious for New York City, he trails her, ending up at the hotel she is sharing with Forbes. When he comes to her room, he professes his love to her, and she replies with a shrug. She tells him that a kiss they shared in the forest was “of the good-bye order,” that neither she nor Forbes nor Ledsmar wanted to see him again after because “we find you a bore” (DT 322). Her subsequent devastation of Ware—her illumination of his illumination—deserves to be quoted in full:

We liked you, as I have said, because you were unsophisticated and delightfully fresh and natural. Somehow we took it for granted you would stay so. But that is just what you didn’t do—just what you hadn’t the sense to try to do. Instead, we found you inflating yourself with all sorts of egotisms and vanities. We found you presuming upon the friendships which had been mistakenly extended to you. Do you want instances? You went to Dr. Ledsmar’s house that very day after I had been with you to get a piano at Thurston’s, and tried to inveigle him into talking scandal about me. You came to me with tales about him. You went to Father Forbes, and sought to get him to gossip about us both. Neither of those men will ever ask you inside his house again. But that is only one part of it. Your whole mind became an unpleasant thing to contemplate. You thought it would amuse and impress us to hear you ridiculing and reviling the people of your church whose money supports you, and making a mock of the things they believe in, and which you for your life wouldn’t dare let them know you didn’t believe in. You talked to us slightly of your wife. What were you thinking of, not to comprehend that that would disgust us? You showed me once—do you remember?—a life of George Sand that you had just bought—bought because you had just discovered that she had an unclean side to her life. You chuckled as you spoke to me about it, and you were for all the world like a
nasty little boy, giggling over something dirty older people had learned not to notice. These are merely random incidents. They are just samples, picked hap-hazard, of the things in you which have been opening our eyes, little by little, to our mistake (DT 322).

In short, she tells him, “What you took to be improvement was degeneration.”7 For a kicker, he asks Father Forbes, “is it true that you don’t want me in your house again? Is that the truth or not?” To which Forbes replies, “The truth is always relative” (DT 326). Ware reacts by attempting suicide, is saved at the last minute, and finds his way to the Soulsbys, who help him recover.

Madden’s inflation of Ware’s expectations and desires in Scene One corresponds directly with her deflation of them in Scene Two. In Scene One, she exposes him to a “whole world,” in Scene Two she reminds him that he is a small, sad part of the same old one. In Scene One, she places him between the Greeks and the Jews, in Scene Two she expels him from her world completely. For Ware, Celia’s denunciation equates to an eviction both from the idealized, cosmopolitan intellectual world he imagines and an actual social world. After he stumbles his way to the Soulsbys’, he moans, “People hate me; they won’t have me in their houses. They say I’m a nuisance and a bore. I’m like a nasty little boy” (DT 333). Celia or “people”—just as the epistemological shift from plain old ignorance to, we might say, apperceptive ignorance enables his admission to the intellectual world, his expulsion from it imbues Celia with a synecdochical power to represent all the people of Octavius.

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7 It’s unclear whether or not Frederic means this reference to degeneracy ironically or not. In Degeneration (translated into English in 1895), Max Nordau links physiognomic “degeneration” (such as “imperfection in the development of the external ears,” “squint-eyes, hare-lips, irregularities in the form and position of the teeth,” “asymmetry of face and cranium” and so on) to the “moral degeneracy” of fin de siècle art of exactly the kind Madden champions (17). Nordau, a shining exemplar of scientific racism and doom-saying crabbiness, would have viewed Madden as embodying the two “chief intellectual stigmata of degenerates”: “unbounded egoism” and “inability to resist a sudden impulse to any deed” (18). It’s possible that Frederic means to indicate Madden’s intellectual shallowness by having her apply a term of abuse to Ware that better suits her. It’s equally possible, though, that the term—fashionable in the 1890s—is simply an insult rather than a diagnosis. In both senses, the use of “degeneration” here is an example of the “sociologizing” function of the novel discussed below.
Essentially, Madden’s accusations amount to nothing other than an indictment of Ware’s manners, his inability to comport himself. The three tempters don’t resent Ware’s ignorance, they fetishize it. Though Madden tells Ware his mind has become “an unpleasant thing to contemplate,” it’s his childish behavior—giggling about sex—that repulses her. While she finds his innocence charming, she finds his childishness perverse. The difference between the two seems to rest in matters of comportment and behavior. Assuming that he is a member of their community, rather than simply an object of interest, he acts too familiarly, imposes too much on them. Ware’s fall amounts to a discovery that the intellectual world does not preclude the social world, that an idealized membership in an enlightened cosmopolitan community does not elevate the member above social tensions. The very source of Ware’s initial humiliation at the hands of Ledsmar and Forbes, their condescending politeness returns in the form of Madden’s outright cruelty. Manners—Ware’s lack of them and the tempters’ mastery of them—serve alternately as a shibboleth and a weapon.

Yet it would be inaccurate to call The Damnation of Theron Ware a “novel of manners”; it seems to be a convention of the novel of manners that its protagonist has them. Here manners designates less formalized behaviors, like saying “please” and “thank you” and shaking hands, than a kind of social style. By manners, I mean something like what Lionel Trilling means when he defines them as “that part of a culture which is made up of half-uttered or unuttered or unutterable expressions of value.” Manners are “hinted at by small actions, sometimes by tone, gesture, emphasis, or rhythm, sometimes by the words that used with a special frequency or a special meaning” (206). Manners distinguish one culture from another, enter into their art and politics yet remain distinct from them. Perhaps most importantly for Trilling, manners allow us to see the workings of money and class in the novel, and “the shifting and conflict of social
classes becomes the field of the problem of knowledge, of how we know and of how reliable our
knowledge is.” Manners make social conflict in the novel visible before the brink of out-and-out
class warfare, introduce money into the novel as “a social element.” The novel, Trilling
concludes, is “born in response to snobbery,” which is “pride in status without pride in function”
(209).

When Madden informs Ware of her opinion of him, she does so in such a way that makes
it clear that he has violated the sensibilities of an entire group. He’s right, then, to feel that
“people” hate him when Madden tells him that she does—Madden’s manners are not her own, by
definition cannot be her own, despite her pretensions to romantic individualism. Bad manners
violate a social order hovering above any particular faux pas, an order comprised of “unutterable”
faults, allegiances of sensibility, and sympathies that Ware’s attempt at mimicry mock. This
order operates in parallel to the idealized intellectual world Ware imagines, serving as the
material foil to his cosmopolitan community. In the novel’s constant allusion to organization, it
affirms the vision of a well-ordered society subject to sociological slicing and dicing. Yet Ware’s
projection of an “intellectual world” produces the idea of an abstracted, society-less society
bound by a form of self-consciousness.

Within the purview of Trilling’s analysis, manners introduce epistemological uncertainty
into the novel, and this uncertainty appears as a function of class. Ware’s inability to successfully
conduct social relations with Forbes, Ledsmar, and Madden signal the failure of his attempts to
mimic their epistemological position, to fake a worldly affect informed by the knowledge of
Darwin, the Higher Criticism, Romanticism, or any other scientific, philosophical, or aesthetic
doctrine current in the latter half of the century. The introduction of money into the novel
(Forbes, Ledsmar, and Madden, the novel makes clear, each live quite comfortably) transforms
knowledge into social currency and vice versa, and Ware’s attempt to counterfeit that knowledge resonates both thematically and throughout the readerly experience of the novel. Epistemological uncertainty in the novel takes the shape of veiled social tension—class difference understood (for Ware) as qualitative shifts in consciousness; epistemological uncertainty about the novel takes the shape of a critique of form—Frederic’s ambiguous use of narrative point of view obscures the point he is ostensibly trying to make. The formal disequilibrium noted by the novel’s critics, the sense that we don’t have access to the novel’s moral core or the object of its critique, suggests that we, as readers, have too much in common with Ware’s compromised relationship to class difference. In that sense, criticism of Theron Ware is rooted firmly within certain assumptions about the form and purpose of the Novel. An analysis of some of the master-tropes undergirding novel theory, then, will help to shed light on the intersection of epistemology and form at work in Theron Ware.

III.

In essence, the problem of manners in the novel leads directly to the problem of epistemic difference, and of what counts as epistemic difference. On the one hand, we might look at all of the above examples drawn from The Damnation of Theron Ware as evidence of the violation of manners and their ruthless enforcement delineate the boundaries across which various discourses cannot pass—we could typologize the various forms of speech utilized by Forbes, Ledsmar, and Madden, and contrast them with Ware’s. Are we meant to treat the aesthetic and sociological ideas put forward by characters in the novel as theses Frederic himself is putting forward? Or are aesthetic and social doctrines secondary to the novel’s treatment of manners? The difference between these two critical concerns amounts to the difference between treating the novel as a vessel for the circulation of ideas through culture and treating the novel as a form especially
primed for the examination of the minute distinctions in language and comportment that Trilling calls “manners.” The former concern treats the novel as a synoptic social document, one that handily presents certain ideas prevalent on the intellectual scene in the 1890s—once we extract the relevant cultural material from the sediment of the novel’s form, we can be confident in having found the elemental socio-intellectual material of its constitution. But because the problem of manners necessarily involves the minuta of social and linguistic presentation—those things “hinted at by small actions, sometimes by tone, gesture, emphasis, or rhythm, sometimes by the words that used with a special frequency or a special meaning”—we find that manners comprise not only the substance of characters’ interactions with each other, but also the substance of the novel itself; manners inhere in nearly every aspect of the novel’s language.

Because of the non-didactic nature of Theron Ware, its refusal to take a position “outside” the novel’s utterances, we’re left with an undecidable situation in which the first set of critical concerns—the social and aesthetic doctrines possessed by characters—become inextricable from mannered form of their expression. Doctrines in The Damnation of Theron Ware, then, are a function of the manner of their expression. We might have a harder time reducing the novel to the categories of “surface and depth” than it initially appeared. The entanglement of what we might call the “doctrinal register” of the novel and the descriptive register suggests that the spatial modeling of the text installs some questionable assumptions in the critical discourse surrounding realism, and through it, the modern novel. In the case of Theron Ware, the questions of how we’re meant to take the “ideas” are mediated by the formal demands of the modern novel, demands which have been systematically misread as a peculiar form of authorial aggression rather than modern innovation.
As an example, Father Forbes seems to have particularly irritated Edmund Wilson because, despite his professed and professional Catholicism, he seems to hold no theological beliefs at all. Rather than a religious institution that mediates the relationship between ordinary people and God, Forbes claims the Catholic Church is, “first and foremost … a police force” and “secondly … fire insurance.” Its significance is not theological; it fosters “the growth of young children” and “furnishes the best obtainable social machinery for marrying off one’s daughters, getting to know the right people, patching up quarrels, and so on.” As for the priests, they “earn their salaries as the agents for these social arrangements. Their theology is thrown in as a sort of intellectual diversion, like the ritual of a benevolent organization” (DT 243). Though Forbes sounds like a little Catholic Marx here, it’s more likely that Frederic has him alluding to the work of the American ethnologist Lewis Henry Morgan, whose Ancient Society (1877) analyzes the development of kinship structures and private property and influenced Marx and Engels. It’s tempting to look at characters like Forbes and Ledsmar as sociological icons, condensations of the narrative mode operating throughout the first chapter. The organization of characters into ages and types gives way to delineated characters that insist on the essentially totalizing structures in which they are embedded, that theorize the nature of the beliefs they reinforce but do not hold.

Such a reading of the novel would depend on a thorough separation of its various registers—we would first have to know the doctrines in distinction from their utterance in the novel. Both critics of Theron Ware and novel theorists in general have relied on just such a distinction. If Frank Norris relies on spatial metaphors like “surface,” “depth,” “geometric plane,” and “the inner circle of realism,” he’s certainly not alone in doing so—forms of disentanglement are an essential part of the fundamental organizational apparatus of modern novel theory. Many,
if not most, critics of the novel ranging from Henry James to Franco Moretti have used the spatial metaphor in order to clarify their conceptions of the novel’s form.\(^8\) Its categories have proved not only useful, but seemingly inescapable in the theorization of the novel and, in a different respect, to theorization *in* the novel.\(^9\) One need not look far to find an example of the former.

Referring to Marx’s description of history as class struggle from *The Communist Manifesto*, Frederic Jameson writes, “It is in detecting the traces of that uninterrupted narrative, in restoring to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history, that the doctrine of a political unconscious finds its function and its necessity” (20). Reading, all interpretations, in Jameson’s formulation necessarily envision the novel as a depth in need of plumbing. The “fundamental history” of class struggle, one that both establishes the conditions of the novel’s possibility and lays “buried” within it below its surface, rearranges the categories of depth writers like Norris attributed to it, transposing them from the level of content to that of form. While depth is a matter of degree for Norris, dependent on content, it is the fundamental formal metaphor for Jameson, one that enables a conception of the novel as a mystifying and mystified genre whose ultimate demystification depends on the exposure of its political operations. Far from a passing reference, Jameson’s further explanation of his method as “the

\(^8\) For examples from James, see chapter 5.

\(^9\) Joseph Frank’s idea of “spatial form” as one of the central features of modernist poetry and fiction highlights this tendency. In the modernist novel, cross-cutting of simultaneously occurring but spatially distant scenes demands that the reader construe events in the novel as occurring “all at once”—that is, in a sense, they must internalize the spatial dynamics at work in novels and poetry in order to make sense of them. Frank’s readings of *Madam Bovary, Ulysses, Remembrance of Things Past*, and *Nightwood* frame the device as a particularly modernist innovation. He might also have found it in the later chapters of James’s *The Wings of the Dove*. Tellingly, though, we also find this technique at work in the final pages of Frank Norris’s *The Octopus*, which, despite the fact that nobody has ever accused Norris of being a modernist, uses a technique identical to Frank’s spatial form. While Frank seems to think spatial form was particular to the work of the modernists, formalist criticism in general has dedicated itself to locating the processes of internalization and spatialization as part of the *reading process*. In some sense, then, Frank’s location of spatial form names the process through which literature assumes the guise of a kind of reader, one that contains and abstracts space in a way conceptually similar to the way readers do.
rewriting or restructuration of a prior historical or ideological subtext, it being always understood that the ‘subtext’ is not immediately present as such, not some common-sense external reality, nor even the conventional narratives of history manuals, but must itself always be (re)constructed after the fact” defines the novel as thoroughly underwritten by a fundament that finds expression in a surface (and therefore superficial and excessive) appearance. Further:

The whole paradox of what we have here called the subtext may be summed up in this, that the literary work or cultural object, as though for the first time, brings in to being that very situation into which it is also, at one and the same time, a reaction. It articulates its own situation and textualizes it, thereby encouraging and perpetuating the illusion that the situation itself did not exist before it, that there is nothing but a text, that there never was anything extra- or con-textual reality before the text itself generated it in the form of a mirage (81).

The clear disdain with which Jameson treats the term “subtext,” careful to place it in italics, then quotations, and then to explain it away, as though expunging a vulgar colloquialism from his critical lexicon, cannot undo the basic modeling of the text as possessed of fully spatialized strata. Though Jameson is careful to distance himself from simplistic “base-superstructure” models of causality, it’s clear that the correspondence between subtext and surface text rearticulates precisely such a model of determination, though in spatial rather than cultural terms. Indeed for Jameson, novels often come out sounding quite deep, despite his insistence on dredging meaning up from the depths of the novel in order to lay it out on the surface.

If Jameson’s theoretical account of the novel has remained influential in the thirty years since the publication of The Political Unconscious, it is not because the spatial metaphors on which it relies were in any way new—one could locate it, at various moments, in most influential theoretical accounts of the novel. There’s a kind of intuitive sense here—the reader experiences the novel temporally, but the novel itself as an object is big. It takes up a good deal of space on
Percy Lubbock’s use of the notion of novelistic “form” to name the experience of reading something so long it cannot be fully retained by the reader’s mind suggests that it is precisely the literal, physical, spatial dimensions of the novel that require a corollary mental construction of an abstract “form.” Yet Jameson attributes these spatial dynamics to the text itself insofar as novels dissemble (or “repress”) the political material at work within them. So while in one inarguably physical register, the length of most novels manifest as a palpable weight and thickness, in another register they manifest abstractly as a “form” that cannot be located in any material sense. Jameson’s spatialization of the novel seems to split the difference, imagining a kind of physical depth other than the most obvious physical one, and attributing that depth to the novel “itself.”

The spatializing tendency of novel theory, then, reveals a more penetrating truth about the project of that theory. In the construction of novels as depths to be plumbed, novel theory tends to imagine novels themselves as possessors of some form of “truth,” even if that truth is neither a universal nor an emotional nor an historical truth but simply truth as an endpoint of analysis, as a delineation of the true “shape” or “form” of the novel itself. Often enough, it seems as though this conception of the novel leads to the idea that statements, utterances, instances of speech, figures, the very language of the novel operates on the order of Freudian parapraxes, which appear as “mistakes” pointing the way to a deeper and more convoluted “truth” of the

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10 See chapter 5.

11 Or, as Catherine Gallagher puts it, “Formalist analyses seem bent on showing that, although a novel represents a temporal sequence by means of a temporal sequence, it nevertheless has, or should have, a form that can be made apprehensible all at once, in a picture or fractal” (230). Gallagher’s larger point is that Anglo-American formalism “has become a formalism not of durability but of ephemerality,” and hence critics have ignored “length” as a meaningful category of analysis (232). The fact that “length” is a term used to qualify measures of both space and time either muddies the water or clarifies it considerably.

12 I’d wager if you called Frederic Jameson and asked him whether or not he thought there was a literal spatial dimension to novels other than the purely physical one, he’d say no. I’m reading him hyperbolically here only to emphasize a critical tendency in novel theory, one linked to theorists’ attempts to disavow formalist practices.
subject’s unconscious. Despite the fact that the subject may not intend to speak the truth, it emerges, suggesting that his speech always conveys, literally cannot help but convey, a form of truth, whether or not he is aware of it. The truth of the subject’s desire is expressed in the parapraxis, just as, in bringing the buried, distorted “subtext” of the novel to its surface, the critic allows the novel to express the truth it dissembles beneath its surface. Ironically, the long-abandoned idea that literature conveys moral truth lives on in the practice of the critic as the revelator of the truth of the novel, even and especially in morality’s absence.

One could object that some theorists simply don’t think of novels in this way. It is precisely those theorists who demonstrate what is at stake in the spatializing tendency of novel criticism. Bakhtin, for example, in his identification of heteroglossia as the determining characteristic of the novel form, is at pains to deny an expressive model of novelistic construction:

[…] The author does not express himself in [the words of the novel] (as the author of the word)—rather, he exhibits them as a unique speech-thing, they function for him as something completely reified. Therefore the stratification of language—generic, professional, social in the narrow sense, that of particular world views, particular tendencies, particular individuals, the social speech diversity and language-diversity (dialectics) of language—upon entering the novel establishes its own special order within it, and becomes a unique artistic system, which orchestrates the intentional theme of the author (299).

Bakhtin emphasizes exhibition over expression, curation over ownership. Instead of an artistic expression, the novel “orchestrates” an idea. Only through the novelist’s assumption of language that is not his, that he does not own, that does not necessarily express anything about his life or

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13 In the final passage of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Freud writes, “But there is one thing which the severest and mildest cases [of neurosis] have in common, and which is equally found in parapraxes and chance actions: the phenomena can be traced back to incompletely suppressed psychical material, which, although pushed away by consciousness, has nevertheless not been robbed of all capacity for expressing itself” (279, emphasis in original). Parapraxes are not simply mistakes but expressions of a comparable order to those conscious acts of communication we engage in every day.

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origin can the novelist gain access to the proliferation of voices and discourses out of which he builds the novel. In Bakhtin’s terms, to ask what’s hidden beneath the novel’s surface misses the point—novels consist of the stratification of different discourses rather than a narrative “surface.” The novel’s polyphony renders its most readily apprehensible aspect—its language—rough and uneven, without the superficial implications of “surface.” In “Discourse in the Novel,” Bakhtin seems most concerned with discursive variety, with the ways in which writers juxtapose different discourses and survey the species of speech available to them at any given moment. The “intentional theme” orchestrated by the novel’s various interlocking discourses plays out among the instruments of speech, giving voice to social totality, rather than replacing, as Jameson would, the import of authorial expression with the import of the expression of a political class.

Bakhtin’s narrative poetics help to account for the manner in which The Damnation of Theron Ware itself doesn’t seem to possess any particular sociological perspective. Any materialist “truth” is subordinated to narrative interests—Theron Ware doesn’t “express” any sociological or anthropological thesis, despite its interest in theorizing and speculating. It’s not a sociological novel but it can’t resist the impulse to “sociologize,” to perform the theorizing gesture without becoming a work of theory. Forbes’s enlightened knowledge is exercised cynically, in service of a false consciousness he turns to his own benefit, which he construes as coextensive with the benefit of all Catholics. If The Damnation of Theron Ware operates along similar lines—thorizing without laying claim to the theory, espousing doctrines in which it has no literal investment—it highlights the manner in which utterances made within a novel are not then equivalent to utterances made by a novel.

Bakhtin’s sensitivity to discursive variation within novels also led him to theorize elsewhere (in Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics) a narrative feature that would become a
paragon of modern novelistic practice: free indirect discourse.\textsuperscript{14} For a text like \textit{Madame Bovary}, the locus classicus of the modern European novel, free indirect discourse allows the novel to shake off the identification of narration with the author, and therefore with an externalized consciousness that renders observations and judgments on its characters. The removal of a psychologized narrating “consciousness” allows the novel to foreground the orchestration of events while relegating to the background the intentionality of the “intentional theme” Bakhtin locates as the motivating feature of the novel’s discursive structure. After 1856, a novel could describe any action, put any form of speech into any character’s mouth, without being the “source” of that utterance.\textsuperscript{15} That a novel says something is no longer sufficient evidence that it says something.

And yet saying something without meaning it, or saying something while disavowing responsibility for saying it is, in another formal context, a rough definition of cynicism. That cynical speech and the modern novel share such similar formal features, it seems to me, severely

\textsuperscript{14} As of this writing, it appears as though free indirect discourse still holds the field. In his study of “middlebrow” literature and middle-class reading habits, Timothy Aubry notes that the “refusal of omniscience,” while originally a “modernist innovation” is now virtually universal. Contemporary American novels “report the action of the novel almost entirely from the standpoint of the character or characters through free indirect discourse” (151). Aubry cites scholars like Jameson and Richard Ohmann in support of the view that free indirect discourse remains prevalent on the American literary scene, so it’s quite interesting that Jonathan Culler, among others, has recently called for the abolition of the term “omniscience”—in many ways a vestigial limb of narrative theory—as a relevant critical category (“Omniscience” 22). Even more confusingly, Kent Puckett argues in response to Culler that “omniscience” ought to be preserved as it “functions as a motivating if necessarily impossible ideal, an ideal that figures prominently within a novel form built on the difference between the limitations of consciousness and the promise of something less limited” (7). Puckett’s larger argument that “[t]o understand literary form is … to understand how it is both generally and at particular moments coincident with or identical to social form” has certain views in common with my own in this chapter, but his reliance on the conceptual coherence of omniscience performs an end-run around ideas of speech and doctrine essential to my analysis (9). Especially in the case of Henry James, Puckett’s application of the term “omniscience” simply seems wrong.

\textsuperscript{15} According to Franco Moretti, free indirect style was first subjected to critical analysis in a Ledsmarian-sounding article entitled “Vermischte Beiträge zur französischen Grammatik,” published in \textit{Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie} in 1887. All of Moretti’s comments on the emergence of free indirect discourse in \textit{Graphs Maps Trees} are instructive, especially his observation that the increasing use of free indirect in the European novel enacts “the gradual, entropic drift from ‘reflective’ to ‘non-reflective’ consciousness: that is to say, from sharp punctual utterances like those in \textit{Mansfield Park} to Flaubert’s all-encompassing moods, where the character’s inner space is unknowingly colonized by the commonplaces of public opinion” (82).
problematizes the discourse surrounding a novel like *The Damnation of Theron Ware* which, for good or ill, finds itself always accused of cynicism and is more often discussed as, in T. J. Jackson Lears’s terms, an exemplary “antimodernist” text than a paradigmatically modern novel. Further, cynicism itself has only recently entered critical discourse about the development of American literature, and even then critics tend to discuss cynicism as an attitude or political problem, while its epistemic import tends to get pushed to the wayside.

IV.

To return to Father Forbes’s interpretation of contemporary ethnography and sociology: it sounds cynical because, as a priest, it seems like he ought to believe the doctrines he espouses. That he values those doctrines for instrumental reasons rather than their transcendental truth, even to the exclusion of their transcendental truth, places him squarely within the domain of Sloterdijk’s cynical “enlightened false consciousness.” The reason Frederic’s deployment of that cynicism may or may not be in itself cynical has to do with two things. One is the tendency of the novel form to “exhibit” rather than “express,” and the other is the ambiguity of “cynicism,” a term whose relationship to *The Damnation of Theron Ware* requires some explanation.

The term itself appears only twice in the novel. The first instance occurs as Ware grows suspicious of Levi Gorringe’s intentions toward Alice, Ware’s wife, during a love-feast: “There was some vague memory in [Ware’s] mind which associated Gorringe with other love-feasts, and with a cynical attitude toward them. Oh, yes! he had told how he went to one just for the sake of sitting beside the girl he admired—and was pursuing” (*DT* 148). The second instance occurs during a description of the joint camp meeting between the Methodists of Octavius and Thessaly. While the Methodists congregate to pray and take care of church business, outsiders attend as well to eat and drink and engage in “rough horse-play on the fringe of the sanctified
The second instance seems less complicated than the first, because in the second instance, the accusation of cynicism refers to no one in particular—it’s rhetorical rather than truly accusatory. In the first instance, though, “cynicism” denotes a Forbesian mobilization of religious feeling to instrumental ends—Ware remembers Gorringe’s past cynical behavior and accuses him of repeating it, this time with Alice. She, Ware supposes, possesses true religious feeling, whereas Gorringe’s apparent religious feeling is simply a front allowing him to get closer to her. Ware would be correct, then, in calling Gorringe’s behavior cynical. But of course, Ware has no real evidence that Gorringe is in fact acting cynically. In one way of thinking, Ware’s accusation of cynicism reflects only the cynicism that he himself possesses. Luedtke, in fact, qualifies Ware’s attitude toward Gorringe and Alice as cynical, rather than noting that Ware himself believes that Gorringe himself is cynical (88).

It’s possible that Luedtke is simply misreading here, but his attribution seizes on the bi-directional, reflective qualities of accusations of cynicism. As Frederic uses it here, accusations of cynicism call the motivations of the accused into question. If Gorringe is a true Methodist, his newfound friendship with Alice is only a happy side-effect. If he is not a true Methodist, his pretensions to belief are a necessary fiction that will help ingratiate him to Alice. That Ware immediately assumes that Gorringe’s behavior is cynical, that his intentions are impure, requires
a cast of mind as cynical as the calculating activities it believes it has discovered. In thinking Gorringe cynical, Ware thinks cynically.

Within the logic of cynicism, then, motivation becomes the epistemological problem par excellence, because only the discovery of motivation can separate the categories of right-thinking and right-acting from manipulation and dissembling. Without the discovery of motivation, the accuser could well find himself a cynic, in that he may discover in his own distrust of the motivations of others not an accurate picture of the world but his own grimly smirking face. An accusation of cynicism is an epistemological gamble, one with two rather distasteful outcomes. Either the cynical motivation is revealed, the accuser is correct, and the world is, as expected, a terrible place, or the motivation is sincere, the accuser is wrong, and he finds within himself something terrible.

This reflective dynamic understands modern cynicism as a mode of thought that risks blowing out the social bonds between individuals by turning the common ground of good faith into a minefield. Those reflective qualities indicate a deeper instability in epistemological certainties that cynicism both disrupts and exemplifies. As Benjamin Scheier puts it, cynicism “inhabits the boundaries between criticism and prescription and between skepticism and hope; what distinguishes cynicism from simple nihilism, self-interest, apathy, or hypocrisy, after all, is its … appeal to the way things should be that irresolvably supplements understanding of the way things are” (5). Cynicism operates in the absence of the conditions it finds lacking, conditions which include the correspondence between speech and motivation, but can find no positive grounds on which to “envision a redemptive future” (22). Moreover, this inability to envision a

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future worth having is linked to the epistemic problem of motives through what David Mazella locates as “the cynic’s most characteristic gesture,” which is “to doubt the sincerity of others’ speech, while refusing to take at face value other people’s accounts of their motives or actions” (4).

We might then recognize cynicism branching out farther in Ware’s final meeting with Father Forbes. He tells Forbes that he plans on leaving the ministry because while Forbes has “a thousand things to interest and pleasantly occupy you in your work and its ceremonies, so that mere belief or non-belief in the dogma hardly matters,” in the Methodist church, “dogma is everything. If you take that away or cease to have its support, the rest is intolerable, hideous” (DT 276). In his growing cynicism, the project of the Methodist church, of all churches really, appear to be no more than the perfunctory maintenance of dogma in the service of church hierarchy. Dogma becomes the end rather than the means of the church, and so the church becomes a cynical institution.

“Illumination” in The Damnation of Theron Ware, then, announces enlightenment as a cynical development in consciousness. Enlightenment and cynicism emerge together, all at once, and grow together like gnarled roots twisting around each other. The light of illumination exposes the transcendental core of the church to the operations of a cynical consciousness that finds it vacant, a dogmatic superstructure concealing a hideous nothing. Once Ware is able to exercise instrumentalized reason, all reason appears instrumental, and so consciousness itself appears in the mode of a blunt critique that answers the question of the future with a shrug.17

17 H.L. Mencken, of course, finds the cynic’s lack of hope for the future a reason for celebration: “A cynic is chronically in the position of a wedding guest who has known the bride for nine years, and has had her confidence. He is a great deal less happy, theoretically, than the bridegroom. The bridegroom, beautifully barbered and arrayed, is about to launch into the honeymoon. But the cynic looks ahead two weeks, two months, two years. Such, to
That the term “cynicism” and its variants appear so infrequently in the novel, then, doesn’t signal its lack of importance. Cynicism appears as both a permeating structure of thought and a critical problem—it operates even in the absence of its name. Moreover, it serves as a problem not just of critical thinking in the novel but of criticism of the novel, as the location of cynicism inevitably results in a kind of critical recoil, even in the case of fictional critics. In Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street* (1920), the newlywed Carol tells Miss Sherwin that she’s been “re-reading ‘The Damnation of Theron Ware.’ Do you know it?” Sherwin replies, “Yes. It was clever. But hard. Man wanted to tear down, not build up. Cynical. Oh, I do hope I’m not a sentimentalist. But I can’t see any use in this high-art stuff that doesn’t encourage us day-laborers to plod on” (66). Sherwin’s concern that her own “sentimental” reaction to the “cynicism” of the novel entails a gesture to a constructive future—cynicism threatens the will of the day-laborer to “plod on,” risks revealing to her the emptiness of her endeavor. In a certain way, though, Sherwin’s response to Carol bears a resemblance to a Forbesian orientation toward utility—“this high-art stuff” should only act as a spur to keep the laborers plodding along, much as Catholic theology, for Forbes, is merely an elaborate mechanism for policing social bonds and keeping the hoi polloi out of trouble. The accusation of cynicism, then, reveals a concomitantly cynical attitude toward art, one that regards the production of “high-art” as an adjunct to the perpetuation of productive labor.

For other, real-life critics like Edmund Wilson, the accusation of cynicism seems to linger in the background of the analysis. After calling the novel “rather repellent,” he asks a series of questions whose relationship to motivation itself leaves a crucial question unanswered:

borrow a phrase from the late Dr. Eliot, are the durable satisfactions of life” (353). I would argue that what Mencken is actually describing here is schadenfreude rather than cynicism, and while cynicism may sour one to the point where schadenfreude is the only remaining pleasure, I doubt there is any essential connection between the two. Moreover, as we’ve been discussing it, cynicism names a particular epistemological structure, while schadenfreude names a particular kind of cathexis, more like sadism-lite than anything.
Why, for example, is Father Forbes, who is presented as the last word in Catholic sophistication and must know about Methodist doctrine, made to begin talking about ‘this Christ-myth’ only the second time Theron has met him? This is surely neither behavior becoming a priest nor elementary good manners. And why, in the middle of this, should he talk in a perfectly irrelevant way about Lucretius foreshadowing Darwin? Is this Frederic himself showing off or Frederic making the priest show off (125)?

Wilson’s last question asks, in essence, about Frederic’s motivations. What is he trying to do? Is he demonstrating his own intellectual capacity or mocking the intellectual pretensions of Father Forbes? Wilson’s question is rhetorical, of course: we can’t know the Frederic from the Forbes. Or, better, there’s no way to distinguish Frederic’s showing off from Forbes’s because, in having Forbes show off, Frederic reveals that he must necessarily possess the same knowledge as Forbes. The position from which Wilson asks the question, which is really not a question but a complaint, requires a set of distinctions between author and text, between text and subtext, between sincerity and irony that can only be buttressed by the sort of direct address to the reader that Frederic had, by this time, become too sophisticated to employ, or the kind of extrinsic knowledge about Frederic that we simply don’t possess. Stylistic indeterminacy, then, manifests as show-offiness, a case of authorial bad manners.

In Wilson’s frustrated inability to figure out who’s who, we might hear the echoes of something frustrating about the development of the modern novel. While Wilson recognizes the indeterminacy of the location of the utterance as a flaw in the novel, a scar left behind by its cynicism, such indeterminacies also display the kind of “impersonality” associated with Flaubert’s narrative innovations. According to Jonathan Culler, Flaubertian impersonality “involves … the desire to prevent the text from being recuperated as the speech of a

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18 In an obituary for Frederic, his friend and colleague Arthur Warren wrote, “[In 1888], Frederic had told me how he was studying beekeeping and reading libraries of metaphysics, the higher criticism, Voltaire, the lives of the Wesleys, and what not. Eight years later he put the effects into ‘Theron Ware,’ or ‘Illumination’ as he called the book in England” (19).
characterizable narrator, to prevent it, that is to say, from being read as the vision of someone who becomes an object that the reader can judge” (62). Imagine, then, that Wilson made his complaint not about Harold Frederic’s characterization of Father Forbes, but of Gustav Flaubert’s characterization of Rodolphe Boulanger. We would immediately reply that to ask “who is showing off” is to assume a too-substantial idea of what the “who” is. Under the (admittedly idealized) conditions of Flaubertian impersonality, we take it for granted that the author’s opinions and desires disappear into the events and characters described. Flaubert eschews moral judgment in favor of a “conviction that every event, if one is able to express it purely and completely, interprets itself and the person involved in it far better and more completely than any opinion or judgment appended to it could do.” In this practice and with “a profound faith in the truth of language responsibly, candidly, and carefully employed,” Flaubert shifts the emphasis of the novelist’s responsibilities from substantive statements about the world to the maintenance of linguistic fidelity to the world (Auerbach 483).

Though Harold Frederic was no Flaubert, the “narrow yet uncertain range of awareness” characteristic of both Ware’s experience of the world the reader’s attempt to situate himself in the novel does appear, in the context of the novel after Flaubert, distinctly like innovative narrative technique rather than merely “repellent” bad manners. The Damnation of Theron Ware obscures itself as “an object the reader can judge” through refusing to take a position among the full array of ontological, theological, and sociological positions elaborated by the novel’s characters. Like the fully orchestrated discursive world Bakhtin describes as the novel’s essential domain, The Damnation of Theron Ware reproduces the affective clashes and cognitive failures of the “intellectual world” its flawed hero strives to join—in its representation of sociological

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19 This Flaubertian impersonality possesses some different qualities than the later, no less “modern” “continual extinction of personality” T.S. Eliot thought represented “the progress of an artist” (7).
thought and cultural criticism and in its persistent disinvestment in taking a position within those domains, it reveals the modernity of its form through its refusal to represent itself in the form of modern thought.

Cynicism and impersonality: the former a modern development in consciousness, the latter a modern development in form. As modes of thinking and writing, they rely on antagonistic notions of the representational capacities of language. Impersonality in the novel (at least in its Flaubertian form) idealizes the transparent representational capacities of language and removes the “characterizable narrator” from the realm of the novel. Cynical thinking assumes the opacity of language and the instrumental nature of all reason, and often enough acts cynically in response. Despite these opposing epistemological orientations, though, each seems capable of appearing as the other. The impersonal narrator is a narrator impervious to judgment and incapable of judging. The cynical narrator does nothing but judge yet requires a cynical reader to make the accusation of cynicism. In the former case, exposing impersonality to the accusation that it is really interested and possessed of moral qualms would amount to accusing it of cynicism. The court of critical opinion, then, would seem to possess the power to produce the cynicism it claims to locate simply by virtue of assigning it, while it divests itself of the responsibility of doing so in the case of novels it deems “impersonal.”

We could pursue this line of reasoning further, but the point is that Flaubert’s conception of impersonality has given critics a theoretical peg to hang their hats on. Once impersonality enters the scene as a narrative alibi, speculating about the motives of the narrator refuses to play by the rules of the game, because there is no “narrator” to speculate about. *Madame Bovary*,

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20 We might also think of the oddness of the “when he and I were boys” moment from earlier in the novel as a puncture in the novel’s impersonal schema—the fact that it leaps out now could just as well indicate the degree to which we now assume impersonality in the novel.
despite the fact that it is in many ways a clear indictment of middle-class values and thinking, takes refuge in an aesthetic theory that later formalisms adopted as a leg for their theoretical stool. In this way of thinking, the accusation of cynicism emerges in the absence of a statement that could account for the incompletely delineated location of motives within *The Damnation of Theron Ware*.

Accordingly, the implications of our own dearth of knowledge about Harold Frederic reach beyond a simple ignorance. Unlike Ware, we have no recourse to instantaneous illumination when that ignorance comes to light. I would speculate our lack of knowledge concerning his thought results in a corollary lack of conceptualizations available to critics who would seek to elucidate their aesthetic qualities. Some recent criticism has attempted such an elucidation, seeing in the novel a rejection of the value of aesthetic experience itself. In that reading, aesthetic experience is framed as, in Tom Perrin’s words, “a deceitful variety of experience that leads its characters into terrible trouble” (32). When Ware is lulled into believing that aesthetic experiences reveal moral truth, we are disabused of that notion by the novel’s own attempts to distance us from its main character. The “repellent” quality Wilson located in Ware is explained by Perrin as the novel’s attempt to warn us that, “one ought to always beware of becoming aesthetically carried away at all, lest one be duped into becoming a moral fool like Theron Ware” (33).

For Wilson, the specific aesthetic experience of reading *Theron Ware* is a problem; for Perrin’s reading of the novel, aesthetic experience itself is the problem. The “repellent” quality of the novel functions almost like a defense mechanism, warning us of tainted material lurking within. The affective, experiential dimensions of reading come to undermine the aesthetic experiences described. The unpleasant feeling provoked by the novel is in fact the point of the
novel. In Perrin’s reading, the thing that bothered Wilson so much about the novel is the location of the novel’s interest and the key to its function. *Theron Ware* mobilizes a *Verfremdungseffekt*, rendering it more “modern” even than Frederic’s older proto-modernist contemporary, Henry James.

Perrin’s reading is fascinating insofar as it “solves” the 38-year-old interpretive problem of the “repellent” qualities of the novel by claiming, “Yes! Precisely! It’s repellent!” In locating the “moral” of the novel in an aesthetic experience of the novel that denigrates aesthetic experience in the novel, Perrin associates the use of free indirect discourse with an attempt to lull the reader into a complacent identification with Ware, an “identificatory trance” that is “suddenly broken” when the narration loosens itself from its proximity to Ware (46). When the narrator departs from Ware, the spell is broken and the reader awakens from his trance to find (to his horror!) he has been the dupe of aesthetic experience all along.

In conclusion, Perrin suggests, “*The Damnation of Theron Ware* might be seen as Frederic’s attempt to find a workable aesthetics, one that does not abandon the notion of aesthetic experience entirely, but at the same time attempts to resolve the problems caused by susceptibility in a way that its plot cannot” (47). The use of aesthetics, then, prods us along to see the fallibility of aesthetics. In the reading dynamics Perrin exposes, Frederic’s attitude towards the deployment of aesthetics comes to look suspiciously similar to the kind of Forbesian instrumentality he seems to critique. A susceptibility to aesthetic experience steers the reader toward a healthier attitude toward aesthetic experience, namely that one shouldn’t be so susceptible to aesthetic experience. Like Forbes’s Catholics, who need the organizing power of church dogma in order to maintain social order, a properly *distancing* aesthetic experience in *Theron Ware* serves as a safeguard against the moral error provoked by aesthetic experience.
Though I’m skeptical of the finality of Perrin’s argument and his rather constricted reading of the novel, it suggests a tantalizing connection between social organization in the novel and the formal dynamics revealed in the temporal reading experience. For if the development of Ware’s epistemological position away from its imperviousness to self-consciousness (he can only wonder at “the hand of Providence” at work in his thinking) towards a realignment of knowledge itself with self-consciousness (his knowledge of his own ignorance counts as a new form of knowledge) results in his odious behavior, then developments in self-consciousness emerge in tandem and in equal measure to the process of Ware’s distancing from the messy social totality of Octavius. Ware’s development of a troubled, cynical consciousness provokes the reader’s awareness of aesthetic experience, warning not just of the dangers of aesthetic experience, but also of social disinvestment, of the construction of overly-idealized imagined communities, in short, of epistemological fantasies that overemphasize the power of cognition, impute power to cognition itself. In the play of cynicism across the novel, aesthetic experience, the tenability of social bonds, and the very grounds from which accusations of cynicism themselves can be leveled fall apart.

Insofar as cynicism aligns under a single conceptual umbrella doubts about the transparency of language and the tenability of the future, and takes the instrumentality of doctrinal belief as its grounding assumption, it wields not only an unmatched capacity for negation but proves central to a formal conception of the modern novel. There’s a kind of tonal dissonance in accusing a thinker as enamored with the richness of everyday speech as Bakhtin of “cynicism,” but, if Sloterdijk’s diagnosis of cynicism as a symptom of modern consciousness itself holds water, and if the emergence of the modern novel has been persistently aligned with narrative modes strictly opposed to expressivity of the narrating voice, then cynicism would
seem to be an epistemic condition that makes possible the very concept of the modern novel in the first place. The gesture of unmasking or demystifying so central to novel theory assumes a formal cynicism in the novel but remains blind to the necessity of a concomitant cynical attitude towards its object. One might object that not to suspect, not to unmask, not to operate under the assumptions about language and narration’s deceptive nature would leave critics in a state of uncritical acceptance. I would agree with such an objection, but add that it only indicates that cynicism is a one-way street, the epistemological equivalent of the second law of thermodynamics: once it takes hold as a grounding formal principle in novels and a grounding critical principle, it negates the possibility of the recovery of a prior, uncynical mode of operations. To imagine what such a mode would look like would amount to something distinctly uncritical.

V.

“Cynicism” does not name an “attitude.” Rather, it names an encompassing epistemological structure that is interpretive in nature. To question motives is to subject them to inchoate interpretation, to penetrate below the surface of the utterance into a deeper stratum of meaning. Above all, to think cynically, to read cynically, is to perform a Jamesonian gesture of unmasking, to reveal the pure politics at work beneath what appears to be sincerity. The ways in which cynicism becomes inextricable from the modern novel, then, seem clearly bound the manner in which individual novels (like The Damnation of Theron Ware) have been read as works that perform gestures of interpretation revealing the instrumentalization of domains in public life that ought to transcend instrumental reason—the theologies of priests and the ideologies of democratic politicians being two such domains. This form of reading assumes cynicism where it would otherwise find impersonality, finds the form of instrumental reason
turned back on instrumental reason itself, where otherwise it would find a formal and stylistic commitment to linguistic transparency.

In so far as it signifies in both the accusative sense, in which the charge of cynicism claims to locate self-interested motives operating beneath some form of dissembling behavior, and the nominative sense, in which “cynic” names the kind of person who thinks that everyone acts cynically, “cynicism” can designate both the operations of certain forms of interpretive criticism and the epistemological position of the novels they interpret. With the rise of what V. L. Parrington termed “critical realism” in the late nineteenth century, cynicism becomes a problem central to the stylistic and formal imperatives of the American novel. “Criticism,” in a sense, comes to designate cynicism, in either its accusative or nominative usages. Parrington seemed to accuse Harold Frederic himself of a kind of cynical negativity, writing that he “quite evidently hates this countryside that bred him. He will not, like Hamlin Garland, take up the battle for it against the town. He sees no hope in political programs; he is no Populistic agrarian fighting for justice; he wants only to escape from it to the city, where life may be lived more generously” (289). In Frederic, Parrington sees not simply the stirrings of political realism, but its apotheosis. To Parrington, Frederic seems critical to the point of hopelessness. Neither politics nor social solidarity seem possible for Frederic under Parrington’s reading—one can only live for the more expansive pleasures of urban life.

I hope it does not sound too cynical to say a “correction” of Parrington’s error would be pointless, and not simply because correcting an inconsequentially wrong, long-deceased intellectual historian feels uncomfortably similar to chiding the errant morals of a fictional
Whether or not he wrote injudiciously or misread Frederic’s work or was simply operating without enough knowledge of his subject, Parrington’s emphasis on Frederic’s negativity is simply one node in an interpretive system that seems to have no other choice but to recognize work the activities of negation and cynicism. That the systematicity of the system, the seeming necessity for pessimism, negativity, and cynicism to provide the background to a striking number of his critics, has gone unremarked by any of the critics themselves indicates the presence of a more pervasive problem extending beyond the rather small body of critical and scholarly work on Frederic.

Rather than viewing the persistence of cynicism as an interpretive curiosity in work surrounding a marginal author, I would highlight the structural similarities between this mode of cynicism and what Paul Ricouer has identified as the “school of suspicion” represented by Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud and identifiable by techniques of demystification (32). Eve Sedgwick, taking note of Sloterdijk’s analysis of cynicism, has noted the significant homology between it, paranoia, and the hermeneutics of suspicion. Though she calls cynicism “paranoid in structure,” she relegates it to a different position: “cynicism is what paranoia looks like when it functions as a weak theory rather than a strong theory” (143). According to Silvan Tomkins, a strong theory is “capable of accounting for a wide spectrum of phenomena which appear to be very remote, one from the other, and from a common source” (quoted in Sedgwick 134). The more distinct and distant the phenomena it can order, the stronger the theory is. The strength of

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21 Though it is well worth noting that many of Frederic’s letters communicate, either directly or by implication, a belief that the political process could affect positive change in the world. In a letter to Grover Cleveland, for instance, Frederic tells the newly-minted president-elect that the prospect of a Cleveland presidency has stirred up in him, “the pride of country, of race, yes, of state,” and that it now appears “as in a burst of sunlight” that “there is a public conscience—that all the greed and scoundrelism and prejudice and folly of our political, race and business sides … were not able to stand before the simple weight of an honest man and an upright cause” (Fortenberry 37). He opposes this newfound optimism, though, to the decaying potential and “modern tendencies” that had taken hold in the U.S. prior to the election of 1884.
the strong theory is its ability to order and accommodate any phenomenon—a paranoiac can use anything as evidence of conspiracy. Its weakness, according to Tomkins, is that it easily falls into tautology, locating convenient evidence that affirms the paranoid fantasy and ignoring all else: “above all there is a highly organized way of interpreting information so that what is possibly relevant can be quickly abstracted and magnified, and the rest discarded” (quoted in Sedgwick 135).

Sedgwick’s brilliant, moving essay on paranoid reading urges critics to abandon strong theory precisely for that weakness, finding that an overcommitment to the hermeneutics of suspicion has left the supposedly historically-attuned work of the New Historicists trapped within obsolete paradigms of social control and blind to contemporary problems of social justice. Moreover it construes paranoia as a transhistorical epistemological structure, one that transcends the very historical formations on which New Historicism bases its claims. Instead she champions “weak theories” that, while unable to provide totalizing interpretations, have the benefit of providing accounts of phenomena more attuned to their situational particularity than ceaseless demystification.

In identifying cynicism as “what paranoia looks like when it functions as a weak theory,” then, Sedgwick implicitly gestures to the historically specific features that define it. The theory is weak insofar as it requires a broader network of supplemental and subsidiary concepts in order to bring it to light as a conditioning factor. One of the qualities of its weakness is the fuzzy zones of nondistinction that constitute its borders—cynicism overlaps with and fades into any other number of other affective and epistemological states: doubt, skepticism, negativity, revulsion, and so on. The fact that cynicism affects the everyday interactions of so many people distinguishes it from anything so systematic as a methodology. Rather than a fully determining
epistemological structure or a fully determined textual phenomenon, cynicism in *The Damnation of Theron Ware* turns out to be mutually produced and productive, both a discovery of interpretive procedure and one of the many active positions taken by interpreters. The preceding discussions of social totality, manners, and narrative form have attempted to provide a contingent framework for understanding the function of cynicism within the discourse surrounding *Theron Ware*.

And yet it seems important to note that, in speaking of “the modern novel,” we are in large measure speaking of a theoretical concept rather than a specific group of texts. In finding symmetry between modern cynicism and what I’ve so far called “the modern novel,” then, I’m attempting to make visible an epistemological *a priori* of a certain strand of the novel, but one that in no way defines anything like the totality of the narrative techniques available to it. Accordingly, surveying some dominant theories of literary history, John Brenkman notes skeptically, “The reigning view of the novel tells … a tidy little story: in the beginning was realism (naive nineteenth-century representations of vulgar social reality); in the middle was modernism; in the end, postmodernism.” Accordingly, “innovation” in the novel becomes synonymous with increasingly “antirealist” forms of representation, a notion that Brenkman rejects, claiming instead that “realism and innovation are a double imperative in the contemporary novel” (810).

I would take Brenkman’s claim further: not only does the antirealist analysis mischaracterize the shape of contemporary novelistic innovation as divested of the realist

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22 For example, as Franco Moretti has shown in *Graphs Maps Trees*, depending on its national and political context, free indirect style came to reflect “the ‘truths’ of the neo-classical narrator, the *doxa* of public opinion, the force of abstract ideas, the voice of small communities, of social classes, of collective oral myths” before being put to use by modernists like James, Mann, Proust, Woolf, and Joyce (88). In Moretti’s reading, rather than a hypostasized, tell-tale feature of literary modernity, free indirect style indexes the “cluster of possibilities (and constraints) within which [it] accomplished its various tasks” (92).
impulse, it does so by constructing a realist straw man. The realist novel as an account of “naive … vulgar social reality”—that is social reality merely “as it appears to the eye”—is superseded in the modernist novel by an account of the subject’s alienation from a fully administered society. But reading through the works of Frederic, Crane, Grant, Frank Norris, and even, in his “Altrurian Romances,” William Dean Howells himself, descriptions of alienated consciousness seem integral to those texts that fit within the period of realism’s dominance in the U.S. Ware’s alienation is so thorough that it penetrates through all strata of Octavius’s society, into his own marriage, into his own self-conception. If Ware’s intellectual ambitions (or pretenses) precipitate his fall, Frederic’s novel seems to invite us to generalize Ware’s social trajectory and view it as symptomatic of the increasing unfitness of certain American “types” for the onset of modernity. In fact, the texture of “vulgar social reality” is precisely what is at issue in novels like The Damnation of Theron Ware. The late nineteenth-century American novel (or rather, some late nineteenth-century American novels, those which do not fit neatly into literary historical accounts of antirealist innovation) attests to the degree to which human ambition found itself unluckily coupled to forms of consciousness unsuited to the intellectual, technological, spatial, and economic transformations in which they were embedded. Rather than a social totality fully apprehensible to human consciousness, we see the hopeless resistance of an ill-equipped protagonist to irreversible social fragmentation. It becomes hard to imagine how the steady march from “realism” to “antirealism” begins on such shaky ground.

The similarity between the form of “the modern novel” and the epistemology of

23 Suggesting that The Damnation of Theron Ware deserves a more prominent place in the literature of its period, Amy Hungerford writes, “One way to integrate Theron Ware is to see in it a reflection of the secularizing forces at work in American culture after the Civil War” (733). Further, she notes that Ware’s transition from preacher to politician at the novel’s end “reveals not the persistence of religion but its original bankruptcy.” Interesting as well that Hungerford attributes our ability to recognize Ware’s decision to enter politics as a marker of his failure to the “distance” that Frederic places between the reader and the character, “despite the narrative voice’s identification with [Ware]” (734).
cynicism, then, should help reorient literary historical analysis of the American novel. Assumptions regarding the aesthetic naïveté of the late nineteenth-century American novel need, at the very least, to be revised. The problem is encapsulated by Eve Sedgwick’s remark about paranoia: “paranoia tends to be contagious; more specifically, paranoia is drawn toward and tends to construct symmetrical relations, in particular, symmetrical epistemologies” (126). Cynicism, too, exhibits this drive toward symmetry, as the identification of cynicism seems to require the deployment of cynicism. Sedgwick’s comment can help us understand not just the role that cynicism plays at a thematic level, as a narrative device that distances the novel’s voice from the epistemological dilemmas that ensnare its characters, but also as an objectification of those same epistemological dilemmas. Within this view, the late nineteenth century American novel starts to look more invested in immanent critique (another critical practice given to performing symmetrical relations), or what V. L. Parrington called “critical realism,” than it is in uncritically reproducing “vulgar social reality.”

Just as the assumption of a cynical epistemology seemingly always locates cynicism at work in the object of its attention, assumptions regarding the trajectory of literary history, from “realism” to “postmodernism,” have resulted in critics finding in the American novel what they themselves had hidden. Within this trajectory, the identification of impersonality with literary modernity carries with it a special irony: the transparency of language presumed by impersonality becomes an alibi that orients definitions of literary modernity away from the forms of uncertainty that constitute modern experience for novels like Theron Ware. That is to say, while the vagaries of human consciousness exhibit instabilities provoked by the changing texture of social being, the impersonal stance offers an epistemologically stable location from which the story of modernity’s social, religious, philosophical, political, and economic antinomies can be
observed. Henry James, in “The Art of Fiction” and in the prefaces to the New York Edition, would demonstrate his allegiance to Flaubertian impersonality by identifying a focalized “central intelligence” (rather than a narrating voice that would levy judgment on the text’s characters and events) with literary sophistication itself. Subsequent analyses of the modern, and modernist, novel would view impersonality as the narrative gift left to the literature of the twentieth century by the nineteenth. I’ve tried to suggest that this seemingly “formal” quality of literary modernity actually requires certain critical assumptions in order to become legible, that the difference between a text that is simply “unsettled,” as Theron Ware is seen to be, and one that is “modern,” like the novels of Flaubert and the later James, is established as much by a critic’s willingness to see formal innovation as it is by formal innovation itself. To paraphrase James: really, symmetrical relations stop nowhere, and this unyielding drive is both their strength and their danger. But the ways in which the symmetries of critical judgment and literary technique fall into line risk over-domesticating the cynical epistemologies and alienated imagination at work in American fiction at the end of the nineteenth century. If cynicism, by its nature, offers no way to “envision a redemptive future,” it might at least help us reimagine the American novel’s past.
Chapter Four

“The Knowledge of Correct Standards”: Charles Chesnutt, *Miscegenation*, and Realism’s Writing Systems

*O imitators, you slavish herd, how often your noise
Has stirred my anger, how often stirred my laughter!*
-Horace, *Epistle XIX*

Speaking before a meeting of the Ohio Stenographer’s Association on August 28, 1889, Charles W. Chesnutt declared, “The invention of phonography deserves to rank, and does rank, in the minds of those who know its uses, with the great inventions of the nineteenth century; along with the steam engine, the telegraph, the sewing machine, the telephone” (*Essays* 74). Phonography, the name Isaac Pitman gave to his popular system of shorthand notation, had been an obsession for Chesnutt going back about a decade. In the midst of teaching himself the system, Chesnutt wrote in his journal on June 28, 1880, “I must write a lecture on phonography—the principles of the art; its uses, and the method of learning it,” and so his speech marked the culmination of his desire to entwine the practice of shorthand with his other obsession, that of becoming a writer (*Journals* 143). Two years before delivering his speech, the *Atlantic Monthly* published his short story “The Goophered Grapevine,” the first piece of fiction written by a Black man they had ever printed, and now Chesnutt stood before a professional organization of stenographers and declared himself on the cutting edge of the nineteenth century’s technological development. Good day for Chesnutt.

“The Goophered Grapevine” itself, a story written largely in dialect, almost seems designed to look like one of Chesnutt’s stenographic transcriptions—it displays what Lisa
Gitelman has described as “the underlying matter of representing orality” in even those domains of literary culture without direct knowledge of shorthand writing (52). The story begins, as do all of the tales later collected in Chesnutt’s debut *The Conjure Woman* (1899), in the first person. The White Northerner John describes his and his wife Annie’s decision to move from northern Ohio to North Carolina, both for Annie’s health and in order for John to purchase a vineyard. The two encounter Julius McAdoo, a former slave, who warns them away from the vineyard, telling them that years ago some of the scuppernong vines were “goophered” (cursed or hexed by a conjure woman), and that anyone who eats or drinks of them would die within a year. While now many other non-goophered vines have grown alongside the goophered one, only Julius knows which one will kill and which won’t. Julius’s elaborate story, written entirely in dialect (“Dey ain’t nuffin dat kin stan’ up side’n de scuppernon’ fer sweetness”), is designed, John figures, to scare him off, as Julius has been making money by illicitly selling the grapes to the Black community in the area (*Stories* 9). Not put off by Julius’s attempt to manipulate his belief in the superstitions of southern Blacks, John buys the vineyard and hires Julius as a driver.

“The Goophered Grapevine” suggests, both in the linguistic codes and the plot elements it deploys, that misdirection, subterfuge, and epistemic legerdemain subtend the aura of simplistic straight-talk implied by the use of dialect. As Gitelman writes of dialect fiction, “[O]rality signaled identity and otherness, both the raw and regional otherness of unlettered or unrefined speakers, but also the otherness that separated individuals, nations, races, classes, and cultures severally from one another and the ‘sociological tension’ that held them together” (52). A writing-effect that both alienates readers (because it is difficult to read) and implies an organic naturalness, Chesnutt’s deployment of dialect construes the
bumpkin yarns of Julius as a ploy that covers over instrumental motivations with the veil of feigned racial ignorance. The “transcribed” feel of dialect writing, the sense that it was drawn from a present and actually-experienced scene of speaking, rearticulates the orthographic imperatives of stenographic writing as a politically charged aesthetic strategy.

It almost goes without saying that, at the time, this strategy went largely unrecognized. In a review for the *Cincinnati Commercial Tribune* published in May 1899, Nathaniel Stephenson wrote that *The Conjure Woman* was written with “utmost simplicity, and would seem to contain a literal transcription of the talk of some actual ‘Uncle Julius’. It has the merit of what appears to be an absolute fidelity to nature, and, as a consequence, lacks that quality which converts bare fact into literature” (McElrath, Critical Essays 37). A year later, in a review of Chesnutt’s next collection, *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color-Line* (1899), an exasperated Stephenson wrote “It seems almost as if we might as well give up, one time as well as another, the effort to make certain people understand that fiction is not ‘just telling things.’ So many well-intentioned people persist in making themselves ridiculous by their futile attempts to make fact into fiction” (55). What seems most interesting, of course, is that Chesnutt’s dialect stories were *not* transcribed, and that the stories in *The Wife of His Youth* weren’t factual. Yet the suggestion that, through the manipulation of orthographic convention or a narrative verisimilitude inspired by Chesnutt’s own experiences with the color line, fiction might hew too close to transcription automatically ejects the work from the aesthetic realm and into that of reportage, from art to “just telling things.”

This chapter takes as its point of departure the idea that Chesnutt’s two coinciding writerly practices—stenography and fiction—are more than merely coincidental. The
connection of writing to stenography and stenography to writing, far from being limited to the singular professional development of Charles W. Chesnutt (the first major Black American novelist), reflects some of the shared anxieties and contradictions of the racial and literary imaginations of the nineteenth century. Stenography, as a form of writing that claims to record and preserve the inflections of human speech, and literary realism, a form of writing that claims to register the vicissitudes of human experience, both participate in a form of mimesis that was, by the end of the nineteenth century, the primary site of critical discord surrounding American fiction.

But that discord was not only literary. Rather, debates about the role of mimesis in literary production, while they found their mute, Harpo-like brother in the technology of stenography, also shaded into debates about the nature of imitativeness, and more specifically whether or not imitativeness was an epistemic quality rooted in race. For race scientists, anti-abolitionists, and, later, for post-Reconstruction critics of Black education, the idea that the imitative nature of “Africans” posed an insurmountable obstacle to any real education, the idea that a Black person who appeared to have acquired knowledge through education was, in truth, only “imitating” what they had heard, proposed that while Blacks could use knowledge, only Whites could truly possess it.

As we saw in chapter two, the difference between possessing a quality of mind and performing it is in no way restricted to the racial domain. The question of whether or not the Dryfooses own their taste and the question of whether or not the beggar truly belongs to his own class have their origin in the same epistemic crisis in the commonality of public knowledge and a form of experience that exacerbates rather than moderates the effects of epistemic difference. This chapter seeks to demonstrate the inverse of chapter two: rather
than finding that aesthetics supplements the epistemic field where socioeconomic disparity prevents knowledge from being held in common, Chesnutt’s writing exposes the degree to which conceptions of race held in common between Black social critics (like Chesnutt) and anti-Black writers and social theorists actually aided the latter in redefining Black epistemology as imitative and incapable of spontaneous creation; Chesnutt and the theorists he found so odious understood each other all too well. Arguing against critics like Aaron Ritzenberg, who find that, in Chesnutt’s writing, “Passing between black and white is not only a spatial movement, but a movement between two cultures that have entirely different ways of thinking about time and history,” this chapter examines the effects of a conception of race that is perhaps too common (51).

Chesnutt’s work as a teacher of young southern Blacks, a writer who thematized and inveighed against the pretzel logic of post-Reconstruction American race law, and a stenographer who conceptualized the “art” of phonography as an epochal technological development suggests that his writing is uniquely situated at the crossroads of the technological, literary, and racial discourses of mimesis, realism, and imitation. Those three terms, proximate in their definitions but acquiring crucially different connotations as they passed through the nineteenth century’s discursive crucible, provide the organizational framework for what follows. If the distinctions between mimesis, realism, and imitation seem at first too fine to merit consideration, I would like to suggest that their very ability to substitute for each other occasioned not exactly definitional confusion between them, but the terms of access through which the logic of racial politics could come to resemble those of literary politics, through which the Howellsian trope of “fidelity” could also become a prized form of technological functionality, and through which Jim Crow became not only a
legal regime but a mode of thinking that haunted the postbellum nineteenth century’s imagination, one that persists to this day.

Accordingly, this chapter is not so much a distant meditation on the epistemic and discursive ping-ponging between these three forms of semblance circulating through Chesnutt’s writing, but a kind of immanent critique that, to some extent, utilizes the very logic it wishes to consider objectively, to whatever extent that is possible. This approach may expose what follows to the accusation that the argument simply reifies the very epistemology it wishes to analyze. I would cede the point. But I think the reasons for that reification rest in the fact that, while we have clearly made much progress toward uprooting the kinds of institutional racism that thrived during Jim Crow, the categories through which we think race in America have changed little, if at all, since the nineteenth century. While the kinds of things people say publicly about racial difference have, it seems to me, become less frequently, less overtly, less jaw-droppingly racist, the very notion of “racial difference” remains firmly in place. The liberal’s cringe at a too-tellingly worded statement about race reflects not embarrassment over retrograde racial attitudes but an uncomfortable recognition of commonly-held racial categories; the cringe itself is cringe-inducing. While there are surely shortcomings in this chapter that have to do with my own inelegant phrasing or perhaps even my own substantive ignorance, the use of terms like “Black” and “White” is not one of them, as the very thought of “race” in the American context carries with it the necessity to employ the very forms of categorization that are the epistemic grounding (though not the only grounding) of “race problems” to begin with. Accordingly, the reader should mentally insert scare quotes around terms like “Black,” “White,” “miscegenation,” and “race” in places where I have deemed it too clunky or distracting to do so. Further,
rather than terms like “African-American” or “Caucasian,” I prefer “Black” and “White,” words whose very descriptive inaccuracy points up the constructed and incoherent nature of racial definition. As we will see, it is precisely Chesnutt’s ever-present awareness of this very problem that makes him not only extraordinarily interesting but also in some sense representative of the late nineteenth century’s racial imagination.

Of course, I am hardly the first to point out the centrality of the idea of “imitation” to the nineteenth-century, especially as it pertains to race. Both Eric Sundquist and Kirt Wilson have commented extensively on the cultural work performed by imitation as both a trope and an epistemological concept that encapsulated one of the central antinomies of race thinking in the U.S. Miles Orvell’s notion of the nineteenth century’s “culture of imitation” that was “fascinated by reproductions of all sorts—replicas of furniture, architecture, art works, replicas of the real thing in any shape or form imaginable” has salience here as well (xv). For Orvell, the 1890s marks both the highpoint of American realism and the transition away from a “culture of imitation” and toward a “culture of authenticity,” in which the mechanically reproduced object was shunned in favor of objects and modes of cultural production that bore the mark of the hand. In a sense, then, Chesnutt’s work as a writer concerned with the way in which “miscegenation” served as a site of social reproduction, with an early fascination with “realism” as tool to combat racial stereotyping, and as a stenographer practicing a technologically-mediated craft positions Chesnutt perfectly on the cusp of these two cultures.

Yet rather than accepting Orvell’s cultures of imitation and authenticity, I’m inclined to say that such a distinction obscures the extent to which imitation and authenticity risked appearing as one another, especially insofar as skin color functioned as a trompe
l’œil that could either serve as evidence of a substantive and essential race or reveal that racial difference was superficial, only a matter of skin color. It is telling that Orvell’s *The Real Thing* virtually ignores the role of race in the era’s cultural production, save perhaps for his consideration of Francis Galton’s composite photographs (92). What Chesnutt’s writings demonstrate is that categories like “mulatto” and practices like “passing” do not so much violate the essence of race as expose the degree to which what appears to be the “identification” of race is just as easily describable as an “assignation” of race, and so the ways in which the very categories of imitation and authenticity become inextricably bound up with performative and indexical functions of language that are part and parcel of the nineteenth century’s modes of production. Orvell does capture admirably, though, the way in which technological discourses served as articulations of the shifting ontological priorities of a culture. The centrality of photography in Orvell’s account of late nineteenth century cultural production makes clear that the debates that raged about whether or not photography constituted an art or a mere transcription of reality are local instances of a more general controversy over which phenomena legitimately fall within the aesthetic frame and which are an instance of simple reproduction.

In what follows I will argue that the tension between aesthetic production and “just telling things” serves as a way to bridge the conceptual divides between realism, mimesis, and imitation. Chesnutt’s exploitation of the two-pronged epistemic problem of race (How do I know what race you are? and How does knowledge work for other races?) dovetails with the problem of mimesis encapsulated by the distinction between stenography and realism (If something is too mimetic, can it be art?). Rather than addressing these issues, as has been done traditionally, through readings of the dialect stories, this chapter focuses
primarily on *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), Chesnutt’s first published novel. *The House Behind the Cedars* has been much maligned by recent critics. Even Sundquist, Chesnutt’s most compelling critic-champion, finds that the novel “capitulates to conventions of racialized, gothic sexuality” and “fails to forecast a new generation of future Americans” (399). In an effort to recuperate the novel, I will argue that that very failure aligns *The House Behind the Cedars* with the kind of critical antinomies at work in Chesnutt’s essays. Moreover, through an account of the “miscegenation” issue in the 1864 presidential election, I will demonstrate that the place of “race mixing” within those critical antinomies has its origin in political discourse. Like the one goophered grapevine hidden inconspicuously among the others, the liberal discourse of “race mixing” conceals a more fundamental rift between Chesnutt’s stated political goals and the way those goals are conceptualized. Finally, this chapter will consider the ways in which Chesnutt’s stenography came to supplement the realist impulses that animated his work, and will suggest that media history and theory can provide a way to contextualize the disparate visions of realism as aesthetic practice and realism as “just writing things down.”

I.

Of the many ways in which race functions as an epistemological problem, the phenomenon of “passing,” a practice in which a member of one race (usually Black) assumes the guise of someone of another race (usually White), may be the most well-known. And in some way it is accurate to characterize *The House Behind the Cedars* as a text that is “about” passing.¹ While Rena Walden, the novel’s protagonist, is in many ways just one more iteration of the

¹ Though, as Sollors warns, the terms “‘black’ and ‘white’ could serve as such forceful agents that they have had the power to eclipse, or racialize, what they referred to,” and so the claim that a text is “about” race often (if not always) overlays texts that *happen* to involve race with the assumption that their *primary aim* is to engage discourses of race (17).
shopworn “Tragic Mulatto” figure, Chesnutt’s treatment of her character’s origin and subsequent social transformation functions as an argument against the idea of inborn epistemic limitations.

The novel introduces Rena in purely visual terms, through the eyes of her brother John, who has returned home to Patesville for a visit after years away. He does not immediately recognize her, but notes that she is “strikingly handsome,” with an “admirably proportioned figure,” and the “angles of childhood rounding into the promising curves of adolescence.” Significantly, she at first appears White, as her hair is a “dark and glossy brown” and “neatly plaited and coiled above an ivory column” (Stories 273). As we learn much later in the novel, John and Rena’s father was a rich white man who eased their mother Molly’s financial burdens, but died and left the family with the “stain” of illegitimacy. John soon realizes who Rena is, and, after reuniting with her and Molly, convinces Rena to move to Clarence, South Carolina with him to help take care of his child (he is a widower) and get away from Patesville. Even though the town has changed (there are “a number of Jewish names” on the signs), John tells Molly that Rena will never be able to escape the stain of her illegitimate, mixed background, which “nothing but death” will remove (Stories 284).

In Clarence, Rena Walden can pass for white, just as her brother John does, and she changes her name to Rowena Warwick. While outwardly she acquires the accouterments of Southern Society, and spends time at a finishing school, even those “months at school” cannot “eradicat[e] a certain self-consciousness born of her secret.” Patesville does not lose “the distinctness of outline” despite its temporal and physical distance, and, between her past and her present, “the present was more a dream, the past was the more vivid reality” (Stories 307). While at school, Rena is able to build “upon a foundation of innate taste and intelligence” and acquire “the self-possession which comes from a knowledge of correct standards,” all of which is aided by her “necessary reticence about the past” (Stories 308). For Rena, then, the past emerges both as more present than the present and as a source of a feminine “reticence” that aids her in acquiring the manners that will help her ascend through Clarence society. Here the past functions...
doubly as a shameful origin—because Rowena must conceal the truth of her lineage, lest she be “outed” as Black—and as a perpetually active conditioning factor in the acquisition of manners. The “knowledge of correct standards” (like knowing when not to speak) and the “self-consciousness” of her past (meaning the “fact” that she is Black) conspire to produce the appearance of a perfectly mannered Southern lady.

Manners, then, are neither an organic part of Rena’s past, nor are they sets of behaviors that are totally learned. When George Tryon, after winning a tournament during a town fair modeled after Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe*, grants Rena the honor of being named “The Queen of Love and Beauty,” it is because he feels “instinctively” that she “ought to be the queen” (*Stories* 305). At the ball following the tournament, she impresses the people of Clarence with her “easy grace” despite her anxiety over her performance (*Stories* 308). The combination of an outwardly apparent and natural-seeming “grace” comes coupled with nervousness about the origins of that grace. Considering his decision to bring Rena to Clarence, John thinks “that if she had been homely or stupid, he would never have disturbed her in the stagnant life of the house behind the cedars”—her physical beauty satisfies his “Greek sense of proportion,” though Rena is unable to see the “undeveloped elements of discord between [herself] and her former life” (*Stories* 311).

The knowledge the people of Clarence possess about Rena, then, amounts to the fact that she is a graceful and beautiful White woman, while her ability to portray herself as a graceful and beautiful White woman depends paradoxically on her own “reticence” about her family’s race. The secret of race then functions as a constitutive element of the learned Southern manners her reputation rests on. Throughout the novel, Chesnutt draws not oppositions but equivalences between a phenomenally apparent but essentially *learned* Whiteness and a secret or hidden

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2 “Rowena” is the name of a character in Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe* (1820), another story about concealed identities.

3 As Carla Peterson has shown, the invocation of *Ivanhoe* hints that Chesnutt is just one of many Black writers of the period interested in appropriating the genre of historical romance in order to subvert it. Black historical romances, in Peterson’s understanding, “present southern aristocracy as mostly a backward and reactionary people, while the North represents forces of progress, and the New Negro embodies progressive potential” (39).
“mixed” past. Chesnutt’s point, in “What is a White Man?,” that increasing uncertainty about miscegenation prompts an increasing desperation on the part of Whites to legislate racial definition finds its fictional corollary here; Rena’s phenomenally apparent Whiteness is produced, in a sense, by her Blackness. Only through Clarence’s misrecognition of her reticence as the result of her possession of manners, rather than her possession of manners plus some genuine anxiety about her own discovery, can they come to understand her as a White Southern Lady. The visibility of Rena’s “Whiteness,” then, signals both the degree to which race registers as a form of social behavior, activity, and mannerism as much as it does through skin color and, to reverse the formulation, the degree to which skin color provides an explanation of social behaviors, activities, and mannerisms. The racial gestalt of Clarence makes sense of skin color by way of epistemology and constructs epistemology to match the presumption that Whiteness signifies in a phenomenally apparent way.

But while manners serve as a deceptively phenomenal form of social knowledge that signals Rena’s belonging to the White community in Clarence, her suppressed race forges a different kind of bond. John recognizes that, despite the security of his social position, the discovery of his past would ruin him:

Because of this knowledge, which the world around him did not possess, he had felt now and then a certain sense of loneliness, and there was a measure of relief in having about him one who knew his past, and yet whose knowledge, because of their common interest, would not interfere with his present or jeopardize his future (Stories 312).

It is not so much the familial bond that, in John’s mind, links him to Rena. Rather the fact of the knowledge of their origins and their shared interest in keeping that knowledge secret form the basis of their association. John’s interpretation of his relationship with Rena, then, assumes the form of a kind of epistemological contract. Besides the transactional nature of his appeal to her (he gains someone to care for his child, Rena gains culture and status), the actual substance of their bond seems, from John’s perspective, to consist of the secretive nature of the knowledge of
their race. He feels close to her not because he is her brother, but because they both possess knowledge that, if revealed, would ruin them equally.

At least for John and Rena, this kind of complicity is repressed even from the surface of the text. Chesnutt insistently refers to their secret but refuses to name it as the truth of their race or the truth of their lineage. There is a way in which their illegitimacy could be decoupled, or at least distanced from, the rhetoric of race: their mother was their father’s mistress, not his wife. Despite the fact that it is undoubtedly racial difference that enables the illicit relation in the first place, one could imagine that, in genteel Clarence society, “good birth” would refer to legitimacy and social station as much as it would race. We might ask, then, about the nature of the “knowledge” that cements John and Rena’s “common interest.” Is it the knowledge that they are, under the laws of Patesville, both Black? Or is it that they are illegitimate and hence socially undesirable? Events in the novel suggest the former carries far more weight than the latter, but the text’s refusal to articulate a significant difference between the shame of lineage (as something located in the past) and the shame of race (as something located in the body, and hence in the present), and the entanglement of these terms within an amorphous and shared “knowledge” suggests that Rena’s “necessary reticence about the past” encodes an essential ambivalence about whether race is temporally distant or temporally present, embodied or disembodied.

As a consequence, the novel itself remains as reticent as Rena regarding positive definitions of race, preferring to leave these ambiguities and tensions unresolved. Tryon’s accidental “discovery” of Rena’s lineage demonstrates the way in which, for Chesnutt, race functions most powerfully as an epistemological a priori than as an empirically extant phenomenon: “The full realization of the truth which followed speedily, had for the moment reversed his mental attitude toward her, and love and yearning had given place to anger and disgust” (Stories 361). The shift from affection to antipathy is immediate, and rather than remaining merely angry, the knowledge of Rena’s race inspires an entire reinterpretation of her
epistemology. Deciding momentarily to try to reconcile with Rena anyway, he sees her dancing at a ball in Patesville. She appears to be enjoying herself, though in fact she is dancing to the song because it makes her remember Tryon, and attempting, again, to make the past more present than the present. Tryon reflects:

   Her few months of boarding-school, her brief association with white people, had evidently been a mere veneer over the underlying negro, and their effects had slipped away as soon as the intercourse had ceased. With the monkey-like imitativeness of the negro she had copied the manners of white people while she lived among them, and had dropped them with equal facility when they ceased to serve a purpose (Stories 416).

Again epistemic difference is conflated with a confusion between past and present—Rena is reliving her romance with Tryon while Tryon sees only a moment of inappropriate glee. Here Tryon’s wounded feelings manifest with an unmistakably racist valence. While Rena’s manners had seemed integral to her character and bearing, they were in fact only “imitations” of manners—they are performed but not possessed. Manners, the passage implies, are more or less coextensive with race—if manners are really “possessed” rather than merely “copied,” Rena shouldn’t be able to drop them, as Tryon thinks she has. In that way Tryon construes manners as somehow both learned and natural. Had Rena been “truly” White, we’re left to suppose, the manners she learned at boarding school would have stuck.

   Manners, then, rather than indexing processes of acculturation that are, by definition, unnatural, turn out to be yet another indicator of an internal and natural race—they obscure Rena’s Blackness by mimicking Whiteness. Much as, for the Marches in A Hazard of New Fortunes, the Dryfooses’ display of tasteful objects signals an inability to possess taste itself, Tryon interprets Rena’s performance of manners to signal that she cannot possess them. In both A Hazard of New Fortunes and The House Behind the Cedars, the dynamics of ownership and possession—whether the possession of manners and taste, or the ownership of apartments and art—provide a hermeneutic lens that anamorphically distorts the minds and motives of other people by bending and stretching them to fit within regions of knowability defined, in one way
or another, by the logic of property and property rights. In that sense, Chesnutt’s novel engages not only in, as we will see, a frustrated desire for realist legitimacy but also in a thematic internalization of the tropes of taste and possession that determine the epistemic limits of the realist novel—rather than apartments and interior decoration, the discourse of possession, performance, and imitation takes place in the ontological register. While these are primarily aesthetic and socioeconomic problems for Howells, for Chesnutt, as for millions of blacks living under Jim Crow, they become matters of life and death.

Accordingly, the attribution of Rena’s manners to Black “imitativeness” rather than White gentility deploys a trope of “imitativeness” that, as Kirt Wilson has shown, permeates the racial discourse of the nineteenth century, especially debates about Black education. On the one hand, activists and writers like Frederick Douglass stressed the importance of copying by hand texts like *The Columbian Orator* in order to acquire the basic skills and knowledge denied them by slaveholders; extraordinarily accomplished Black intellectuals employed “mimesis to obtain literacy, assimilate social norms, and pursue personal ambitions,” and recommended that others do the same, just as their White counterparts did (Wilson 91, 93). On the other hand, though, “imitation” became a central term in the formulation of race hierarchies, a term that proposed hard and fast limitations to how much good formal education could do for Blacks.

There ought to be nothing controversial in the idea that education and knowledge acquisition requires a good deal of imitation. According to Wilson, though, around the middle of the century, anti-Black scientists, writers, and thinkers like Louis Agassiz began to frame imitation as an inborn, racial limiting condition rather than an enabling one. Agassiz attributed the “submissive, obsequious, [and] imitative” nature of Blacks to their environment, arguing that their lack of spontaneous or generative intellectual capacity was evidence of their distinctness from Anglo-Saxons (Wilson 95). In an intellectual atmosphere that was, for the most part,

4 Agassiz was an influential and vocal polygenist, who believed that the races were created by God in different places at different times, and so possessed permanent and inborn traits that were suited to those environments. Imitativeness was one of these traits. See Gould, Menand, and Stanton.
extremely hospitable to “empirical” evidence that supported the subordination of Blacks, Agassiz’s writings on race, including his adoption of the idea that Blacks are “imitative” by nature, gained currency.⁵

And while, by the turn of the century, the science underlying Agassiz’s reasoning had been thoroughly dismantled by the rise of Darwinian evolution, the idea of Black imitativeness remained installed in debates about education. Joseph Le Conte, in his influential The Race Problem in the South (1892), argued that it was precisely the ability to acquire knowledge through imitation that limited the good that knowledge might do. While apparently accepting some form of evolutionary theory, Le Conte wrote that “The Negro has many fine and hopeful qualities. He is plastic, docile, impressionable, sympathetic, and imitative.” Because of this, slavery was the perfect environment for Blacks, as they are “in a high degree improvable by contact with a superior race and under suitable conditions” (362). But, as Le Conte lamented, slavery was no longer an option, and so rather than relying on the ennobling influence of the plantation system, the burden of education was left to systems of formal schooling. This was a problem for Le Conte, as even an educated Black populace could not be trusted with the vote: “Mere book education … though easily acquired by the Negro on account of his quick apprehensiveness, has little effect on character, and is but small guarantee for self-governing capacity” (377). “Apprehensiveness,” the ability to understand or perceive, could have no effect on the character, so that while Blacks may acquire knowledge, their native incapacities will not allow them to exercise it effectively. The discourse of imitation, then, not only provides thinkers like Le Conte with the a priori they need to argue against the extension of education to Blacks—it also provides an analytic lens through which to interpret and explain away any form of

⁵ Claiming that blacks were essentially “imitative” was not necessarily evidence that you were a virulent racist, though. Even well-meaning reformers deployed the term. For example, in his essay “Slavery,” the anti-slavery Unitarian preacher William Ellery Channing concedes that “God is no respecter of persons; and in some slaves there is a happy nature,” which is amplified by the “affectionate, imitative, and docile” nature of the “African,” and that “in favorable circumstances he catches much that is good” (721). In that sense we see the same political tensions at work in “imitation” that we do in “miscegenation”—both reflected the collision of historical-linguistic contingency and attitudinal ambivalence toward race at work in the nineteenth century liberal imagination.
substantive knowledge Blacks might appear to possess. The “fact” of imitation provides an alibi that dominates any act of epistemological speculation, and so provides a rationale for denying formal education to Blacks while also denying that any Black person is meaningfully educated.

Everyone seemed to have their own particular way to characterize the problem of race, imitation, and education. In an article published in 1900 in the *North American Review*, John Roach Straton found that imitation had everything to do with what he saw as the worsening moral condition of Southern Blacks after the introduction of formal education. Citing figures that saw an uptick in crime and “sexual immorality” among Blacks, Straton speculated “either that the negro has received the wrong sort of education, or that there are causes which prevent the beneficial effects which usually arise from education from prevailing in this case” (791). For Straton, the latter is to blame more than the former because “There is historical justification for the statement that a weak race, which is unassimilable in its nature, when brought suddenly into contact with the higher civilization of a strong race, unconsciously destroys itself” (794). This process of destruction, tellingly, takes place through “the wasting effects of a struggle, involving a complete change of habit, to take on, through imitation, a civilization for which [the weak race] was not prepared” (795). Straton goes on to list a number of examples in which so-called “weak races” (Turanians, West Indians, Maories, and Native Americans, among others), through the imitation of morals and practices to which they are unsuited, die out or falter. “Do not,” Straton asks, “these facts finally demonstrate that the weaker races imitate most what is bad and profit little by what is good in the higher civilization […]?” (797). Though Straton calls Blacks “simple-minded, impressionable, and imitative,” it is not only that the imitative nature of Blacks in particular limits the extent to which education will have a morally uplifting effect; the impulse to imitate a higher civilization will eventually lead (or was in the process of leading) any “weaker race” to overreach and destroy itself through setting unrealistically “civilized” standards of behavior for itself (801). The reader is left to infer that an essentially “imitative” people in a
cultural arrangement that actually encourages the dangerous imitation of unsuitably civilized morals and norms is in a tough spot indeed.6

Manners, education, culture: Blacks can imitate these things, but only Whites can have them. Debates about imitation thus came to transmute the antebellum prohibition on the right of slaves to own property into an epistemological argument about Blacks’ ability to own knowledge and culture. And while the withholding of property rights from slaves served as one of the limiting conditions that prevented them from achieving personhood, so epistemological arguments about imitation severely constricted the degree to which Blacks were able to argue effectively for the legitimacy of their citizenship under Jim Crow. A Black person with manners and learning is always in some sense representing or reflecting the manners and learning of a primary White source, cribbing an embodied White style. Chesnutt’s own deployment of the rhetoric of imitation is, of course, heavily ironized. After returning from his trip to Patesville, Tryon begins spending time with the ardent Blanche Leary. While initially less than enthusiastic about her, Tryon is pleased to discover “in her mind depths that he had never suspected. She displayed a singular affinity for the tastes that were his—he could not, of course, know how carefully she had studied them” (Stories 422). Leary’s need to “study” Tryon’s taste reverses the assumptions about imitativeness that Tryon uses to write off Rena. That Leary (whose first name makes her a kind of icon of her race) must “study” Tryon’s taste in order to imitate it implies, in contrast to Rena’s “innate taste and intelligence,” that she possesses no taste of her own.

Leary’s skilled mimicry of Tryon’s taste, then, reverses the racial assumptions that undergird the discourse of imitation. And while Chesnutt clearly engages the link between education and imitation, he does so in a way that differs from the way Agassiz, Le Conte, Straton, and others framed the problem. In one respect, the claim about Black “imitativeness” was just

6 Straton ends his piece with some complimentary words for Booker T. Washington’s program of industrial training. In the following issue of the North American Review, Washington responded to Straton’s doubts about education and the race problem by saying that Straton’s claims about rampant sexual immorality and crime were deeply flawed, that industrial employment and close contact between Blacks and Whites wasn’t a problem, and, basically, that Straton didn’t know what he was talking about. See “Education Will Solve the Race Problem. A Reply.”
one more entry in a lexicon of racist euphemisms and code-words, like “miscegenation,” painted with a thin layer of scientific respectability. But in another, “imitativeness,” rather than serving as just one term among others, reifies the same anxieties about racial differentiation that were mobilized in the Miscegenation scandal of 1864. If discourses of miscegenation posit, approvingly or not, that the distinction between Blacks and Whites might disappear sometime in the near future, discourses of imitation posit, among other things, that it already has. In this way, The House Behind the Cedars describes imitation not as factor that limits the efficacy of Black education, but as a White paranoid fantasy that construes Black epistemology as a social threat. In suddenly reinterpreting Rena’s manners as evidence of her Blackness rather than her Whiteness, especially insofar as they are the result of Rena’s education at “a few months of boarding-school,” Tryon imagines himself as the victim of a kind of cultural miscegenation. The “fact” of Rena’s Blackness implies for Tryon the impossibility of her actually possessing the qualities she displayed as a well-mannered White woman.7

That is to say, “race” in The House Behind the Cedars works a bit like “motivation” in The Damnation of Theron Ware. Both serve as obscured causal factors providing an interpretive foothold for characters and critics seeking to explain otherwise inexplicable phenomena—race and motivation are both understood to provide the terms of possibility for hermeneutic activity, whether that activity is, as in critical discourse surrounding Theron Ware, “extrinsic” to the text or, as in the role of racial knowledge for characters in The House Behind the Cedars, “intrinsic” to the text. To state somewhat schematically the structural relation between these terms,

7 It’s also worth noting that the idea of mimicry and imitation emerges as a dominant trope in science fiction film and television, especially those films and programs that serve as political allegories—often (but not always) the capacity to mimic is coextensive with some kind of national or global threat from invading or subversive nonhumans. In other cases, mimicry is construed as a radically immanent threat and can come to stand in for self-destructive impulses that are either too heavily repressed or given too much agency (especially in the case of scientists who overreach and either discover or create imitative aliens, creatures, or robots). In almost every case we see the discovery of significant difference provoke the same kind of uncanny recognition and epistemological confusion that attends Tryon’s discovery of Rena’s race. See Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956), the Alien films (1979-2012), Blade Runner (1982), The Thing (1982), the Terminator films (1984-2009), They Live (1988), Species (1995), Mimic (1997), A.I. (2001), and Battlestar Galactica (2003-2009), among many, many others.
“imitation” correlates to “race” as “cynicism” correlates to “motivation,” so that each key term in the interpretive process comes paired with a disruptive epistemic problem that injects uncertainty into the communicative relations between text and reader, character and character.

But if Chesnutt’s point is that Rena actually possesses her manners rather than simply performing them, and that boarding-school refined her “innate taste and intelligence” rather than giving her material to mimic, then education still emerges as a complicating factor in the novel’s social field. Shared secret knowledge and “common interests” serve to make John feel less alienated from Clarence’s upper crust, but they also serve as terms of social exclusion once Rena returns to Patesville after her break with Tryon. At the ball where Tryon eventually discovers her dancing, Rena stands out:

The guests … were dimly conscious of a slight barrier between Mis’ Molly’s daughter and themselves. The time she had spent apart from these friends of her youth had rendered it impossible for her ever to meet them again upon the plane of common interests and common thoughts. It was much as though one, having acquired the vernacular of his native country, had lived in a foreign land long enough to lose the language of his childhood without acquiring fully that of his adopted country. Miss Rowena Warwick could never again become quite the Rena Walden who had left the house behind the cedars no more than a year and a half before (Stories 409).

If the key to John’s feeling of commonality with Rena is precisely the privacy of their shared knowledge of their own race, the public nature of Patesville’s knowledge about Rena’s attempt to pass renders commonality impossible. We see this difference materialized in the speech of the guests as well—they speak in dialect while Rena does not. The orthographic visibility of the distinction between “authentic” Blacks and whatever Rena is, then, participates in the same kind of transcriptive practices that figure in debates about realism, as well as Chesnutt’s stenographic practice.

Rena too recognizes that “[h]er life in her brother’s home, by removing her from immediate contact with [the Black people of Patesville]” made “vastly clearer to her the gulf that separated them from the new world in which she lived” (396). The failure of Rena’s attempt to
pass leaves her alienated even from “her inalienable race,” and after her departure from Clarence, John feels “a little of the spiritual estrangement from his associates that he had noticed in Rena during her life in Clarence” (*Stories* 396, 388).

Later, when Rena leaves town with Jefferson Wain, an apparently wealthy landowner who turns out to be a dissipated wife-murderer, and she becomes a school teacher in another town, she runs into George Tryon’s mother, who asks her, “Are you really colored?” (*Stories* 426). Rena does not admit that she once passed for White, and she finds it “more difficult to suppress the fact that she had been white, than she had formerly in hiding her African origin” Meanwhile, Mrs. Tryon notices “an air of real refinement” in Rena, one that is “not merely of a fine nature, but of contact with cultured people, a certain reserve of speech and manner quite inconsistent with Mrs. Tryon’s experience of colored women” (*Stories* 427). Mrs. Tryon’s perception that there is both something refined about Rena’s “nature” and “a certain reserve of speech and manner” that seems learned from others unwittingly reverses her son’s epistemological about-face—for George, manners are just more evidence of the imitative nature of all Black people, while for his mother manners evince the singular nature of this particular person, a person she does not seem convinced is Black at all.8

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8 Anyone doubting the centrality of manners to Chesnutt’s thought and writing would do well to read his lecture “Etiquette (Good Manners),” delivered before the Normal Literary Society of Fayetteville, North Carolina in 1881—Chesnutt himself was principal of the Normal School at the time. Like many of the etiquette books of the nineteenth century, Chesnutt’s lecture describes social procedure with what now looks like comic specificity and militancy. It is not just that one ought to try to smell good and be polite—manners are a crucial matter of negative liberty and a particularly pungent example of the aesthetics of the common: “I have no right … to offend a man’s sense of smell by coming into his presence with my clothes saturated with the odor of tobacco, or reeking with the fumes of the gin shop” (*Essays* 2, emphasis added). But beyond offering advice as to how to comport yourself at the dinner table, what to do if you encounter an acquaintance in the street, how to brush your teeth, how to behave in church, and so on, the essay places most of its pressure on the bind that Rena encounters throughout *The House Behind the Cedars*. No matter how one applies the rules of etiquette, Chesnutt stresses, “There is one more thing … which I implore you not to do—Don’t, for heaven’s sake don’t put on airs. Nothing is more disgusting than affectation. Be natural” (*Essays* 11, emphasis Chesnutt’s). The countervailing imperatives to perform unnatural behaviors like using a fork in a particular way and also never acting in a way that appears unnatural exert a kind of unbearable pressure on the categories of naturalness and unnaturalness that goes unmentioned in “Etiquette,” but serves as one of the primary tensions of *The House Behind the Cedars*. Perhaps, in the intervening two decades, Chesnutt learned that manners could only take one so far.
There is a sense in which the interwoven threads of possession and performance, imitation and essence, and manners and knowledge in *The House Behind the Cedars* radically complicate Chesnutt’s efforts to “externalize” race, to define it down to its most material and least substantial possible meaning. Often times, as with John and Rena’s conceptualization of race as a “secret” referring to their biological origin, “race” seems synonymous with “knowledge of race,” a knowledge that has no other object than itself. John, in fact, first becomes aware of his race when, as a child, “He was informed one day that he was black,” a sentence with the same absurd and transformative power as the opening line of Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis” (*Stories* 373). And John combats this “information” by reading through the Western literary canon, tasting “of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge.” After learning “all that could be taught by the faded mulatto teacher in the long, shiny black frock coat,” he becomes an autodidact. And after reading all the books in the library, he realizes that “happiness lay far beyond the sphere where he was born” while “the blood of his white fathers … cried out for its own” (*Stories* 375). After being “informed” that he is Black, John discovers an internal (though apparently dormant) Whiteness activated by his self-education and dissatisfaction with the limited opportunities of a Black man living in Patesville. In both cases, “information” and processes of informing become catalysts of a seemingly deeper or more essential racial self-knowledge.

And yet the degree to which the reader herself is being “informed” of the agency of John’s “white blood” remains up in the air. Much as the racial politics of imitation appear not as actual beliefs espoused by the novel but rather as beliefs the novel wishes to ironize, the formal qualities of *The House Behind the Cedars* depend on the readers’ understanding of differences between possession and performance that characters in the novel constantly struggle with. While John feels his “white blood” crying out, the novel itself never comments on this seemingly anomalous investment in racial essentialism. Whether we are lead to believe that there really is some racial quality that John “expresses” through his desire for social mobility, or whether he views his own ambition through a racial lens passes by without comment, nor do we get (as we
did with the comparison between Rena and Blanche’s imitative epistemologies) a moment of ironic juxtaposition. As we will see, while Chesnutt claims, in his essay “The Future American,” that Blacks and Whites share enough ideals and beliefs to make meaningful differences between them nonexistent, the persistence of color as a kind of knowledge you can possess about a person (including yourself) suggests that race and epistemology are, in the American context, versions of each other: racial difference becomes a kind of epistemological difference, and vice versa.

Because racial difference and epistemological difference find themselves so often coupled to each other, it is sometimes difficult to remember that the terms through which racial difference come to us have their own history. Chesnutt’s emphasis on miscegenation as a practice that undercuts or disrupts the certainties of racial difference, and so the certainties of epistemological difference, itself has a politics and a political history, one in which we can see many of the issues subtending Chesnutt’s fiction presented in embryo. “Miscegenation” is a central notion for Chesnutt because of what it suggests for the practical future and theoretical edifice of race: miscegenation suggests that racial difference might someday cease to exist as a coherent idea but that it currently does possess some sort of the validity. Accordingly, approaching miscegenation as a solution to the problem of race requires an understanding of that problem as primarily practical rather than epistemic—once we can no longer see racial difference, racial difference will cease to be. As the very origin of the term “miscegenation” demonstrates, the promotion of “race mixing” as a political strategy is in no way a liberal invention. The “miscegenation issue” in the 1864 election provide a way to think about how those same contradictions tend to get reproduced whenever “race mixing” is proposed as a solution to the “race problem.”

II.

Anyone rummaging around in the history of American racial politics will eventually come across the following story. In 1864, New Yorkers saw the publication of a pamphlet
entitled *Miscegenation: The Theory of the Blending of the Races, Applied to the American White Man and Negro*. The title certainly would have given them pause, as no one had ever seen the word “miscegenation” before. In fact, the pamphlet’s anonymous author invented it, giving the reason that “amalgamation”—then the most common term used to describe “race mixing”—was a “poor word, since it properly refers to the union of metals with quicksilver” (ii). The term “miscegenation”—from the Latin *miscere* (to mix) and *genus* (race)—had only one definition.

Besides introducing a new word into the English language, the pamphleteer was also responsible for what appeared to be one of the most fearless documents in the archive of nineteenth century abolitionist writing. Among many other claims and political recommendations, the pamphlet notes that, “the miscegenetic or mixed races are much superior, mentally, physically, and morally, to those pure or unmixed,” that “a continuance of progress can only be obtained through a judicious crossing of diverse elements,” that “the Caucasian, or white race … has never yet developed a religious faith on its own,” that “the true ideal man can only be reached by blending the type man and woman of all the races of the earth,” that “the most beautiful girl in form, feature, and every attribute of feminine loveliness [the pamphleteer] ever saw, was a mulatto,” and, most provocatively, that “the Southern beauty … proclaims by every massive ornament in her shining hair, and by every yellow shade in the wavy folds of her dress, ‘I love the black man’” (8, 14, 23, 25, 36, 43).

Excepting perhaps that final item, it is not too difficult to imagine twenty-first century liberals nodding in agreement with many of the descriptions, prescriptions, and sentiments put forward by the anonymous pamphleteer. Even among the most radical abolitionists of the day, interracial marriage was tolerated, but it was rarely explicitly encouraged, and Eurocentric racial hierarchies were often deeply ingrained in their thinking, despite their good intentions.9

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9 Among the few abolitionists that did recommend intermarriage, Charles Sumner and Wendell Phillips were the most prominent. As Elise Lemire has noted, Phillips’s speech on July 4th, 1863 saw him declare that he was “an amalgamationist to the utmost extent” (qtd in Lemire 115).
Throughout *Miscegenation*, the author is at pains to exalt Black Americans as exemplars of “the *beau idéal* of true manhood” (48). One wonders how the racial politics of Reconstruction would have played out had more people thought like the pamphleteer.

Around Christmas of 1863, before *Miscegenation*’s official publication, the pamphleteer sent his work out to a host of prominent abolitionists, many of whom expressed, through letters sent to the publisher, an admiration “tempered with cautious enthusiasm both for the substance of the pamphlet and for the timeliness of its publication” (Kaplan 286).\(^\text{10}\) While it generally met with encouragement, many of the pamphlet’s readers urged caution, seemingly worried that the nation might not be ready for such dramatic measures. They might have been especially concerned that the pamphlet not be aligned too closely with the push for Lincoln’s reelection, especially because it recommended that the Republican Party include miscegenation as a plank in its platform. Lincoln himself was sent a copy, but he did not respond. In addition, nobody seems to have commented on the pamphlet’s potentially inflammatory descriptions of Irish immigrants as “coarse-grained, revengeful, unintellectual” people with “very few of the finer instincts of humanity” who could benefit from “blending” with Blacks (*Miscegenation* 30). With the New York Draft Riots only six months in the past, one could imagine the effect such statements might have on the still-seething Irish-American community.

Nevertheless, the pamphleteer pressed on, aggressively promoting his work, which, by that February, “was being advertised provocatively in the principal Abolitionist papers of the country as available for purchase at newsstands or at the publisher’s office” (Kaplan 291). Soon after, it garnered glowing reviews in anti-slavery publications and sneering reviews in pro-slavery publications. Horace Greeley’s anti-slavery *Tribune* was accused of “advocating

\(^{10}\) My summary of the events surrounding the publication of *Miscegenation* is drawn primarily from Sidney Kaplan’s “The Miscegenation Issue in the Election of 1864,” which is still the most comprehensive account of the whole affair. See also Sollors’s “Was Roxy Black? Race as Stereotype in Mark Twain, Edward Windsor Kemble, and Paul Laurence Dunbar,” Hollinger’s “Amalgamation and Hypodescent: the Question of Ethnoracial Mixture in the History of the United States,” and Pascoe’s *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America*. 
miscegenation,” doggerel verse was written on the theme, and the entire affair had boiled over into a full-blown controversy, with pro-slavery advocates claiming that Lincoln sought to force Whites to marry Blacks, and anti-slavery advocates disavowing such nonsense while maintaining the right of Blacks and Whites to marry if they chose (Kaplan 293). Pamphlets were published in response with titles like *What Miscegenation is! And What We Are to Expect Now that Lincoln Is Reelected, Miscegenation or Amalgamation: Fate of the Freedman*, and *Subgenation: The Theory of the Normal Relation of the Races; An Answer to “Miscegenation.”*

While most of the pamphlet’s readers seemed to take *Miscegenation*’s science at face value, later in 1864 an anonymous reviewer for the scholarly *Anthropological Review* (published in England) wrote, “We should not have thought it worth while to take any notice of the publication of the pamphlet under review, if it did not give us some insight in the extraordinary mental aberration now going on in Yankeedom.” The reviewer maintains a tone of scathing sarcasm throughout, finding the document full of “willful misrepresentation” of scientific data, “misuse” of monogenist theory, and generally full of anthropological falsehoods.11 In fact, the reviewer found the opinions of the pamphleteer so outlandish that initially “we expected it was merely a hoax” (116).

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11 Not that the *Anthropological Review* had things straight either. The reviewer scoffs that, “The position of the foramen magnum is asserted [by the pamphlet] to be the same as that of the European—-the author entirely ignoring the fact, that Prichard has long since been shown to be entirely in error on the point” (118). As Stephen J. Gould has shown, the position of the foramen magnum (the hole in the skull where the brain stem connects to the spinal cord) was a point of contention between monogenists, like James Cowles Prichard, who asserted that there were no meaningful anatomical differences between the races, and polygenists who asserted that different races constituted different species with different common ancestors. In humans, the foramen magnum is located at the bottom of the skull and allows us to look straight ahead, but in other animals that walk on all fours, it is located closer to the back of the skull. While Prichard had been “disproven” by Paul Broca, who fudged data (unconsciously, Gould claims) in order to demonstrate the posterior position of the foramen magnum in African skulls and so to argue that Blacks were anatomically and mentally “monkey-like,” *Miscegenation* subscribed to the *outmoded* idea that the skulls of Blacks and Whites are the same. The irony that the pamphlet took an ill-informed position that was later demonstrated to be true (everyone has holes in the same places) gives us an idea of the bizarre, back-formed way the miscegenation controversy of 1864 prefigured and shaped liberal discourses of miscegenation in the 1890s. For an instructive rehearsal of the foramen magnum debates, see Gould, chapter 3. For a quick and dirty rundown of the monogenist-polygenist debates, see Menand, chapter 5. For a more detailed account, see Stanton.
As it turns out, the anonymous reviewer’s suspicion toward the anonymous pamphleteer was well-founded. *Miscegenation* actually had two authors, David Goodman Croly and George Wakeman. And far from radical abolitionists, they were both in the employ of the New York World newspaper, which was essentially a partisan Democratic organ and staunchly opposed to the abolitionist cause, to say nothing of interracial marriage. The mudslinging continued, and on March 24, the World, where Croly served as managing editor, published an editorial (anonymously, it almost goes without saying) that took aim at the pamphlet: “A writer who seriously advocates the intermarriage and cohabitation of white men with negroes, and white women with negroes, has little claim to notice, on his own account, by journals which make it their chief business to mark and interpret the current indications of public sentiment.” But, the editorial suggests, if such a writer promotes an opinion anonymously, it may be because it expresses some idea already possessed by the public, and in fact, public endorsement “or the opposition it excites … makes it an index of public sentiment” (qtd in Kaplan 308). Given that *Miscegenation* was already the object of quite a bit of both endorsement and opposition, the editorial writer basically says that the anonymity of the author is reason enough to suppose that the pamphlet represents beliefs already actively held or actively opposed by the public. Further, given that the pamphlet’s ideas had been repeated by “the leading negrophilists of the country,” it makes sense to suppose that the miscegenist agenda is a central tenet of abolitionism in general, that its ideas are already commonly held. From the perspective of the reading public, it might well have appeared that the miscegenation issue was a part of the abolitionist zeitgeist or that compulsory intermarriage was in some way a logical extension of the anti-slavery position. Just as the more paranoid anti-abolitionists had suspected all along, *Miscegenation* “confirmed” that race mixing was not only a consequence of abolition, but its true and secret goal.

In essence, the *Miscegenation* hoax was an extremely well-crafted bid to, in cable newsspeak, control the narrative. Croly and Wakeman, acting on behalf of Northern anti-Black political interests, managed to centralize miscegenation within abolitionist discourse only to use
the issue to rile up anti-abolitionists. They achieved much with their hoax. They invented and put into circulation a new word to replace the quasi-euphemistic “amalgamation,” one that lent an air of scientific objectivity to what was, in reality, a thoroughly political affair; they snuck ideas that were (at the time) unpalatably radical into abolitionist discourse in a way that could be neither fully affirmed nor fully disavowed (abolitionists talking about miscegenation were prone to heroic acts of circumlocution); they invented the very political liabilities that they and their political fellow-travelers would then exploit. They achieved much, except for what was ostensibly their ultimate goal, which was to defeat Lincoln in his bid for reelection.

While the hoax effectively ended after the 1864 presidential campaign, nobody at the time either managed or bothered to unmask Croly and Wakeman—decades later, some still thought *Miscegenation* was a genuine abolitionist document, while many in Washington immediately recognized it as a satire or “burlesque” (Kaplan 299). Despite its essentially fictional status, *Miscegenation* brought to the surface a set of ideas that were present on every side of nineteenth century race debates: the idea that race is a substantive and measurable quality, the idea that race is expressed in visible bodily differences that index internal differences (whether they be biological, cognitive, emotional, or temperamental), and the idea that race mixing, if it proceeds unchecked, will lead to the disappearance of the differences between the races. And yet, if the *Miscegenation* pamphlet actually advocates the “blending” of the races to the point that any legible difference between them disappears, but does so in order to provoke a reaction that would combat advocates of “blending,” then it would appear that to champion *Miscegenation* in 1864 would be to both advocate a radical abolitionist policy while in some way acting against your own interests.

The problem of “miscegenation” has never quite shaken the highly contradictory, borderline nonsensical political positions that first brought it into public discourse. There is a sense in which to speak of miscegenation or any other of its euphemisms is to play indirectly into the hands of Croly and Wakeman, which seem to reach up from the grave in order to tie the
cric’s shoelaces together. The fact that people still speak of “mixed backgrounds” in everyday conversation indicates that we have not abandoned the basic conceptualizations of race that enabled the Miscegenation hoax in the first place: before one can speak of “mixed races,” one must believe the races are separate enough that the idea of mixing them together makes intuitive sense. We might well say of the Miscegenation pamphlet what Robert Reid-Pharr says of the discomfort provoked by postbellum race novels like Thomas Dixon’s The Leopard’s Spots (1902): “the ‘bad’ postbellum race novel is not difficult to us because it is so ancient, strange, or ‘obscene,’ but, on the contrary, because it represents such an unseemly beginning to our own beliefs (compulsions, one is wont to say) about the ‘essence’ of race and nation” (472). The Miscegenation hoax remains such a compelling incident in American political history because it vibrates with the frisson of familiarity and unseemliness Reid-Pharr describes. It is something of a primal scene for racial thinking in America, fittingly situated between two regimes of race law, and serving as a distasteful reminder of the mixed parentage of even our most liberal beliefs about race.

Certainly, by the last decade of the nineteenth century, most people writing about race still operated under assumptions similar to those of the readers of Miscegenation, even and especially those who advocated the lifting of race-based laws and legislation. Chesnutt, in his 1889 essay “What Is a White Man?,” writes, “[I]t is evident that where the intermingling of the races has made such progress as it has in this country, the line which separates the races must in many instances have been practically obliterated. And there has arisen in the United States a very large class of the population who are certainly not Negroes in an ethnological sense, and whose children will be no nearer Negroes than themselves” (Stories 837). Racial “intermingling” will lead to the obliteration of the color line, and consequently a population that is not ethnically Black. What seems most interesting to me about this formulation is the parsing out of “ethnically” Black Americans from some other sort of American who is presumably Black in some other sense of the term, either by virtue of their color or their “race.”
Chesnutt’s point is that the progressive obliteration of the color line makes it “in the highest degree important for [the White leaders of the South] to know what race they belong to,” and so to pass more and more convoluted laws that determine the legal status of a person’s race (Stories 837). Because increasing “intermingling” makes race increasingly hard to discern, laws regarding descent become crucial to ensure that racial hierarchies remain intact. Race could not be abandoned as a determining factor after Reconstruction but neither could race be relied upon to announce itself on arrival.  

Chesnutt’s essay outlines legal definitions of Whiteness and surveys the ways in which miscegenation laws serve to “preserve the purity of the white race” (Stories 842). The effect of miscegenation laws, no matter what their specifics, is not merely the safeguarding of a legal definition of Whiteness—miscegenation laws also make “mixed blood a prima-facie proof of illegitimacy” and ensure that “a colored man or woman whose complexion is white or nearly white is presumed … to be the offspring of a union not sanctified by law” (Stories 843). In this analysis, it is not exactly the children of interracial couples that bear the brunt of miscegenation laws, nor is it quite those who appear to be children of interracial couples. Men and women whose “complexion is white or nearly white” have their social standing impugned.

Under miscegenation laws, Chesnutt seems to claim, Whiteness has the potential to become a liability as much as a benefit. Rather than serving as a reliable index to an essential and substantive inner “race,” the surface of the skin, as Plessy v. Ferguson demonstrated to

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12 While after the Civil War, laws against interracial marriage grew laxer, it was only because, “prohibitions on the rights of White men to marry Black women” were “no longer justifiable as a necessary part of the system of slavery” and so those laws “were increasingly vulnerable to challenge as unjustifiable restrictions on the rights of White men” (Pascoe 42). So, while miscegenation laws during Reconstruction might have infringed on the privileges of White men, after the advent of Jim Crow, many of those laws were overturned, as judges deployed every available discourse to argue against the wisdom, justice, and naturalness of intermarriage (70). Similarly, writing about the antebellum context of interracial literature, Werner Sollors finds, “That the cultural construction that the mother's slave status could outweigh the father's freedom, or that any parent's 'black' origins could make meaningless the other parent's 'whiteness,' may thus actually represent a social curtailment of the father's unlimited patriarchal power of deciding either who can be a legitimate heir or who among the illegitimate family members may receive a standing equal to the legitimate family” (Neither 46).
disastrous effect, came to be regarded with increasing suspicion. Outer Whiteness could better conceal inner Blackness, and so Whiteness became a threat not only to the social standing of light-skinned Blacks, but to the entire alignment of skin color and race. As a consequence, even as Chesnutt’s fiction (especially his 1901 novel *The Marrow of Tradition*) engaged the social antagonisms exacerbated by post-Reconstruction race laws, his essays came to put less and less stock in the idea that race was valuable enough to preserve. In contrast to thinkers like Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois, who wrote and acted with the tacit understanding that Black identity was something worth defending, Chesnutt took it as a given that miscegenation would erase legible racial distinctions of its own accord.

In “The Future American” (1900), a series of three essays written for the *Boston Evening Transcript*, Chesnutt lays out the terms of this erasure. He first dispatches the standard set of scientific justifications for the separation of the races: the idea of a “pure Aryan, Indo-European race,” craniometry, and color have all fallen apart, and so can offer no clue as to what “the future American” will look like (*Stories* 845). In other words, the future American will not be made up of any “pure” race but will instead “be formed of a mingling, in a yet to be ascertained proportion, of the various racial varieties which make up the present population of the United States” (846). But these racial varieties, in themselves, have little or no substance, as Chesnutt

13 While the possibility that Blacks might “appear” White had been a part of American racial discourse since long before Reconstruction, it seems not to have been as threatening. Take, for example, the case of Henry Moss, a Black slave from Virginia, probably suffering from what we now know as vitiligo. In 1792, as his skin had lost most of its pigment, Moss travelled north and charged admission to audiences who wanted to see a Black man turn White (he used the money to buy his freedom). Dr. Samuel Stanhope Smith used Moss’s case as evidence that there were no essential differences between the races, only environmental differences. According to Smith’s strict environmentalism, Moss, once the depigmentation was complete, wouldn’t be a Black man who appeared White, he would just be a White man—any other differences between Moss and, say, Smith himself would be attributed to the differences in their environment and upbringing. For Moss’s story, see Stanton, chapter 1.

14 The rhetorical and political contortions resulting in the decoupling of race and color is captured admirably by George Schuyler’s satire *Black No More* (1931), in which a scientist invents a procedure that turns Black skin into White skin.

15 It is notable that, while Chesnutt refers repeatedly to “amalgamation,” he never uses the word “miscegenation” in the essay. In his personal correspondences, though, the word “miscegenation” appears at least as frequently as “amalgamation,” and he uses without reference to the circumstances of its invention. See Helen Chesnutt.
uses the term “race” “in its popular sense—that of a people who look substantially alike, and are moulded by the same culture and dominated by the same ideals” (Stories 847). What does “substantially alike” mean here? What are the outlines of the culture and ideals Chesnutt refers to?

It is as though Chesnutt’s non-definition is designed specifically to hollow out the notion of race completely. After all, a “Black” person can look substantially like a “White” person (as did Chesnutt himself), and they could and did share a culture and ideals. Near the end of the final essay in the series, in fact, Chesnutt writes:

The colored people are the same as the whites in religion; they have the same standards and mediums of culture, the same ideals, and the presence of the successful white race as a constant incentive to their ambition. The ultimate result is not difficult to foresee. The races will be quite as effectively amalgamated by lightening the Negroes as they would be by darkening the whites. It is only a social fiction, indeed, which makes of a person seven-eighths white a Negro; he is really much more a white man (Stories 861).

Essentially, then, because Blacks and Whites are the same in religion, culture, ideals, and ambition, there really are, according to Chesnutt’s earlier reasoning, no differences at all between the races. As long as a Black man looks “substantially” like a White man, all other cultural and religious matters being equal, there is no meaningful difference between Black and White at all.16 Like Mrs. Tryon’s suspicion toward Rena’s claims about her own race, “amalgamation” and “miscegenation,” as conditions that enable “passing,” demonstrate the fictionality of race’s social fiction but in no way diminishes its epistemological power.

And yet at the same time, Chesnutt proposes that “amalgamation” is an ongoing process that will lead inexorably to the loss of racial distinctions.17 The paradox of the argument—there

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16 Chesnutt’s suspicion toward the very concept of race persists throughout his writings. In his 1905 speech “Race Prejudice,” Chesnutt says, “I do not believe that the current notion of race has any logical or scientific ground, or that it is, in its essence, a matter of very much importance; as a fact it is extremely important” (Essays 215). Near the essay’s end he goes further, using physical “color” and “race” interchangeably, and saying, “I can look down into this audience and see how, in three or four generations, it has, with certain individuals and groups, almost entirely disappeared. Should it disappear entirely, race prejudice, and the race problem, would no longer exist” (Essays 231).

17 Chesnutt was far from the only writer to note that “amalgamation,” far from a future threat, was already well underway. In 1897, Wesley Gaines, for example, wrote, “it appears that the dreaded amalgamation is already partially accomplished. It no longer belongs to the realm of theory; it has been transferred to the region of fact” (152). For a consideration of the relationship between “miscegenation” and futurity, see Mitchell, chapter seven.
are no meaningful differences between the races and yet the races are substantively different enough to “mix”—suggests that Chesnutt’s thinking about race proceeds from a critical impulse to evacuate racial categories while retaining, however sketchily, the conceptual differences between them. This paradox is most visible in a thought experiment offered by Chesnutt: imagine “a government sufficiently autocratic” to enforce “amalgamation,” so that “it were made a misdemeanor for two white or two colored persons to marry, so long as it was possible to obtain a mate of the other race.” According to Chesnutt’s estimates, “in three generations the pure whites would be entirely eliminated, and there would be no perceptible trace of the blacks left” (*Stories* 849). Further, he notes, “as it would probably be put, the white race would have absorbed the black” (*Stories* 850). By emphasizing that the differences between White absorbing Black and Black absorbing White is largely rhetorical, which is what it means for a state of affairs to be “put” in some way rather than to “be” in some way, he gestures to the figurative dimension of the construction of racial difference while at the same time relying on the substantive reality of the difference to make his case.

But this is only a thought experiment—he goes on to note that “the same result will be brought about slowly and obscurely” as long as “the processes of nature are not too violently interrupted by the hand of man” (*Stories* 850). Within the logic of Chesnutt’s essay, race is simply a euphemism for external, visible difference rather than something internal and essential—since Blacks and Whites share the same culture and ideals, and biological definitions of race have been discredited, only outward physical appearances denote race. So while race mixing is a “natural” process, one that will happen of its own accord so long as miscegenation laws don’t prevent it from happening, and one that will result in the abolition of race in general, there is actually no such thing as “race” to begin with, and once visual markers of race become so dispersed as to cease to signify, race itself will cease to exist as a meaningful socio-political category. While the essay proposes a practical solution to the problem of racial difference—if everybody just intermarries, racial difference will cease to exist—it fails to acknowledge the
forms of categorical thinking that underpin its argument. In equating race only with skin color, Chesnutt ignores the epistemological valence that concepts of racial difference were often founded on—pointing out the irrationality of such concepts hardly makes them go away. And for all that, “The Future American” seems to sacrifice (and this is perhaps why present-day critics find it so disconcerting) is the sense that Blackness might serve as a coherent political category that would enable advances for a subordinated class.\(^{18}\)

That Chesnutt relies on discourses of imitation to characterize the epistemological differences produced by the notion of racial difference suggests that the set of anxieties invoked by documents like *Miscegenation* were being displaced but not abandoned. Discourses of miscegenation usually relied on arguments about “civilization” and the survival of the “pure Anglo-Saxon race,” arguments that, their speciousness aside, attempted to equate private, small-scale decisions (like who you marry) with large-scale societal concerns. While Southern post-Reconstruction miscegenation laws successfully criminalized those small-scale decisions, they obviously did not stop Blacks and Whites from having sex with each other and procreating. In that sense, arguments about the socially detrimental effects of Black imitativeness provided a

\(^{18}\) Ryan Jay Friedman finds that the essay series is at odds with Chesnutt’s overriding concern, in his fiction, with slavery’s legacy. For Friedman, “The Future American” “radically dehistoricizes the category of blackness, making it strictly a matter of ‘externals’ related vaguely to ‘blood,’” rather than an articulation of the dominant governmental regime—that is, there is a way in which the evacuation of the category of race weakens critiques of disenfranchisement and arguments for the continuing relevance of the legacy of slavery. In fact, it is interesting to note the similarities of Chesnutt’s argument for the inevitability of race mixing with arguments that are, in varying degrees, written with a skeptical eye toward civil rights. One classic of the genre is Norman Podhoretz’s “My Negro Problem—and Ours,” published in *Commentary* in 1963, an essay admirable for its emotional and intellectual honesty, if not its political prescriptions. It traces Podhoretz’s own boyhood confrontations with Black kids in his Brooklyn neighborhood, emphasizing his own intimidation at their hands. As the essay passes from memoir to a consideration of the struggle for civil rights, Podhoretz finds himself wondering “whether [Blacks] really believe in their hearts that [an integrated] state can be attained, and if so why they should wish to survive as a distinct group.” Ultimately, Podhoretz, then still a self-proclaimed liberal, argues that “miscegenation” (Podhoretz’s word) is preferable to enforced integration, and that “the wholesale merging of the two races is the most desirable alternative for everyone concerned” (101). In other words, rather than pushing for civil rights, we ought to simply wait for miscegenation to perform its work. Thus race mixing, a prospect that Podhoretz finds personally distasteful but views with the same inevitability that Chesnutt did, emerges as a way to forestall or defer civil rights. “Miscegenation,” almost exactly one hundred years after the word’s invention, again finds itself playing the spoiler in the push for liberal race legislation.
way to replace arguments about “race purity” that had less currency after Darwin with pervasive epistemological uncertainty.\footnote{While it may have appeared on the wane at the time, of course, race science was just hitting its stride in the 1890s. Herbert Spencer’s social Darwinism and Francis Galton’s eugenics would repurpose natural selection from an analytic concept explaining how species change and differentiate to a tool of social control.}

While there’s no evidence that I’ve found to suggest that Chesnutt was aware of the Miscegenation hoax, the whole affair demonstrates the extent to which the political motivations that subtended racial construction could come to assume a veneer of naturalness that Chesnutt was both aware of and beholden to. The House Behind the Cedars serves as Chesnutt’s most exemplary meditation on the subject, not because he engages the incoherence of racial categorization in a way that is somehow “correct” or “clear-eyed,” but because it demonstrates the way in which any attempt to approach the problem of “race” while holding onto its categories inevitably reifies the very incoherencies it wishes to eliminate. (This chapter, I might add, is most likely in the process of doing the same thing.) The crux of the problem, which The House Behind the Cedars addresses and exemplifies, is that an awareness of the politically constructed nature of racial knowledge doesn’t make the problem go away.

Like the question of the temporal location of Rena’s “illegitimacy” (either located in her mother’s illicit affair and therefore in the past or in the “truth” of racial identity and therefore in the present), both the Miscegenation hoax and Chesnutt’s political essays envision race not only as a quality possessed by a body but one whose very conceptual coherence is subject to a speculative impulse. By imagining the conditions of race “someday,” whether in the past or the future, we found our theories of race on pastoral analepses and utopian prolepses, on notions of what it means to construe race as a form of knowledge, of what it means to imagine that race is a thing one can know. Chesnutt’s writings about miscegenation, “amalgamation,” and passing engage this problem through oscillating between analepsis and prolepsis, through reference to a past that founds social conceptions and self-conceptions of racial beings and a future that does
away with such things but remains, through the unseverable tether of the body’s persistence through time, bound to them.

But as he was engaging this problem in *The House Behind the Cedars*, Chesnutt was also in the middle of a seemingly less dire controversy. His own ambitions to make his living as a writer of fiction, and his initial success in attracting the attention of prominent Northern literary figures, William Dean Howells among them, situated him in the middle of the controversy over realism. Just as he was engaging, in his fiction, the way in which epistemological uncertainty conditioned and was conditioned by racial anxieties through portrayals of imitation, critics of literary realism were engaged in an assault on what they saw as a too-mimetic literary practice, one that risked becoming “mere imitation.”

III.

Even as mimesis played a crucial role in the racial politics of the nineteenth century, it was often acknowledged as one of the central terms in the literary politics of the last quarter of the century. Debates about “realism,” insofar as the term claimed to denote a unified and identifiable literary technique, are essentially debates about mimesis, about the role mimesis ought to play in the work of art, and about the limits of the work of art’s mimetic capacities. Realists claimed that American literature had traditionally excluded the actual problems, contradictions, and dilemmas of life in favor of literary types and romantic stories, that it tended to regard contemporary existence as something that obscured a world of ideal figures whose truth transcended the concerns and experiences of social life. On the other side of the debate, critics of realism often claimed that realism was artless, that it simply presented a bare reality that risked falling into what George Parsons Lathrop called “literalism,” an aesthetically impoverished transcription of everyday events onto the page (Pizer 29).

Lathrop, in his 1874 essay “The Novel and Its Future,” performs many of the characteristic ambivalences of critics of realism. On the one hand, Lathrop finds that realism is
“without a doubt, essential to the best dramatic novel-writing.” The best realist novelists will investigate the function of all those complicated impulses, emotions, and impressions which we experience hour to hour, day to day, and by which our actions and characters are continually controlled, modified, or explained” (28). But, he warns, “mere transcription of facts, aspects, and phases, actually observed by the writer, is … neither artistry nor anything approaching it” (Pizer 23). Further some techniques are excluded from the category of “art” right from the start: “A photograph of a natural object is not art; nor is the plaster cast of a man’s face, nor is the bare setting on the stage of an actual occurrence. Art requires an idealization” (Pizer 33). In Lathrop’s description, the skillful realist is an anatomist of consciousness, and one who seems to practice a kind of materialism. Impulses, emotions, and impressions control, modify, and explain behavior. There is no reference here to a deep or essential human nature, only a field of interaction between sets of experiences conditioned by some identifiable cause. But “mere” facts, “mere” descriptions fail to achieve the status of art—without “function,” facts have no place in the novel. Photography, because it merely “transcribes” reality, cannot participate in the “idealization” that distinguishes art from fact.

And yet the end of idealization is not the presentation of idealization as such. Lathrop writes that an insufficiently “idealized” scene, if it were “transcribed” onto the page or the stage, “would no doubt fail of the intended dramatic effect, and the spectators would declare the representation unnatural” (Pizer 33). Thus the debate turns not on the aim of art, which is the creation of a mimetic effect, but on the means of achieving that mimetic effect. Lathrop implicitly claims that readers expected a certain amount of “idealization” in their literature—to deny them their illusions would be to rip the suture between reader and text. Charles Dudley Warner thought the same, writing that, while “the analytic method” in the novel is all well and good, “it destroys illusion.” Readers want to feel that “characters in a story are real persons,” but realist novels “set [characters] up as if they were marionettes, and take them to pieces every few pages, and show their interior structure,” sacrificing narrative momentum until “the reader loses
all enjoyment in impatience and weariness” (Pizer 37). Illusion, in the reading of anti-realist critics, actually facilitates the sense of reality in a novel rather than serving as an escape from reality. Warner’s terms specifically seem to contrast the description of exterior illusion with the revelation of a wearying, patience-trying “interior structure.” In Warner’s formulation, keeping the character that seems like a real person from turning into a marionette seems to depend on not digging too deeply into precisely the kind of psychic clockwork that Lathrop valorizes. Yet both depend on an illusion-making aesthetic frame in order to distance the mimetic impulse of art from a realism that hews too close to its subject.

For critics like Lathrop and Warner, then, the critique is not so much that literature shouldn’t be mimetic, shouldn’t attempt to represent what is “real”—it is instead that the description of reality with an inadequate aesthetic frame actually fails to represent reality because it cannot involve the reader in the idealizations and illusions that our experience of reality encompasses. Contrast this to what must be the single most-cited defense of American literary realism: Howells’s grasshopper. In his “Editor’s Study” column in Harper’s Monthly, Howells defends “the young writer who attempts to report the phrase and carriage of every-day life, who tries to tell just how he has heard men talk and seen them look.” Howells laments that his writer is “instructed [presumably by critics like Warner and Lathrop] to idealize his personages … to take the life-likeness out of them, and put the book-likeness into them.” He compares these critics to a pedant who tells a young entomologist to ignore the evidence in front of him:

"I see that you are looking at a grasshopper there which you have found in the grass, and I suppose you intend to describe it. Now don't waste your time and sin against culture in that way. I've got a grasshopper here, which has been evolved at considerable pains and expense out of the grasshopper in general; in fact, it's a type. It's made up of wire and cardboard, very prettily painted in a conventional tint, and it's perfectly indestructible. It isn't very much like a real grasshopper, but it's a great deal nicer, and it's served to represent the notion of a grasshopper ever since man emerged from barbarism. You may say that it's artificial. Well, it is artificial; but then it's ideal too; and what you want to do

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20 The novelist and poet Margaret Deland echoes something of this sentiment in her 1899 essay “The Value of the Novel” when she writes, “Let entertainment accomplish what it may, morally—but let us be entertained!” (876).
is to cultivate the ideal. You'll find the books full of my kind of grasshopper, and scarcely a trace of yours in any of them. The thing that you are proposing to do is commonplace; but if you say that it isn't commonplace, for the very reason that it hasn't been done before, you'll have to admit that it's photographic” (Criticism 13).

Critics like Lathrop and Warner, in Howells’s view, think they have the realists in a bind. In the first place they say that realism is, by its nature, drab and “commonplace”—who wants to read about the boring things we all have to do every day? But, if the realist counters that realism’s commitment to “the phrase and carriage of every-day life” is itself an innovation, and so interesting on that account, then the anti-realists will claim that this very adherence to the real, the “photographic” imitation of bare reality, means that realist writing cannot be art.

Howells, of course, believes it is the role of the artist to “reject the ideal grasshopper” in favor of “the simple, honest, and natural grasshopper.” Photography and “transcription,” then, really do come to count as a kind of art. It is not so much that Howells rebuts the objections of the anti-realists—they have entirely different conceptions of what counts as a legitimate form of mimesis. In a post-realist age, Howells seems to tell us, art no longer requires idealization or illusion in order to achieve mimetic fidelity to the world—those very qualities that, in Lathrop-Warner-type thinking, excluded certain forms from consideration as objects of aesthetic attention become, for Howells, virtually the only objects worthy of aesthetic attention.

In a Howellsian conception of realism, one shared by sympathetic writers like Hamlin Garland and, to varying degrees, Mark Twain and Henry James, literature became a kind of mimicry, a way to recreate and give voice to the all-important “real thing.” Whether or not a novel gives voice to real life became—and in most quarters remains—the most significant measure of its artistic success. Howells’s dedication to the actual grasshopper implies that realism would entail a form of literary empiricism, with pride of place given to the experienced event over the imagined one. At least at first, Chesnutt considered himself a realist. In a journal entry dated March 16, 1880, Chesnutt wrote,
I intend to record my impressions of men and things, and such incidents or conversations which take place within my knowledge, with a view to future use in literary work. I shall not record stale negro minstrel jokes, or worn out newspaper squibs on the "man and brother." I shall leave the realm of fiction to hard facts. There are many things about the colored people which are peculiar, to some extent, to them, and which are interesting to any thoughtful observer, and would be doubly interesting to people who know little about them (Journals 126).

Recording the things “peculiar” to “colored people,” abandoning “stale negro minstrel jokes” in favor of “hard facts”: these imperatives accord with Howells’s conception of realism’s fidelity to experience. Chesnutt clearly saw himself as a writer who could mobilize realism in service of a more accurate picture of the Black life than was readily available. If Albion Tourgeé, a Northern, white judge and champion of Black rights with “necessarily limited intercourse with colored people,” could, in his novel A Fool’s Errand, “write such vivid, interesting descriptions, such vivid pictures of Southern life and character as to make himself rich and famous, why could not a colored man, who has lived among colored people all his life … if he possessed the same ability, write a far better book about the South than Judge Tourgeé or Mrs. Stowe has written?” (125).21

Chesnutt’s initial attempt to write this kind of realist literature was his long short story “Rena Walden,” an embryonic version of The House Behind the Cedars. After the poet and The Century editor Richard Watson Gilder rejected it, Chesnutt wrote to George Washington Cable,

Mr. Gilder finds that I either lack humor, or that my characters have “a brutality, a lack of mellowness, a lack of spontaneous imaginative life, lack of outlook." I fear, alas! that those are exactly the things that do characterize them, and just about the things that might be expected in them—the very qualities which government and society had for 300 years or so labored faithfully, zealously, and successfully to produce, the only qualities which

21 The answer to this rhetorical question is not as simple as it might seem. While Chesnutt certainly lived among the people he sought to describe in his fictions, he didn’t exactly consider himself one of them. In his journals and in his essay “Superstition and Folklore of the South,” Chesnutt displays a condescending, if not outright disgusted, attitude toward many of the poor Black families whose children he taught. Some critics have interpreted this haughtiness as evidence that Chesnutt “actually” identified with the educated Northern White bourgeoisie he sought to emulate to the exclusion of the Blacks with whom he “actually” belonged. The situation is much more complicated than this. On the one hand, yes, while Chesnutt sought to depict poor Southern Blacks in order to bring greater attention to their plight, he disdained what he saw as their intellectual backwardness. On the other hand, as Richard Brodhead has noted, he was an uncommonly gifted and uncommonly ambitious autodidact (he essentially taught himself German and Latin, stenography, and the English canon) who felt out of place among people who lacked the preconditions of the same kind of cultural awareness he had lucked into by virtue of his proximity to newly opened, Reconstruction-era schools (180). Chesnutt was alienated but not irretrievably so.
would have rendered life at all endurable to them in the 19th century. But I suppose I shall have the drop the attempt at realism, and try to make my character like other folks, for uninteresting people are not good subjects for fiction (To Be 66).

In other words, Gilder rejected “Rena Walden” on the grounds that its characters possessed too many of the qualities that slavery and its aftermath had produced. Chesnutt’s realism was a bit too real for a genteel publication like The Century. The rejection of “Rena Walden” may have suggested to Chesnutt that an editor like Gilder, who was sympathetic to realist literature, was not so interested in “the phrase and carriage of every-day life” if the days and lives described bore no relation to his or his readers’ own. Gilder may have worried that too-vivid descriptions of the hardships of the color line in the South might implicitly indict the privilege and comfort of their White, Northern readership. But whatever the reasons underlying Gilder’s critique, Chesnutt’s contrast between characters that are “like other folks” and characters that are “uninteresting” demonstrates his bind. Realism apparently put limits on the kind of reality it could represent.

A case in point is the wholesale exclusion of The Conjure Woman stories from consideration as a site of literary realism. On one hand, it’s easy to see why they don’t fit the bill: they’re comprised mostly of Julius’s fantastical yarns, stories that are acknowledged by all, despite their origins in instrumental motivation, to contain extravagant falsehoods. On the other hand, the very manner in which they’re written—the dialect—seems to me a primary site of literature’s investment in the real. While dialect is certainly not “accurately transcribed,” it strives, more than most other forms of realist literature, to produce the illusion of unmediated experience. To be clear: I’m not arguing that The Conjure Woman stories are “more realist” than they’re usually given credit for, just that the orthographic fidelity they simulate locates the “real” of the literary text in a material register (grammar, spelling, and syntax) rather than the conceptual register (the assumed relation of a fictional narrative to the reality it purports to reproduce). In that sense, the fact that no one ever tries to argue that dialect stories are of a piece with Howellsian realism severely limits the extent to which transcripive writing systems
(whether formally articulated or ad hoc) are included alongside the technological innovations (like photography) that so often contextualize discussions of late nineteenth-century realism.

Case in point: ever since Gilder’s rejection of “Rena Walden,” Chesnutt’s designation as a “realist” has remained unsettled among critics. He is regularly cited as a realist, or casually referred to as one, but he is occasionally called out for his deviations from the hazy norms of realist mimesis. Joseph McElrath, a preeminent Chesnutt scholar, has mounted the most explicit argument against calling Chesnutt a realist in his article “Why Charles W. Chesnutt Is Not a Realist.” McElrath finds that “it is most unlikely that, following the failure of … [“Rena Walden”] … he was at all interested in, much less committed to, the Realist agenda.” Rather than a realist, “his considerable imaginative powers were better suited to the medium of romance, and he wrote accordingly” (92). The fact that Chesnutt gives “fictional treatment to real-world social problems” does not, in McElrath’s estimation, qualify him as a realist (93). In fact, we’ve only come to understand Chesnutt as a realist because Howells praised his work. McElrath’s explanation for why Howells might have done such a thing, allowing one of these reviled “romancers” into the realist avant-garde, hinges on the fact that Howells just didn’t know many Black people, and had little first-hand knowledge of life in the South. Chesnutt was the “beneficiary” of Howells’s “benign racism,” which held that Blacks possessed qualities like “innate sweetness,” qualities he saw reflected in the stories collected in Chesnutt’s The Conjure Woman and The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories (94). McElrath’s claim, then, is that Chesnutt’s work “confirmed” Howells’s beliefs about the realities of racial character, and so it got lumped in with other “actually” realist work. According to McElrath’s logic, then, Howells would never have praised the realism of work that was so clearly romantic if he had a clear notion of life in the South, or if he knew the “character” of any actual Black people. Unwittingly, Howells had elevated the ideal grasshopper.

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22 To cite just a handful of recent examples, Jarrett, Wilson, Wright, Simmons, and Petrie refer to him as a realist.
This line of thinking is crucial in the context of McElrath’s argument, because he goes on to evaluate not just Howells’s misperception of Chesnutt’s realism, but what we would have to call the substantive merits of Chesnutt’s characterizations. That McElrath feels it necessary to do so in an awkwardly racialized manner reveals, I think, something about the interpenetration of the literary politics of realism and the epistemological valences of race. In the brief second section of his essay, McElrath cites the critic SallyAnn Ferguson as a representative of Black, modern day critics who take the novelist to task for what McElrath calls his “negative fidelity to nature” (95). In McElrath’s retelling, Ferguson critiques Chesnutt for describing Southern Blacks from a middle-class, White perspective. Chesnutt identified so heavily with Whites that he “embodied the outsider’s unrealistic point of view” and describes “fair mulattoes” as enjoying “the ennobling benefits of an infusion of white blood” (96).

I am less interested in Ferguson’s critique than I am in McElrath’s reasons for rehearsing it. I quote his next paragraph in full:

Did Chesnutt discern and objectivize the truth in the characterizations of fair mulattoes such as Rena Walden and Dr. Miller and those with darker complexions such as Frank Fowler and Josh Green? Are these Realist characterizations or, as Ferguson claims, distortions resulting from the application of white racist generalizations? Whatever the point Chesnutt intended and whatever the exact nature of the relationship between the real and Chesnutt's version of it, one opinion seems devoid of risk: these characters appear as manufactured for polemical purposes as the white characters I can more confidently evaluate in light of my own experience on the other side of the color line. Colonel French, Major Carteret, Judge Straight, John and Annie—these representations of types of whites strike me as essentially allegorical figures; and it is likely that the African American characterizations merit the same designation (96).

McElrath seems to want to say that Chesnutt is indeed guilty of internalizing and purveying the kinds of stereotypes he ought to have known better than to employ, but he will not actually say it. Why not? Clearly because he is White and SallyAnn Ferguson is Black, and, while McElrath feels authorized to levy judgment on the verisimilitude of Chesnutt’s characterizations of White characters, the color line poses such an impassable epistemic boundary that he cannot bring himself to accuse Chesnutt of “negative fidelity” when it comes to Black characters because their
thoughts and feelings are apparently literally unknowable in ways that the thoughts and feelings of White characters are not. A number of other questions arise. “Negative fidelity”? As in “infidelity” or as in “distasteful and critical but ultimately true fidelity”? One could see why McElrath would want to be careful making claims about the thoughts and feelings of actual Black people (or any people, for that matter), but why should he feel squeamish making claims about the differing epistemic properties of fictional characters? Why does racial difference specifically prevent him from judging mimetic fidelity, whereas historical, geographical, ideological, class, and ontological difference do not?

I do not mean to beat up on McElrath here—the present chapter and a good deal of other important work on Chesnutt would have been impossible, or at least considerably more difficult, without his laudable efforts (anyone doubting my sincerity can check my bibliography). And of course in one sense the reason for McElrath’s tip-toeing around the epistemic entanglements of race and realism is obvious: no scholar should ever assume what he can’t observe or reasonably infer. But McElrath’s evidence for his judgments about realist fidelity is quite explicitly his own experience of reality, and in both asserting the primacy of that experience in the case of Chesnutt’s White characters and denying it in the case of his Black characters, McElrath grounds his entire notion of the possibility of realism on fundamentally segregated epistemological grounds. McElrath’s fastidiousness about race, his unwillingness to make assumptions that could be construed as epistemologically immodest or outright insensitive, leads him, strangely, to reject the realism of Chesnutt’s writings where Howells accepted it, but proceeding from the exact same epistemological position he sees Howells occupying. That McElrath recognizes and attributes interpretive significance to his ignorance, though, does not allow him to escape from the trap that he thinks Howells has fallen into. Whether one decides that Chesnutt is a realist or not, then, seems a fairly arbitrary matter, as the conclusions one reaches about fidelity to experience and probability of motive are always already conditioned by assumptions about the kind of epistemological access fiction is able to grant.
Relying on the assumption of impassable epistemic difference to structure the generic coherence of realism, then, turns out to reproduce exactly the kind of problems Chesnutt saw operating in the attribution of imitativeness to Black epistemology. And no wonder, as this impassable difference runs counter to the very project of realism which, in Amy Kaplan’s analysis, consists in part of, “a strategy for containing social difference and controlling social conflict within a cohesive common ground” (23). If Howellsian realism aims to contain social difference, to suggest ways to prevent it from widening, then the idea that the experiences of people of other races are unknowable or uncommunicable suggests that realism itself is a hopelessly flawed project. Indeed, one interpretation of The House Behind the Cedars’s stylistic affinity with romance or melodrama rather than realism is that realism itself was unsuited to describe the epistemological problems presented by racial politics in the U.S. By “romanticizing,” or by borrowing tropes and themes from the romance, Chesnutt was able to present very real problems of knowledge and race that realists themselves couldn’t recognize.

The problem of Chesnutt's realism—whether he had it or didn't—seems conceptually linked to the problem of mimesis in general. As Ryan Simmons has written, for critics who try to read Chesnutt as a realist, “the danger is that his fiction will be seen as merely imitative, an application of the doctrines of William Dean Howells. And critics who wish to write Chesnutt out of the realist tradition, like McElrath, “make [him] appear a minor figure, mimicking—with greater or lesser degrees of success—the techniques of his more important peers” (2). What seems bizarre about Simmons's analysis, though also correct, is that Chesnutt is damned to the status of imitator by both those who want to include him in the realist camp and those who don't. If what makes a good realist is a facility for mimetic representation, i.e. imitation, what makes a “bad” or at least minor realist is a facility for mimicking the facility for mimetic representation. The former mimesis takes place as a kind of translation of the world into the linguistic codes of
realistic representation while the latter is portrayed as a knowledge of only linguistic codes. Shades of George Tryon.  

The knowledge of the world and the knowledge of the code, indistinguishable on the surface of the text, become the terms between which the possibility of linguistic fidelity outs itself as an articulation of literary politics. Like the twin problems of miscegenation and imitation, which counter the indistinguishability of Blacks and light-skinned Whites with a discourse of epistemic difference, the discourse of realism creates distinctions at the level of form not quite in order to contain social difference but rather to contain forms of literary representation that might in themselves pose a threat to the possibility of a common knowledge of the social writ large. Hence Sundquist's fascination with the cakewalk in Chesnutt's fiction, a figure that not only serves as a site of cultural poesis and subversive political thought, but also upsets notions of the transparency of social behaviors and representation: the cakewalk is all fun and games until you realize they're making fun of you.

That Chesnutt so handily anticipated the discursive double-bind that would ensnare his fiction for the next century suggests that the “imitative” qualities of his fiction, far from “flaws” or the result of insufficiently mimetic representation, are part of a formalist critical consciousness that is as acute in The House Behind the Cedars as it is in any of his more transparently socially engaged work. Even outside his fiction, in his work as a stenographer, Chesnutt was alive to the relationship between writing, mimesis, and discourses of imitation that circulate through his fiction. That stenography served not just as a way to make money but as an intellectually engaging enterprise suggests that, besides “discourses” of imitation, Chesnutt's writing, broadly conceived, was conditioned by technologies of imitation. Stenographic script, and Pittman's shorthand in particular, served as the technological corollary to Chesnutt's discursive deployment of imitation. In his journals as well as in his posthumously published novel A Business Career,

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23 Sundquist, of course, locates this particular form of “imitation” as the seat of Chesnutt's subversive imagination. The figure of the “cakewalk” in Chesnutt's fiction, the black mimicry and mockery of white manners, serves as the corollary to minstrelsy, the (mostly) white humiliation of already-subordinated blacks (282).
imitation provides the terms through discourse is “technologized” and technology becomes discursive, suggesting that a way that writerly mimesis could be conceptualized outside of the realist discourses into which Chesnutt's writing fits so uncomfortably.

IV.

In other words stenography, for Chesnutt, took on a social and epistemic import that counterbalanced the resistance his attempts at realism encountered from the Northern White literary establishment. While the relationship between stenography—shorthand writing—and literary realism may seem, on the surface, rather specious, consider a passage from H.T. Kealing's “The Characteristics of the Negro People,” an essay included in the highly influential collection *The Negro Problem* (1903), edited by Booker T. Washington and containing Chesnutt's “The Disenfranchisement of the Negro,” as well as W.E.B. Du Bois's “The Talented Tenth.” In it, Kealing, using a language that seems to invert the discourses of imitation I have been examining, bemoans the rise of routinized, rote systems of education in Black schools:

Add to this, too, the commercialism of the age which regards each day in school as a day out of the market. Boys and girls by scores learn the mechanical parts of type-writing and stenography without the basal culture which gives these callings their greatest efficiency. They copy a manuscript, Chinese-like, mistakes and all; they take you phonetically in sense as well as sound, having no reserve to draw upon to interpret a learned allusion or unusual phrase. And while prejudice makes it hard to secure a place, auto-deficiency loses many a one that is secured (181).

In other words, Kealing worries that the demands of the market are turning students into mere writing machines and leaving them without the “basal culture” that will allow them to understand and interpret what they type—they'll become a generation of amanuenses, vessels for knowledge and culture without the tools to recognize the richness of the language and history passing through their fingertips, and unable to recognize error when they encounter it.

The last sentence of the passage makes it clear that Kealing is more concerned that a lack of “basal culture” will make these students unfit workers rather than unfit citizens, and so
ultimately his plea for humanistic education is just another way of meeting the necessities of “the commercialism of the age.” But the idea that ill-educated typists “take you phonetically in sense as well as sound” implies that nineteenth-century technological innovations like stenographic writing systems and typewriters threatened to solidify and materialize the “inborn” epistemic limitations that critics like Straton and LeConte claimed were peculiar to “Africans.” While writers like Chesnutt ironized the discourse of imitation, Kealing seems to worry that a too-instrumental and too-technologized concept of writing might actually make real what, up to that point, had been only a racial fantasy.

Developments in writing technologies, then, while perhaps the result of politically disinterested innovation, came freighted with political effects. To invert Werner Sollors's observation that, “‘black’ and ‘white’ could serve as such forceful agents that they have had the power to eclipse, or racialize, what they referred to,” racial discourse created such epistemologically powerful categories that any new political, historical, technological, or philosophical development could be drawn into them.24 Hence the worry that technology and the labor market might conspire to conjure the nightmare of racial epistemic difference into reality.

Chesnutt himself dealt with this worry in *A Business Career*, a novel written during the 1890s but not published until 2005. Functioning as both an early “white life” novel and a New Woman novel, its protagonist is Stella Merwin, a typewriter girl from a formerly wealthy family that has fallen on hard times. Hired on a temporary basis to work for Wendell Truscott, the man Merwin believes is responsible for her family's financial ruin, she assumes a different name in order to observe the object of her ire up close. Examining a piece of transcription she has performed for Truscott, she “read over her work carefully to see if there were any mistakes,” and, “was struck by the clearness of what had been dictated and the directness and bluntness with

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24 We need only think of the appearance of the term “Chinese-like” in the middle of the Kealing excerpt to recognize that fears of epistemic closure were always already racialized. Incidentally, the typewriter and Chinese writing have their own history in the U.S. See Williams, “The Technē Whim: Lin Yutang and the Invention of the Chinese Typewriter.”
which it was stated.” Able to analyze the style as well as the grammar and spelling of her boss's work and her own, Merwin displays the active mental ability Kealing worried would be worked out of typists and stenographers. Further, “Stella surmised that this bluntness was due to a lack of the polish of education, and that it was of a piece with his demeanor,” which deepens Merwin's engagement with the text. Not only can she analyze the surface of the text, its style and grammar, but she's able to read out of it indications of Truscott's character, or so she thinks (25).

That Truscott is actually rather cultured—he reads Schopenhauer and hangs out with an aesthete or two—is beside the point. Merwin's analytic capacity is here inseparable from her activities as a typewriter (a term which could refer to both the machine and the person operating it). Later in the novel, contemplating Truscott's brusque manner, she thinks:

There was a certain humiliation in the thought that this masterful, resourceful man might regard her as a mere piece of office furniture—a modern business appliance, like the telephone or the telegraph. She had noticed that men called the writing-machine and the operator "typewriters," indiscriminately; whether the custom grew out of a poverty of language or a confusion of ideas she did not know. In either event the fact was not flattering to the operator's intelligence (139).

Essentially, Merwin is offended by the same idea that worried Kealing: that technology—especially technology related to language and communication—will deprive people of spontaneous intelligence, or that it will make intelligence indistinguishable from the transcription of intelligence. Even Merwin, always on the lookout for culturally significant catachreses, “did not know” whether the fact that “typewriter” refers to both a machine and its operator evinces either a lack of belief in the difference between the two or an indifference to distinguishing them linguistically. The entanglement of linguistic poverty and epistemic crisis penetrates, Chesnutt seems to say, as deeply into the concepts of writing, technology, and knowledge as one cares to go.

In other words, Chesnutt's Stella Merwin presents an argument against the model of racialized imitativeness, presenting a writer (of a sort) whose mimetic practice does not imply an
imitative epistemology. One possible objection: Merwin is a White woman, Chesnutt is a Black man. Surely epistemic relations, if they are modulated by discourses of imitation that are racial in nature, fall into line differently depending on your race, however race is conceived. Perhaps. But Chesnutt's interest in stenography and transcriptive practices was so strong, that, reading A Business Career against the background of his journals, it becomes difficult not to see this White middle-class woman as the articulation of a Black technological counter-discourse of imitation. The three extant volumes of his journals suggest that stenography plays just as active a role in the way Chesnutt imagined and conceptualized realism, writing, and knowledge, that it does not seem to far-fetched to read Merwin's critical consciousness as an extension of his own.

For instance, just days before Chesnutt, in his journal, declared his intention to “record [his] impression of men and things,” he wrote a brief meditation on the project of journal writing and its relationship to the skill of stenography that he was attempting to master: “My Journal is a sort of mental Phonography, into which I speak my thoughts by means of the pen; and at any future time I can recall them by simply opening the book” (Journals 121). “Phonography” here becomes a metaphor suggesting a set of relations between speaking, writing, and memory, as well as between stenography and realism. What seems strange about the metaphor, of course, is the asymmetry between the terms “Journal” and “Phonography.” While the journal is an object, phonography is a practice, and so Chesnutt's metaphor at once materializes memory by imagining it as a form of writing and dematerializes it by transforming an object into a practice.

The way in which these seemingly contradictory ideas fall into equivalence, along with the similarity between the journal as “mental Phonography, into which I speak my thoughts” and the journal as a place to “record my impressions of men and things,” suggests that around 1880 both realism and stenography were exerting a kind of conceptual pressure on Chesnutt's writing. His “dream” of being a writer came to take on the more specific character of becoming a realist writer, one who “records,” and his dedication to learning stenographic script seemed to concretize how the process of recording actually happens. Following Lisa Gitelman's claim that
“shorthand alphabets, phonographs, typewriters, and other nineteenth-century innovations in the area of inscriptive practice are so many theories of language and textuality,” Chesnutt's investment in shorthand writing takes on a theoretical import that carries over into his fiction (4). Given that he was acquiring the skills to become a stenographer at the same time as he was becoming a writer, and that, in his journals, he describes realism and stenography in such similar terms, the idea that a form of writing that captures human speech and a genre of writing that captures human experience might be something more than merely descriptively similar provides a compelling analytic through which to reconcile the asymptotic proximity of the terms “realism,” “mimesis,” and “imitation.”

Despite the fact that Chesnutt's stenography started at the same time as his attempts to write fiction, the most heavily mined sites of writing-speech relations in Chesnutt's oeuvre are his dialect stories. This is not unreasonable. His story “The Goophered Grapevine” was, famously, the first fiction by a self-declared Black man ever published in The Atlantic Monthly. Like Joel Chandler Harris's wildly popular Uncle Remus stories, “The Goophered Grapevine” and all of the fiction collected in Chesnutt's book The Conjure Woman displays dialogue that supposedly transliterates Black speech into written English. Chesnutt writes the speech of Julius McAdoo, the former slave who tells the conjure tales, in a style that's more or less characteristic of dialect writing: “I would n' spec' fer you ter b'lieve me 'less you know all 'bout de fac's. But ef you en young miss dere doan' min' lis'nin ter a ole nigger run on a minute er two w'ile you er restin', I kin 'splain to you how it all happen” (Stories 9). In Chesnutt's dialect writing the orthographic conventions of written English are foregrounded, as though the careful placement of apostrophes and ad hoc manipulation of vowels were evidence of a finely-calibrated dedication to maintaining the fidelity between speech and writing.

If the epistemic and discursive problem of “imitation” revolves around the conceptualization of knowledge and culture as property, something that cannot be “owned” in a proper sense by Blacks, then Chesnutt's equation of writing and “mental Phonography” comes to
look like an unconscious negation of that problem, or at least an attempt to solve it. Phonography, as a form of writing that Chesnutt considered both a trade and an art, binds the ideas of writing and property to each other at the molecular level. Rather than a realism that claims “fidelity to experience” or a dialect writing that relies on the manipulation of orthographic convention to simulate human speech, Pitman's shorthand was a writing system specifically designed to mimic, record, and reproduce the spoken word exactly rather than approximating it. As Gitelman has suggested, the late-nineteenth-century demand for dialect fiction required an author with an ear for the language as it was spoken rather than written—think of Mark Twain's claim, in the preface to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, that he scrupulously distinguished between many regional dialects in the course of writing the novel—which suggests that, even for writers who may have never given a second thought to shorthand, stenography and fiction existed in continuity rather than opposition (52).

Through the metaphor of phonography, the journal becomes a model of perfectly mimetic writing, a location where Chesnutt can stamp his “impressions of men and things” directly while practicing phonographic script. And while stenography as a practice, in its technical details, most closely resembles dialect writing, it comes to represent the possibilities of realism: that reality is immediately apprehensible to the writer; that realist writing might serve as a site of mutual understanding and a form of public knowledge; that through practice one might hone the craft of fiction in the same way one learned stenographic script; that imitation might not constitute the sign of racial-epistemological closure, but could foster openness and access to the minds and experiences of others. Whereas the dialect stories see Chesnutt's technical knowledge of stenography on display, in *The House Behind the Cedars* we see the political import of the entangled notions of imitation and knowledge disseminated throughout the novel's very structure. Chesnutt's life-long engagement with stenography provided not only material support for his family, it provided a material conception of mimetic representation, one that depended on an
imitative practice that, like Stella Merwin's interpretive activities, imbued seemingly rote activity with intellectual force.

Throughout this chapter I have tried to unspool the thread of imitative relations weaved throughout Chesnutt's thought and writing, relations through which his writings attempt to transmute some damaging discursive practices of his day into models of political possibility. As I hope I have demonstrated, his attempts were not always successful, but they were always meaningful interventions in epistemic problems posed by the question of realism. Chesnutt's writing served as a game of telephone, that most epistemologically-fraught children's game, in which the “message” of certain discourses (miscegenation, imitation, realism) passed through his work and emerged on the page in a garbled but revealing form. This metaphor suggests that the communicative possibilities Chesnutt envisioned for his fiction were disrupted by deeper cultural antinomies than even he was perhaps aware of, conditioning factors that undermine the “common thoughts” of a culture.

In passing from miscegenation to imitation, from fiction to stenography, from race as an internal, biological quality to race as an external, indexically unreliable color, I've tried to suggest that Chesnutt's concern with realist representations of race was inseparable from his doubts about the possibility of realistic representation. Moreover, insofar as race becomes, in his writing, a sign of uncertainty rather than one of identity, Chesnutt's conceptualization of race posed major challenges to the assumptions that granted generic coherence to realism. Though he's now a card-carrying member of the American canon, his uncertain position as a realist demonstrates not so much his inability to adhere to realist convention, or to effectively innovate within it, but rather realism's dependence on an unarticulated set of beliefs about race and racial politics. Chesnutt's sensitivity to this politics came partly through his own lived experience as a Black man in the North and the South, but also through writing technologies that uncannily reproduce the formal features of realism.
There is a sense in which the three key terms this chapter has been most concerned with—“imitation,” “mimesis,” and “realism”—seem to substitute for each other in certain moments. The ideal of mimetic writing becomes synonymous, in the minds of its practitioners, with realism; the idea of imitation and mimesis, while they can mean essentially the same thing, come to take on wildly different connotations; imitation proves to be both realism's goal and the sign of a failure to write realistically. That these terms seem to stand in for each other at different moments, I think, reflects not only the strange way in which concepts that are linked to the idea of imitation come to imitate each other, but also the degree to which a notional realism provided the conditions wherein a writerly ideal could easily morph into its opposite. In trying to demonstrate that these transitions and substitutions were also shared by writing technologies, I have meant to suggest that the blurry distinctions between the political and the literary, the internal and the external, the past and the future, the natural and unnatural around which Chesnutt's thoughts revolved were a part of the material, technological imagination of the late nineteenth century. The next chapter will continue this line of thinking, finding in Henry James's work a similar set of exchanges between the material, technological conditions of writing and the epistemological imaginaries at work in his fiction.
Chapter 5

The High Brave Art: Materialism and the Epistemology of Dictation in

*What Maisie Knew*

... on this occasion moreover that having been difficult to keep step, we hear of the march of history, what is remaining to that essence of tragedy the limp? We scarce avoid rolling, with all these famished and frustrate women in the wayside dust ... mere patchwork transcription becomes of itself the high brave art.

Henry James, on his deathbed

What is the “what” in *What Maisie Knew*? Is it, like Milly Theale’s letter or Vereker’s figure in the carpet or the crack in the golden bowl, one of those noumenal late Jamesian things that never appears in the descriptive register of the text? Or, like one of those “items of high civilization” that “are absent from the texture of American life,” is the “what” a promise that readers of the novel will find within an enumeration of the things Maisie knew? Does the “what” designate a substantive thing at all, or is it simply a deictic signpost gesturing toward some ineffable knowledge hinted at but never fully delineated? Does it refer to a singular quantum of knowledge or an entire epistemological landscape? The title’s ambiguous reference to knowledge, in other words, is complicated by a kind of incomplete reference—we know Maisie knows something, but we don’t know what she knows or even how James is construing the object his title gestures toward. The problem of epistemological uncertainty, then, begins before you even open the book.

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1 For extensive commentary on Jamesian “things,” see chapter four in Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things*.
And then even once you do open the book, there’s the preface. As James describes it, the entire narrative mode of the novel is premised on the rift between the adolescent Maisie’s perceptual faculties and her epistemic limitations: “Small children have many more perceptions than they have terms to translate them; their vision is at any moment much richer, their apprehension even constantly stronger, than their prompt, their at all producible, vocabulary. Amusing therefore as it might at the first blush have seemed to restrict myself in this case to the terms as well as to the experience, it became at once plain that such an attempt would fail” (27). Children can perceive but they lack the terms to describe their perceptions; children may “know” but what they know cannot be articulated as knowledge. The very descriptive ambiguity that attends the novel’s title, then, reproduces in miniature the epistemic dilemma that James finds so interesting in his title character. Moreover, while the very unavailability of descriptive terms to Maisie constitutes the character’s interest for James, it also presents its own descriptive limitation. While James wants to tell the story from Maisie’s point of view, the fact that she “has many more perceptions than … terms to translate them” means that he cannot fully focalize his narrative through Maisie, for to do so would disallow him from articulating the very forms of inarticulateness he found interesting in the first place. James wants not only to tell Maisie’s story, but tell it so that “the one presented register of the whole complexity would be the play of the child’s confused and obscure notation of it, and yet the whole … should be unmistakably … seen through the faint intelligence” (27). James wants us to see with Maisie’s uncomprehending vision, but he wants us to comprehend the uncomprehension without getting mired in it. James’s desire to represent not just Maisie’s position in the novel’s marital criss-crossings but her experience and perception of her position, then, runs up against an epistemic paradox.
And at the same time as James was building his fiction on this paradox, he was engaged in conceptualizing (or failing to conceptualize) another writerly practice. As is well known, James often dictated letters to his secretary but began, with the composition of *What Maisie Knew*, to write his fiction that way as well. While some of James’s close friends claimed they could identify the exact page in *Maisie* where he left of writing by hand and began dictating, the question of stylistic difference has become a point of debate among James scholars, especially as the practice of dictation relates to the emergence of the “late manner.” Some, like Richard Menke and John Carlos Rowe, and close acquaintances of James’s like Theodora Bosanquet, have given more weight to the role of technological changes in James’s writing. Others have claimed the opposite, that James’s dictation had little or nothing to do with the emergence of the late manner. David Hoover, for example, in a quantitative study of James’s word usage, finds that “neither analysis of James's novels over his whole career nor analysis of chapters or sections of *Maisie* offers any substantial support for the hypothesis that James's change in mode of composition had a major effect on his style” (16). Hoover’s conclusions align closely with James’s own analysis of his mode of composition—in a letter, he claims that after a few years of practice, dictation “becomes *intellectually*, absolutely identical with the act of writing” (*Letters* 247). In James’s phrasing, dictation and writing are separate activities bound by a common intellectual root. Though at some point dictation was both physically and “intellectually” different from writing, it has become intellectually identical over time. James’s dictation, then, doesn’t necessitate a development in intellectual activity, but a progressive return to a prior intellectual method. Whether or not critics of this school think the practice of dictation actually impacted James’s work, the dualistic division between intellectual process
and writing practice—the difference between the intellectual activity of writing and the physical process of writing—governs their thinking.

A curious consequence of this dualistic view of writing is that, just as dictation becomes intellectually identical to handwriting, handwriting becomes intellectually identical to dictation. James encourages us (or Mrs. Cadwalader Jones, to whom his letter was addressed) to imagine his process of composition as originating in a purely mental activity controlling the movements of a hand and stylus across a page. James thinks, the hand writes, the word appears. But if dictation can become intellectually identical to handwriting, handwriting has always involved processes of dictation, insofar as the term “dictation” can come to designate the same processes for James—each term seems to imply the other.

To oppose “writing” to “dictation,” then, is to break up an activity James conceived of as continuous into an opposition justified by the historically contingent succession of the former to the latter. While it’s undeniable that, in the chronology of James’s life, dictation follows handwriting, the link between the two practices seems to inhere at the conceptual level. The tautological nature of the relation expressed in the dyad “writing/dictation” accounts for some of the confusion in the discourse surrounding speech and handwriting in James criticism. Sarah Campbell, noting the incoherence of the distinction, writes that, “The fact that James composed in an interactive and coextensive blend of speech and writing means that we miss something if we treat his late writing as just writing. James’s work also muddies the tidy difference—or identicality!—set up between an initiating speech event and its textual incarnation (the dictated text)” (166). The difficulty in writing about James’s writing is the collapse of difference into identity and identity into difference. Mental initiation and physical incarnation fall apart as coherent categories as “writing” becomes a shell game, located in various iterations in the mind,
on the page, in the air. Like the problem of making the reader comprehend incomprehension, James’s conceptualization of dictation and writing founds itself in a conceptual obscurity that grounds the act of literary production

James’s transition into dictation, then, is also his transition into a new relationship to a crucial inscription technology: the typewriter. If James’s comments on his own writing practice imply an epistemology of dictation, then the act of transcription provides a necessary corollary, because dictation without transcription would just be talking. If the last chapter argued that inscription technologies provide a way to rethink the epistemic assumptions underlying the literary politics of realism, this chapter will argue that inscription technologies, specifically the typewriter, provide the epistemic common ground on which textual metaphor and writerly practice come to take on a strange kind of identity. That is “knowing” in What Maisie Knew comes to resemble the dictating practice that produced it. Rather than chalking this up to James’s idiosyncrasy as a writer, this chapter argues that the homology between literary style and literary practice is the site of the realist impulse in James’s writing, an impulse that travels from the mental conceptualizations and muscle movements that initiate the writing process to the formal register of the text.

As in the previous chapter, here the relationship between literary production and technical reproduction, between writing conceptualized as an act of sovereignly-produced aesthetic labor and transcription as a writing act shorn of the qualities that we associate with aesthetic production, becomes a way to consider the ways in which technological interventions modulate realism’s epistemological imaginaries. While the case of Charles Chesnutt provides a way to consider how emerging technologies reframe the epistemic claims of realism, here James’s dictation provides an analog to the way his late fictions handle the interpenetration of
speech and thinking, of knowledge and ignorance, comprehension and incomprehension. The externalization of the writing process appears not simply as a consequence of the painful hand cramps that afflicted James later in life but increasingly as a constructive element in the way he conceptualized the relationships between language, knowledge, and communication in his fictions.

Accordingly, this chapter will begin with a consideration of tropes of externalization and materiality in *What Maisie Knew* as a way to introduce the epistemic problems posed by James’s fiction and writing practice, as well as a way to reconsider them. Moving from a specific novel to formalist theories of the novel inspired by James’s essays and prefaces, this chapter will claim that the very notion of literary form so crucial to James’s understanding of the novel participates in the same dialectic of materiality and immateriality that operates in his conceptualization of knowledge and writing. Rather than confining the argument to the thematics of literary texts—whether essays or novels—James’s scene of writing here plays a critical part in understanding the ways in which the act of dictation itself, the physical act sustaining aesthetic production, serves as a recursive epistemological model. In one sense, James’s dictation implies a one-directional flow of information and materialization, as James’s fiction makes its way from speech to writing via the nexus of the amanuensis. In another sense, though, as a reading of *What Maisie Knew* demonstrates, it is almost as though James himself were using the writing relations of the dictator and the amanuensis to conceptualize Maisie’s understanding of knowledge. James himself seems to internalize and aestheticize the process of dictation even as it is underway, memorializing it as his young protagonist’s epistemology.

In bringing the dissertation proper to a close, then, this chapter seeks to achieve a number of goals. One is to consider the ways in which problem of epistemic commonality
enters James’s fiction by way of technological innovation. In a sense, the act of typewriting performs the utopian hope of common knowledge by externalizing the process of aesthetic production, by making that act of production perceivable by another person—externalization is one way in which the tropes of commonality and the material effects they occasion and produce come to define the realist impulse at the turn of the century. This chapter seeks to neither claim James as a realist nor to argue against his status as a modernist but to suggest that the entanglement of process and product, of technology and writing, would be a way to reconceptualize generic, historical, and epistemic differentiations between realism and modernism. Viewed through the recursive frame of the scene of writing, and with a characteristic admixture of super-heightened perceptiveness and obliviousness, James seems to be grappling with the ways in which the changing conditions of modernity penetrate even into the writer’s study, into his very articulation of the language. Just as the fantasy of common knowledge serves as both a bulwark against modernity’s destructive entree into human relations and the conditions of those relations’ decay, James’s transition from novelist to dictator demonstrates the inextricability of writing and the technologies that enable it to enter the social world. Despite its origins in James’s final, delirious dictation to Theodora Bosanquet, his forecasting of transcription’s ascension to the status of “high brave art” finds its analog in his own practice.

I.

The plot of What Maisie Knew revolves around the divorce of Beale and Ida Farange, Maisie’s parents. After a judge orders that they share custody of Maisie, each subsequently becomes involved with other people. Ida marries Sir Claude and Beale marries Mrs Overmore, Maisie’s former governess. Because James wants to present Maisie’s perceptions to the reader
without sacrificing their resistance to Maisie’s still-developing vocabulary, perceptions and knowledge in *What Maisie Knew* find themselves condensed into metaphors that not only draw on the materials at hand to Maisie but that themselves seem to take on the mass of the physical objects that constitute the metaphor’s vehicle. We’re introduced to this physics in the novel’s second chapter when, after her parents’ divorce hearing, James describes her parents, Ida and Beale Farange, as pouring their thoughts in Maisie’s “gravely-gazine soul as into a boundless receptacle.” Listening to Ida rail against Beale, James tells us that her mother’s diatribe “was a missive that dropped into her memory with the dry rattle of a letter falling into a pillar-box” (42). Throughout the novel, Maisie’s container-like consciousness receives perceptions as so many letters she cannot open and objects she cannot manipulate. Knowledge, while internalized by Maisie, remains essentially externalized insofar as it is inaccessible to her.

Maisie’s parents consistently neglect her, while their new spouses adore her. The novel consists, in large measure, of Maisie’s other governess, Mrs.Wix, attempting to impart some form of moral education to Maisie in the midst of all of this unseemly behavior. Sitting on the beach, watching the sunset, Maisie has a vision of her own impending attainment of all available knowledge:

> As she was condemned to know more and more, how could it logically stop before she should know Most? It came to her in fact as they sat there on the sands that she was distinctly on the road to know Everything. She had not had governesses for nothing: what in the world had she ever done but learn and learn and learn? She looked at the pink sky with a placid foreboding that she soon should have learnt All. They lingered in the flushed air till at last it turned to grey and she seemed fairly to receive new information from every brush of the breeze. By the time they moved homeward it was as if this inevitability had become for Mrs. Wix a long tense cord, twitched by a nervous hand, on which the valued pearls of intelligence were to be neatly strung (213).
In characteristic Jamesian fashion, though, there is some ambiguity surrounding who is actually imagining this scenario.² The sentence that precedes it reads, “[Maisie] judged that if her whole history, for Mrs. Wix, had been the successive stages of her knowledge, so the very climax of the concatenation would, in the same view, be the stage at which the knowledge should overflow,” which suggests that Maisie generates this sequence in order to imagine and extend an epistemological fantasy that she attributes to Wix. In other words, the progression from knowing “More” to “Everything” to “All” is Wix’s version of knowledge acquisition as imagined by Maisie. But when we reach the end of the paragraph, we discover that “this inevitability,” the ineluctable progress from More to Everything to All, becomes for Wix “a long tense cord … on which the valued pearls of intelligence were to be neatly strung,” suggesting that it is Wix herself who conceives of Maisie’s intellectual progress not just as a logically inevitable sequence, but also as a physical object on which are strung literal (imaginary) pearls of wisdom. Though the passage begins with Maisie trying to think of herself as Wix does, it silently shades into Wix’s condensation of a logical sequence into a static image, despite the fact that, as James has narrated it, she doesn’t actually conceive of the logical sequence herself.

We might ask what, in a novel that is in large measure about the transmission, attainment, and nomination of knowledge, facilitates this particular transmission. Or, if there is not knowledge transmitted or shared between Maisie and Wix in this moment, what kind of epistemological schema allows for this degree of fluidity between the thoughts of two characters?

² The ambiguity of the relationship between thinker and thought in James’s fiction has its own peculiar subset of critics and theories. See in particular Seymour Chatman’s The Later Style of Henry James (Barnes & Noble 1978), Sharon Cameron’s Thinking in Henry James (Chicago 1989), and, more recently, Thomas Otten’s A Superficial Reading of Henry James: Preoccupations with the Material World (Ohio State 2006). Otten locates part of this “ambiguity” in the physical appearance of prose, which “blur[s] the boundaries between person and object” by “creating a fluid surface in which the eye can mistake one kind of thing for another, a slippage the Jamesian syntax heightens and exploits” (14).
In this passage the figuration of knowledge oscillates between two figures, one material and the other ethereal, each existing on opposite sides of what Sharon Cameron calls “the thin but requisite tissue between events supposed to be objectified and their impression on [Maisie]” (66). In the latter, Maisie’s (or Wix’s) anxiety over her knowledge of the world evinces a shift in the conceptualization of knowledge that seems to torque a set of quantitative gains into a qualitative, metaphysical difference. At first Maisie envisions the attainment of knowledge as the attainment of “Most” knowledge, that is, an increase in the quantity of things known. From Most she progresses to “Everything,” in which every quantum of knowledge would come into her possession. These accumulations describe knowledge acquisition as the acquisition of discrete data, pieces or chunks or bits of knowledge, like those “valued pearls of intelligence” strung along Wix’s “long tense cord”; they are isolable and numerable. The third stage for Maisie, from Everything to “All,” seems to indicate a shift of a different sort. If Everything marks the limit of knowable things, All indicates a form of knowledge through which something over and above every thing is known. “All” transcends the imagination of knowledge as discrete and material, rendering it simultaneously as bodiless and all encompassing. The end-stage of knowledge, its terrifying final form for Maisie, is omniscience. In its alignment with the “brush of the breeze” that seems to carry information directly from the atmosphere into Maisie’s body, infusing her with knowledge but leaving her helpless to refuse it, the continuum between the material and the transcendent coincides with a felt opposition.3 Knowledge remains both desirable and

3 We might here recognized the delivery of information via invisible means as a coded iteration of what Richard Menke has called “telegraphic realism,” or the ways in which Victorian fiction both imagines and becomes “a medium and information system in an age of new media” (6). Though Menke reads James’s “In the Cage,” his story of love found through the telegraph wires, in this context, it is clear that information, disembodiment, and communication in some ways resist a technological model of mediation, relying instead on pure writerly technique to clear the breezeway between one mind and another. See Richard Menke, Telegraphic Realism: Victorian Fiction and Other Information Systems (2008).
theoretically attainable so long as it is constrained by matter—once it loses its body and floats free of any particular material structure, it takes on a painful, demonic quality.

If, in the silent transition between Maisie’s imagination of knowledge and Wix’s, James manages a figurative transformation of a metonymic logical sequence into a metaphorical static image, this transition also conceals in another register its opposite number. Insofar as the All of the pink sky and the brush of the breeze constitute the endpoint of a sequence, they also present the results of this sequence concretized into a singular image, an encompassing picture, comprehensible as a totality—epistemology-as-seascape. Similarly, Wix freezes knowledge into a metaphor—the string of pearls—that implies an associative, accumulative, metonymic logic. Figuration then serves to encapsulate the unrepresented subject of Maisie’s dread (the transcendent All of disembodied knowledge) in a static picture, distinguishing the description of knowledge from the terms in which it is experienced.

The other form of knowledge, that which takes a coherent material shape in Maisie’s imagination, signals a degree of comfort with knowledge and knowing. When Maisie learns of Sir Claude’s financial straits and the fact that she’ll no longer attend private school, she “was to feel henceforth as if she were flattening her nose upon the hard window pane of the sweet-shop of knowledge” (120). The metaphor invites us to imagine, as Maisie does, knowledge as a profusion of candies and chocolates, displaying the same repetitive, numerically multiple but formally similar and sensuously attractive qualities as the string of pearls. Here Maisie condenses “knowledge” as a concept into a clearly apprehensible set of images selected from a child’s storehouse of wants and desires. The nose flattened against glass, the force of frustrated desire for knowledge, comes to us as pressure exerted on the exterior of the body, while in the previous image, knowledge is delivered by an anxiety-inducing force that cuts through the body, delivered
by a sensory impression—it is as though the “brush of the breeze” carries information directly from the atmosphere into Maisie’s body. In the sweet-shop of knowledge, bodily sensation figures the resistance of economic circumstances to knowledge’s attainment, whereas on the omniscient beach, All-encompassing knowledge appears unbidden in the guise of sensation.

This discrepancy between two variously imagined forms of knowledge has led some critics to claim that “consciousness” or “thinking” or “knowledge” in James’s work remain hopelessly fuzzy subjects. The question of whether or not words like “knowledge” have any meaning in James is, I think, the wrong question. Rather, we ought to ask how “knowledge” indexes the manner in which people think about knowledge. For Sharon Cameron, the novel’s last line (”[Mrs. Wix] still had room to wonder at what Maisie knew.”) portends to a kind of solidity that its evasiveness denies. But it turns out that the title *What Maisie Knew* and the line of the novel that either provides the title or contextualizes it, serve different functions. For the novel’s title reduces the amount of signifying labor that “knew” is made to perform in the title—the title no longer recapitulates the evasiveness of knowledge in general, it presents the “what” of knowledge as an object deferred in favor of a conversation about how knowledge is construed. It’s worth noting that the construction of the sentence allows us to imagine both that Wix does and does not know what Maisie knows. Either Wix, marveling at how much Maisie knows, knows what Maisie knows, or she, wondering what exactly it is that Maisie knows, does not know what Maisie knows. In both cases, the open question of whether Wix and Maisie know the same things is beside the point. The object of Wix’s wonderment is Maisie’s capacity to know, the way in which she knows.

Despite this concern with the way in which Maisie knows, James goes to great lengths to name the “what” of Maisie’s thought, or the “what” in which thought is lodged. For, again,
thinking and knowing appear only insofar as they are given shape by an act of epistemological imagination, one that nests thinking inside the figuration of an object. James’s “vessel of consciousness” (as he calls Maisie) contains a kind of unassigned jumble of perceptual material; likewise, as a “vessel of bitterness” loaded with her parents’ bilious statements about each other, she serves as a messenger between them (26, 36). In either case, in James’s description of Maisie as a vessel that merely “contains” consciousness or in his narrator’s description of her as a vessel that contains transmitted thoughts over which she can claim no ownership, Maisie’s figuration as a thinking person begins as a thought-holder or envelope for thoughts rather than a generative source of them.  

Thoughts attach to things and enter the memory to be discovered later. Faced with the prospect of a confrontation with Beale Farange, Maisie is unsure whether she can handle an argument with her father. She experiences “an odd unexpected shame at placing in an inferior light, to … Sir Claude,” but remembers Wix’s “telling her that no one was seriously afraid of her father,” spurring her to declare to Sir Claude, “Oh I daresay I can manage him!” (109). An earlier statement by Wix, rather than registering at the moment of its perception, blossoms into knowledge when circumstances occasion it.

The novel’s motor is precisely a model of language, thinking, and memory that imagines itself as one of correspondences, material attachments, as successful (if recondite) *nominative practice*, in which the attachment of thing and meaning emerges from the mind perfectly preserved. Here Moddle, one of Maisie’s early governess’s, attends to Maisie in the midst of one  

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4 Bill Brown, writing of *The Golden Bowl*, approaches this problem in a different way, describing the disjunction between thought and thinker as a split that enables the process of thinking to produce the thinker as a literally *substantial* thing: “For the process of thinking has been empiricized, let us say, to the point where it makes no sense to describe a self or a subject who thinks; rather, a subject appears within the process of thinking and finds the opportunity there to enter a mind. Although readers of James may emphasize the way people are thought about as things, the novel's most striking and famous passages describe thinking itself as a kind of thing, or as a kind of thinging, that constitutes both the subject and the object of thought” (*Sense* 162).
of Beale Farange’s hedonistic gatherings. Attempting to shield Maisie from carousing, bawdiness, and other inappropriate goings-on, the text describes Moddle’s role as governess as a kind of epistemological housekeeper:5

The child wondered if they didn’t make it hurt more than usual; but it was only after some time that she was able to attach to the picture of her father’s sufferings, and more particularly to her nurse’s manner about them, the meaning for which these things had waited. By the time she had grown sharper, as the gentlemen who had criticized her calves used to say, she found in her mind a collection of images and echoes to which meanings were attachable—images and echoes kept for her in the childish dusk, the dim closet, the high drawers, like games she wasn’t yet big enough to play. The great strain meanwhile was that of carrying by the right end the things her father said about her mother—things mostly indeed that Moddle, on a glimpse of them, as if they had been complicated toys or difficult books, took out of her hands and put away in the closet. A wonderful assortment of objects of this kind she was to discover there later, all tumbled up too with the things, shuffled into the same receptacle, that her mother had said about her father (40).

James suggests a model of the mind as a storehouse in which thoughts can remain secret even from their thinkers, in which wary custodians can tuck away dangerous or perplexing perceptions until they return to their perceivers full of meaning. In the distinction in the passage between the “collection of images and echoes” and the “meanings” that are “attachable” to them and in the depiction of Maisie’s mind and memory as a “dim closet” or “high drawers,” James activates a continuity between Maisie’s perception of events whose significance she cannot yet grasp and

5 The model of embodied meaning that I’m attempting to describe in What Maisie Knew is a rather unfamiliar one, not least because it exists both chronologically and theoretically prior to Saussure’s Course in General Linguistics (1916). Foundational to Saussure’s theory are, of course, the assertions that “a linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept and a sound pattern” and “the linguistic sign is arbitrary” (66:67). The non-nominative, arbitrary nature of the sign has undergirded every serious theory of language that has come after Saussure. Yet we find in James a persistent sense of the struggle by individuals to attach thoughts to things, to embody meaning within material objects, indeed to represent the activity of thought as producing a set of objects or substances. Though, of course, we would be foolhardy to call James a linguist, it seems necessary to note that he operates with a set of unspoken semiotic axioms that seem quite different from those actually sustaining the writing itself.
his narrator’s figuration of those events which Moddle has access to, “as if they had been complicated toys or difficult books.” We might recognize in this passage a confusion on the order of the one that occurs between Maisie’s thoughts and Wix’s on the beach. It is, after all, Moddle who “took out of her hands and put away in the closet” those “complicated toys or difficult books” in order for Maisie to discover them later. But in this passage, rather than positing the convergence of two minds through the figuration of knowledge, the figuration of thought and memory as thing occurs in an act of third-person narration that does not seem to focalize the thoughts of any particular character. Moddle’s relationship to Maisie, in other words, participates in an extended metaphor encompassing their relationship to each other and the imagined objects in which Maisie lodges the information she will later rediscover, a metaphor James’s narration attributes to no one save itself.

In that crucial paragraph James concretizes the epistemological scheme underlying the rest of the novel—everything that follows it serves as an explication and elaboration of its logic. Rather than suggesting an unfettered continuity between persons through grammatical slippage, then, James reifies the governess/child relationship through the use of a metaphor that presents a set of frozen relations. Grammatical continuity presents a metafigural dimension that emphasizes the way in which figuration results in a form of embodied experience, an experience of knowledge that is primarily about the relationship between knowledge and bodies, specifically Maisie’s body. The extended metaphor of the toys and games, the drawers and closet, features Maisie and Moddle as parts of a metaphor without a moment of transition into any other figure. So although Maisie’s thoughts are described with a strange kind of solidity (so solid that Moddle herself can hold and manipulate them, take them out of her hands), that scene never enacts the passage out of one epistemological configuration and into another one. This distinguishes it
crucially from the later scene on the beach, allowing us to mark Maisie’s contemplations of her own figurative capacity as a sign of growth rather than mere difference. Despite the peculiarities of James’s description, the tenacity with which he clings to the image of Maisie as a vessel (or closet or drawer) that can perceive information that may be incoherible to a child while retaining it intact, Maisie remains a distinct subject, grammatically and figuratively closed off from the refuge of other minds.

James’s efforts to trace out the process of Maisie’s epistemological development are part of a general trend in his writing of the 1890s. Along with *What Maisie Knew*, he produced in that decade his short story “The Pupil” (1891) and, of course, “The Turn of the Screw” (1898). James’s fascination with children in this period, especially in enigmatic tales like “The Turn of the Screw,” seems to have a special relationship to earlier and later depictions of knowledge and consciousness. Carolyn Steedman has remarked that during the period between the publication of Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister* (1795-96) and Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1901), “the individual and personal history that a child embodies came to be used to represent ‘insideness’” in general (4). Through pondering the interior experience of children, Steedman claims, writers and scientists came to construe “interiority” as embedded in a process of growth and development, one manifested by the presence of the child in literature and science writing.

In the episteme Steedman traces out, then, Maisie would serve as a primary emblem not just of childhood, but of the very notion of a psychological interior that is available to representation in literature. The degree to which James’s rendering of Maisie’s consciousness and thinking belongs to strictly idiosyncratic “Jamesian” ideas remains an open question, then. His rendering of the preservative qualities of Maisie’s mind and memory emerge out of what Michael Taussig has called the “absurd epistemology” of the adult’s imagination of the child’s
imagination. For the adult, “a child exists in some time outside of itself, half in and half outside adult reckoning, as when adults talk about serious things, including children, in the child's hearing, as though the child cannot hear, or when they switch back and forth between addressing the child sitting there in front of them one minute as object and next minute as subject.” This “comic” oscillation between believing a child can understand and that she can’t, put the child in the position, “of being and not being there, part eavesdropper, part idiot, part fairy.” Further, the “considerable powers for fancy, disavowal, and contradiction in this epistemology are further magnified …by the adult imagining of this imagining, using this child, so to speak, as a way of making metaphor literal and almost viscerally effective” (454). In speculating on the metaphorical dimensions of absurd epistemology, Taussig seems to envision (not to say “imagine”) the adult’s imagination of the child’s imagination as a way in which literal, living, breathing children take on metaphorical value, their imagined depths becoming a “vast cultural resource appropriated by modernity” (454). It is as though Taussig expanded James’s discussion of the particular challenge of making incomprehension comprehensible into the very epistemic limit of adulthood in general.

James’s descriptions of Maisie as a “vessel” manifest some of the qualities of Taussig’s absurd epistemology, as does the sense that Maisie both does and does not know what she knows, and the fact that her knowledge is in some way accessible to others. Absurd epistemology provides a way to consider metaphorical descriptions of Maisie as a vessel or container, something that holds reified objects of knowledge inside of herself, as part of a larger general oscillation between the deployment of rhetorical and grammatical patterns. In its inability to settle into any one configuration or mode rhetorical mode, absurd epistemology transposes its
operations onto the figures it describes; like Maisie, it continually rediscovers, redescribes, recapitulates what it hid within itself.

II.

Maisie’s knowledge, then, indexes the particular ebb and flow of James’s descriptive, grammatical, and rhetorical modes across the novel. A glaring instance of ignorance, though, provides the link between *What Maisie Knew* and a broader discourse of form. If Maisie’s incessant figuration of knowledge provides comforting solidity and a mnemonic anchor to her sense of self, the unavailability of certain thoughts for figuration (rather than the unavailability of figuration for certain thoughts) invokes the immaterial aspects of the novel recapitulated in the discourse of formalism that would emerge out of the critical works and prefaces of James and others.

In a passage in which Maisie is being made to choose between obeying Sir Claude and obeying Mrs. Beale, Wix forces her to pause and consider the “morally correct” response, demanding “‘Your moral sense. *Haven’t* I, after all, brought it out?’”

[Maisie] had indeed an instant a whiff of the faint flower that Mrs. Wix pretended to have plucked and now with such a peremptory hand thrust at her nose. Then it left her, and, as if she were sinking with a slip from a foothold, her arms made a short jerk. What this jerk represented was the spasm within her of something still deeper than a moral sense. She looked at her examiner; she looked at the visitors; she felt the rising of the tears she had kept down at the station. They had nothing—no, distinctly nothing—to do with her moral sense. The only thing was the old flat shameful schoolroom pleas. "I don't know—I don't know” (260).

Morality is here construed by Wix as a kind of sense contained within Maisie that education will emphasize or coax out. The “moral sense” resides within her, awaiting activation. Maisie’s
response reveals an instance of thought from which “knowing” is absent. In her attempt to “bring out” Maisie’s moral sense, Wix elicits only a “short jerk” of Maisie’s arms, a physiological reaction “representing,” we are told, yet another “spasm” occurring “still deeper” than moral sense, after which Maisie is forced to admit despairingly that she doesn’t know. The passage displays an unusually direct, didactic quality—we are told “what this jerk represented” without the flight of figural interpolation James would normally use to elaborate on such a significant movement. Unusual as well that James describes the movement as a “jerk” twice, rather than taking the opportunity to use another word or phrase that could imply additional layers of meaning onto the motion. And, as in the previous passage, the text comes to us through an act of figuration on the part of the narrator, unattributed to any character. When we’re told the “short jerk” represents a “spasm” deeper within Maisie, the narrator seems to have exposed to our view something like Maisie’s interior, rather than presenting Maisie’s own or someone else’s impression of that interior.

The “short jerk” as representation, the manner in which its narration leads us directly from its physical instantiation to a substrate of being deeper than and prior to morality, designates the way in which the missing organizational capacity of figuration spurs fear and shame in Maisie. The “short jerk” represents not just a lack of moral knowledge, but an inability to recognize whether or not what one is thinking can be called “knowledge.” Ignorance, in this sense, operates beyond the realm of knowable things, in fact pre-empts the knowability of things. The “short jerk,” as a representation of a deeper “spasm” prompted by the question indicates a realm of thinking operating in excess of thoughts. For if thoughts require form in order to make them available to memory, then the spasm and its external sign indicate a thought’s grasping after something that is simply absent. Maisie’s searching after an (only temporarily) absent
cognizance of her own “moral sense” opens a rift between thinking and thoughts. In “representing” Maisie’s inner experience with a physical sign, or, better, depicting Maisie’s experience as *representational*, as an act of representation itself, the authoritative voice of the narration inverts the relationship between knowledge and its embodiment. Just as we found knowledge lodged in material things or described *as* material things, we find ignorance embodied in a person. But rather than a recondite process of signification in which a materially instantiated knowledge awaits activation while being stored in James’s “vessel of consciousness,” the narration presents knowledge (our knowledge of Maisie’s ignorance) as both fully available to representation and an act of representation itself.

Maisie’s reification as one of those pearls of knowledge completes itself only in her experience of her own ignorance. Moreover, the narration enacts this completion formally by maintaining a position “outside” the representational process it describes—though we’re told what Maisie’s discovery of her own ignorance looks like, we’re not told about it from her perspective. We watch it happen. In *What Maisie Knew*, “ignorance” provides a kind of formal closure that allows us to distinguish between the figurative dimensions required by Maisie’s epistemological development and a narrative point of view from which we can watch that development succeed or fail. In this way of reading the novel, “form” emerges out of the metafigural shifts allowing us to take these different perspectives on Maisie’s development. James’s absurd epistemology, the manner in which the oscillations between grammatical and rhetorical understandings of narration’s relationship to character enable him to shuffle the reader’s access to Maisie’s own epistemology into different configurations, is formal.

*What Maisie Knew* links the epistemological figuration, the way in which that figuration is described, and the formal qualities of novels that emerge out of the shifts in those modes of
description. Locating “form” as a feature of narrative technique has long been a theoretical sticking point. Even from formalism’s canonical inception, its champions, practitioners, and critics have noted their subject’s intransigently “abstract” qualities. Form, for many critics, is the word given to those aspects of the texts the reader experiences but does not, strictly speaking, read. Summarizing I. A. Richard’s view, Paul de Man writes “Form, as the object of the critic’s reflection, is not a thing … but stands as the equivalent of the experience,” emphasizing the immaterial qualities of the very notion of form (“Dead-End” 233). Percy Lubbock’s highly-influential *The Craft of Fiction* (1921) marks a moment in which “form” emerges as a dominant literary critical category over and against the actual process of reading a novel:

*The form of a novel—and how often a critic uses that expression too—is something that none of us, perhaps, has ever really contemplated. It is revealed little by little, page by page, and it is withdrawn as fast as it is revealed; as a whole, complete and perfect, it could only exist in a more tenacious memory than most of us have to rely on. Our critical faculty may be admirable; we may be thoroughly capable of judging a book justly, if only we could watch it at ease. But fine taste and keen perception are of no use to us if we cannot retain the image of the book; and the image escapes and evades us like a cloud (3).*  

“Form,” as an aspect of a novel, exists independently of any one reader’s ability to experience it. The limitations of human memory prevent any one person from keeping every part of the book “in mind” at any one time. For Lubbock, then, we require a theory of form in order to combat the resistance of fiction to memory. Therefore it makes no sense to exclude “form” from

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6 Nicholas Dames identifies the “heroic period of novel theory’s supposed birth and first efflorescence, book-ended by Henry James’s 1884 polemic ‘The Art of Fiction’ and the twin masterworks of, respectively, Continental and Anglo-American novel theory, Georg Lukács's *The Theory of the Novel* (1920) and Percy Lubbock’s *The Craft of Fiction* (1921)” as the standard point of reference for all theories of fiction and form that would follow (25).
consideration of any novel whatsoever, for as Lubbock explains, form inheres in our very idea of what constitutes fiction in the first place:

One critic condemns a novel as "shapeless," meaning that its shape is objectionable; another retorts that if the novel has other fine qualities, its shape is unimportant; and the two will continue their controversy till an onlooker, pardonably bewildered, may begin to suppose that "form" in fiction is something to be put in or left out of a novel according to the taste of the author. But though the discussion is indeed confusingly worded at times, it is clear that there is agreement on this article at least—that a book is a thing to which a shape is ascribable, good or bad. I have spoken of the difficulty that prevents us from ever seeing or describing the shape with perfect certainty; but evidently we are convinced that it is there, clothing the book (14).

Thus a novel’s “form,” though it outstrips human cognitive capacity, turns out to be the aspect of a novel we can’t help but notice and continually rediscover. Regardless of its quality, “form” constitutes the only universal binding agent in the novel, a quality we as readers recognize through back-formation. Like Maisie making sense of things after the fact, we produce a sense of the novel’s form only after completing the novel—its construction is always retrospective.

The problem of abstraction is also linked specifically to the problem of memory, or to memory’s inability to recall at a whim everything the mind perceives. In “The Pleasures of Ignorance,” an essay roughly contemporary to The Craft of Fiction, Robert Lynd restates the problem: “With a bad memory one can go on reading Plutarch and The Arabian Nights all one’s life. Little shreds and tags, it is probable, will stick even in the worst memory, just as a succession of sheep cannot leap through a hedge without leaving a few wisps of wool on the thorns. But the sheep themselves escape, and the great authors leap in the same way out of an idle memory and leave little enough behind” (15). In this register, memory’s failure allows for both the repetition of the pleasure of a first reading and the realization of reading’s futility. Frank Kermode, though, views forgetting as a necessary part of reading, because it “consists of
excluding from consideration all that is not relevant to a simple grammar of story” (115). Between Lynd and Kermode we can locate two forms of forgetting, one that constructs the reading mind as sieve-like, forgetting texts more or less wholesale and another that constructs the reading mind as a kind of machine for scraping away narrative excess. In the former case, forgetting consigns the reader to an eternal return of the text, affording her unending pleasure, while in the latter, forgetting enables the reader to retain relevant aspects of the text so the text need not be read again. I’m overstating Kermode’s argument a bit—of course he believes that some texts must be read more than once in order for them to make sense—but the point is that forgetting is here made an accomplice to the abstraction that allows us to contemplate a notion of form (here described in narrative terms) divorced from the reading process.

This imperative to abstract is then the lynchpin in Lubbock’s formulation of “form.” Yet this imperative also renders form curiously diffuse, unavailable to representation. In the course of his analysis of War and Peace he writes, “The best form is that which makes the most of its subject—there is no other definition of the meaning of form in fiction. The well-made book is the book in which the subject and the form coincide and are indistinguishable—the book in which the matter is all used up in the form, in which the form expresses all the matter” (40). It is thus precisely when we have trouble recognizing form itself that we can recognize form’s immersion in some other element of fiction. And for Lubbock, of course, Henry James’s fiction represents the fusion of form and subject honed to perfection, in which the “narrator” melts into a diffuse, unlocatable “point of view”: “The Ambassadors … is a story which is seen from one man’s point of view, and yet a story in which that point of view is itself a matter for the reader to confront and to watch constructively. Everything in the novel is now dramatically rendered, whether it is a page of dialogue or a page of description, because even in the page of description
nobody is addressing us, nobody is reporting his impression to the reader” (170). In emphasizing (as James himself emphasized) the dissolution of the narrator into “point of view,” Lubbock all but demands that we read “point of view” as a synecdoche for form itself.  

As I’ve emphasized, *What Maisie Knew* displays that dissolution of the narrator into a point of view, but it is not *all* it displays. Lubbock’s way of handling point of view assumes that it is always stable. Readers, after all, don’t merely read, they “confront and watch constructively” the “matter” of the “point of view.” This formulation rests uneasily between the stasis implied by the term “point of view” and the sense that this stasis is continually constructed by the reader as he is reading—it is both a feature of the text and a feature of the physiological process through which individual, human readers receive the text. The sense that a certain kind of narrative distance is maintained betrays James’s (and now Lubbock’s) conception of the novel as a reportorial form, not in the sense that it conveys information about the world to the reader like a newspaper would, but in the sense that it *implies* in the conceptual register a pre-linguistic event that it conveys to the reader through language. Given this, Lubbock’s claims regarding the stable “point of view” of the novel and the reader’s construction of that point of view posits an ironic reversal, in which the event the novel describes occurs, in a sense, in the reader’s head. *What Maisie Knew* seems to describe precisely this process—the sense in which external events enter Maisie’s imagination almost as material things bears a conspicuous resemblance to a Jamesian-

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7 Here the interpenetration of form and content provides another instance of a broader tendency in James continually remarked upon by his critics. As R. P. Blackmur puts it, “the artist [James says] *creates* the moral value out of the same material and by the same means with which he creates his other values—out of the actual and by means of imagination. The values are, though distinguishable, inextricable. Some works may show aesthetic values without moral values, and other works very clearly have no aesthetic values and yet shriek to heaven with their moral values, but where you have both orders of value as they are created, together, so they must be felt together, at least so long as the work being enjoyed is enjoyed as art” (79).
Lubbockian⁸ conception of form that emerges from a static “point of view” and yet requires the reader to “confront and watch constructively.”

In Nicholas Dames’s account, theories of fiction and theories of the novel elaborated in James’s wake discard “any theorization of reading, a gesture which was given a more thoroughly philosophical, even metaphysical, justification by his successors” (33). By distancing form from any particular reader’s experience of a novel, Lubbock, claims Dames, transforms novel theory into,

a species of epistemology: how we learn, in other words, not how encounter a succession of incidents (which would necessarily partake of the misleading temporal flow to which mere reading submits). In disinterring form from any particular experience of form, he risks making novel-reading, even the abstract brand he discusses, an “informational” process, which would be uncomfortably close to the commercialized, everyday forms of consumption that he and James began by rejecting. There is, in fact, a peculiar sense that novel-reading is, by virtue of the purely communicative role of “point of view,” not very distant from newspaper-reading or advertisement-reading, other modes of textual consumption that depend more upon the transmission of information than the diffusion of affect (35).

Borrowing a term from Dorothy Hale, Dames finally claims that “Lubbockian ‘noetic materialism’ placed the form of a novel in a space-that-is-no-space, a purely mental geography which annulled as well the troubling temporality of narrative reading” (47). Dames’s critique of Lubbock’s formalism, then, implicitly denies the tenability of form divorced from an embodied reading experience.

For Dames, Jamesian-Lubbockian novel theory equals a conception of novel-reading as epistemology, and this is not to its credit. Yet in What Maisie Knew, that is, in a novel, we get

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⁸ I use this term only as a rhetorical convenience. I’m well aware that there are differences between James’s and Lubbock’s conception of the novel. I only wish to gesture to their shared notion of point of view.
variously described versions of an epistemological imagination that come to look very much like Jamesian-Lubbockian novel theory. Dames leaves out of his critique the crucial balance between, *pace* Roland Barthes, writerly technique and readerly experience, the sense in which point of view is both on the page and in the head. In this way, rather than a novel theory that looks like a simplistic model of epistemology-as-consumption, Jamesian-Lubbockian novel theory comes to resemble the epistemological arrangements and dilemmas James described in his novel, a novel that is chronologically prior to the bulk of the theoretical writing Dames critiques. To claim that James and Lubbock promote a vision of the novel that is, “by virtue of the purely communicative role of ‘point of view,’ not very distant from newspaper-reading or advertisement-reading, other modes of textual consumption that depend more upon the transmission of information than the diffusion of affect,” is to reduce “transmission” to a simple cash transaction rather than the complex oscillation between grammatical and rhetorical modes on which James’s notion of form depends.

III.

Dames's reductive account of James and Lubbock's notion of form seems wholly divorced from the experience of reading their writings. One of James's overarching concerns in his criticism and in the prefaces to the New York Edition was the defense, elaboration, and, in some sense, theorization of the novel. But James's critical concerns never wholly divorced themselves from the thematic concerns of his novels. In the years leading up to *What Maisie Knew*, when, in essays like “The Art of Fiction,” he sought to formulate a new set of terms for novel criticism, and in the years following it, when, in the prefaces to the New York Edition, he tried to generate the terms through which his own fiction would be discussed, James's critical endeavors ran parallel to his fiction. For critics that would emerge in James's wake, the notions
he developed in this parallel endeavor contributed significantly to what would become “formalism” in Anglo-American literary criticism.

This interest in the use of form as a figural device that James uses to describe the expansion of Maisie's epistemological horizon should not be confused with the broader notion of form James started to develop in his criticism and in the prefaces. The two seem to occupy different conceptual registers of the text. In the novel, form manifests in a broader sense through the figural tendencies James assigns to Maisie's character—the desire for form is possessed by the character's mind. In the criticism and prefaces, form is bound up with James's stated intentions regarding the construction of his novels. After all, the prefaces are James's attempt to both explain and chastise himself, to let the reader in on what is really going on in his work, to tell them directly how it fails to measure up to his own standards, how it meets them, and how its exceeds them. Form, the degree to which his novels have it in the right measure and the degree to which they don't, becomes a kind of litmus test for their success.

In order to clarify the rhetoric of “form” at work in James's criticism, it's worth turning to one of the prefaces. In terms of its subject matter and the approach James took to it, The Princess Casamassima (1886) stands out starkly against his other work. Casamassima, after all, is the Henry James novel “about the anarchists.”⁹ I do not wish to focus on the novel itself; whether or not it’s “accurate” is outside the scope of this chapter. But by the time he found himself writing the preface for the novel’s New York Edition (1908), he must have come to terms with the improbability of his having written the story in the first place. In the preface he offers a

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⁹ As every new generation of James readers inevitably is, James’s contemporaries were rather surprised by the novel’s subject matter. In a review in New Englander and Yale Review, Edward G. Bourne noted “the last place we would expect to meet with a bloody conspiracy against society for the benefit of the people is in the pages of one of his books” (396).
Let me at the same time not deny that, in answer to probable ironic reflexions on the full license for sketchiness and vagueness and dimness taken indeed by my picture, I had to bethink myself in advance of a defence of my ‘artistic position’. Should n’t I find it in the happy contention that the value I wished most to render and the effect I wished most to produce were precisely those of our not knowing, of society’s not knowing, but only guessing and suspecting and trying to ignore, what ‘goes on’ irreconcileably, subversively, beneath the vast smug surface? I could n’t deal with that positive quantity for itself – my subject had another too exacting side; but I might perhaps show the social ear as on occasion applied to the ground, or catch some gust of the hot breath that I had at many an hour seemed to see escape and hover (The Art 77).

Lionel Trilling, while not openly contesting it, looks askance at James’s claim to ignorance.

Though Trilling nowhere claims that James had any first-hand knowledge of the political scene he describes in Casamassima, he writes, “If, to learn about the radical movement of his time, James really did no more than consult his penetrating imagination—which no doubt was nourished like any other on conversation and the daily newspaper—then we must say that in no other novelist did the root of the matter go so deep and so wide. For the truth is that there is not a political event of The Princess Casamassima, not a detail of oath or mystery or danger, which is not confirmed by multitudinous records” (68). James, of course, did visit Millbank Prison in preparation for writing the novel, which suggests that his “sketchiness” and “vagueness” have nothing at all to do with a want of factual information (Edel 147). Trilling’s larger point is that James handles issues of class and poverty more sensitively and humanely than the political left often gave him credit for at the time, and so the sentences regarding James’s verisimilitude are necessary.

Of note in the passage from Casamassima’s preface is James’s claim that he anticipated beforehand objections to the novel’s fidelity to any real political movement. He manages these
anticipated criticisms by incorporating his own perceived ignorance into the fabric of his novel. Thus his self-described project consists in rendering the ignorance of "society" rather than attempting to alleviate it, as, say, Upton Sinclair would attempt to do. This act of rendering removes “our not knowing” from a position that might place the novel’s verisimilitude into question to one allowing that very lack of knowledge, the “guessing and suspecting and trying to ignore,” to function as the “donné,” the author’s “freedom of choice” in selecting his subject matter. In the “The Art of Fiction,” written a couple of years before Casamassima, James defends this freedom, arguing that subject matter ought to lie outside the purview of criticism, and that an individual novel’s failure resides not in poor choice of subject, but in “failure to execute,” a failure at the level of form and technique rather than conception (584). This is how James justifies categorizing “our not knowing” and “society’s not knowing” as conceptual decisions impervious to criticism: if facts and details are wrong, it is a consequence of the novel’s conception, not any flaw in its execution, and therefore outside the scope of any criticism.10

But if the donné serves as a bulwark protecting James (and, he would claim, all novelists) from a certain kind of critical attack, it also generates certain internal difficulties in the preface. In James's conception of what it means to render the world in fiction, a conception he argues all successful writers of fiction have shared and must share, the writer filters his observations through "the reflecting and colouring medium" of a perceiving mind (The Art 67). Moreover, this perceiving mind must “feel and ‘know’ enough … for his maximum dramatic value without feeling and knowing too much for his minimum verisimilitude, his proper fusion with the fable”

10 The readings of James’s prefaces and criticism here are necessarily brief. For a more richly textured, detailed analysis, see Hale, Social Formalism.
The artistically successful writer filters his story through the medium of a character who must know enough to move the story forward but not so much that they know more than any real person could. Such a notion of the narrator relies on a kind of doubleness, for when James refers to the “reflecting and colouring medium” and the range of knowledge it has available to it, he is referring to a character.

Yet, more often than not, and definitely in the case of Casamassima, this character is not, strictly speaking, the narrator—it's the character through which the novel is focalized. If the character serves as a medium, then there is some other narrator function that frames and describes these experiences, and shuttles them to the reader, something we might call the narrator proper. If James may plausibly speak of the degree of “knowledge” his central character possesses, and describe the limit of that knowledge as part of the novel's donné, its premise, then this character in some sense conceals that other narrator, the one responsible for recording the thoughts and perceptions of the perceiving character and transmitting them to the page’s surface. There's some sort of lexical confusion between what we would now speak of as the “central character” and the “narrator.” This unspoken sense of the narrator’s doubleness, that the “story” consists in both a character’s fictional “experience” and a personality-less narrator’s description of that experience, stakes out a rather wider swath of territory for the donné than one might expect.

Indeed the preface to Casamassima is dedicated in large measure to a rhetorical coupling of this doubled narrator with the conceptualization of the novel itself, to a fusing of the manner in which a story is told to the information available to the “colouring medium” of a central character. The problem of form, then, is also a problem of knowledge. The oddest thing about such an equation is that James more or less acknowledges this to be the case. The overlap
between what readers can know, what characters “know,” and the ground in between made up by
the narrator constitutes something like the formal register of the novel. The “colouring medium”
seems to give us some clue as to how James conceptualizes his novel's form.

But we might question how seriously we're meant to take the series of tropes and figures
that James employs. After all, if we consider Ross Posnock’s characterization of the
“improvisational” nature of the prefaces, their tendency to proceed by reconciling, through an act
of retrospective autoanalysis, a later articulation of principle with an earlier articulation of
practice, we must read James’s ever-shifting panoply of images, metaphors, and conceits as
descriptive devices intended to enliven his analysis of his novel’s form, but not necessarily as
statements indicating a figural endoskeleton determining the shape and contour of his final
product (25). The figure of the “colouring medium” of the central character’s consciousness, for
example, imputes a permeating quality to consciousness, one that obeys a certain logic of
metaphor. It posits an \textit{a priori} split between the consciousness of the character and the language
through which the reader receives an account of that consciousness, as if, somewhere, there
existed a version of the novel’s linguistic events awaiting presentation by the mind of a central
character. The interpretive dilemma presented by the figure of the “colouring medium,” then,
consists in its centrality to the metaphorical apparatus James constructs in order to describe the
form of \textit{The Princess Casamassima} and the subsequent \textit{inflation} of that figure from descriptive
convenience to formal principle. That is, in the transition from its deployment as a means to
convey the importance of a narrative idea, it installs a metaphorical logic within the preface that
virtually demands we read “colouring medium” as implying the separation of language and a
perceiving consciousness, a separation that would come to define the Anglo-American discourse
of formalism. James’s efforts to describe the features of his own form frequently present this
problem. In the analytic disjunction between young James and old James, the latter’s attempt to
give an account of the former results in repeated and various attempts to breathe life into the idea
of “form” through the deployment of a startling number of figures and tropes, such that the entire
notion of form as articulated by the prefaces takes on a kind of amorphous generality.

IV.

The dilemma of form in the prefaces consists in the havoc wrought by rampant metaphors,
the insistence with which James proposes them as serious models through which to think through
his fictions, and the untenability of that proposal. Sharon Cameron has argued that “the Prefaces
to the early novels propose the centrality, isolation, and sufficiency of consciousness, which the
novels contest,” suggesting a fundamental disjunction between the two (41). As she points out,
the entire endeavor of writing is “exteriorized” through James's process of dictation. She
distrusts James's own claim, made in a letter written to Mary Cadwalader Jones, that
“[dictation] … becomes *intellectually*, absolutely identical with the act of writing,” citing the fact
that James began dictating his fiction in the 1897, in the midst of writing *What Maisie Knew*, a
novel in which “James is investigating … to what extent consciousness … is 'inside' persons and
to what extent it is 'between' them.” That is, James claims that process of handwriting his
manuscripts and the process of dictating them are “*intellectually*, absolutely identical,” and that
the differences between handwriting and dictation are “material and illusory” (32). Cameron
seizes on the unlikely notion that dictation has had no effect at all on James's writing, when it's
clear to her and others that James's style changed drastically in that year; Edel relates that, “his
friends claimed they could put their finger on the exact chapter in *Maisie* where manual effort
ceased and dictation began” (*The Treacherous Years* 176).
James's equation between the “material” and the “illusory,” between the physical facts of his process and his immediate negation of those facts, has larger implications not simply for the stylistic shifts in his writing, but for the way in which he conceives of the epistemology of writing. It is as though the physical act of writing were completely divorced from writing as a form of thought, as though writing consisted only of thinking. If the materiality of writing is precisely the thing that doesn't matter, “writing,” as far as James is concerned, is closer to Cameron's “exteriorized” form of thinking than it is to anything we might normally think of as writing. Here the homology between James's practice and his product is nearly explicit: Jamesian-Lubbockian form possesses those very qualities James ascribes to the act of writing itself. Immaterial, abstracted, both operate seemingly independently of the material aspects from which they emerge. Just as “point of view” is a synecdoche for “form,” “form” is a synecdoche for “writing.”

James’s negation of the materiality of writing, the actual circumstances of his literary production, makes a kind of intuitive sense. The huge amount of writing he produced in his life suggests that his ability to write was more or less unaffected by his physical surroundings. the persistence of the materialization of thinking and thought in his novels—beginning with What Maisie Knew—indicates that, while he may have been found the material circumstances of writing negligible as a practical matter, they worked its way into his fiction as an overriding thematic concern. The denigration of materiality in the realm of writing coincides with materiality’s centralization in the writing. Moreover, in What Maisie Knew, materiality is often a criterion for the internalization of knowledge, whereas James considered the actual writing of What Maisie Knew to look something like the externalization of thinking.
These chiasmatic exchanges between life and art, thinking and writing, form and content have presented endless occasions for the contemplation of the relationship between James's social world and his writing.\textsuperscript{11} James's “amanuensis,” Theodora Bosanquet, in a remembrance of her deceased employer published by the Hogarth Press in 1924, hints at some of these issues when she recalls the manner in which James would come across the source material for his tales and novels:

More often than not, the initial idea for a tale came to Henry James through the medium of other people's talk. From a welter of anecdote he could unerringly pick out the living nucleus for a reconstructed and balanced work of art. His instinct for selection was admirable, and he could afford to let it range freely among a profusion of proffered subjects, secure that it would alight on the most promising (49).

“Other people’s talk” was indeed crucial for the composition of \textit{What Maisie Knew}. In his notebooks, James recounts attending a party at James Bryce’s house on November 10, 1892, during which Bryce’s sister-in-law told a story of which it immediately struck me that something might be made in a tale. A child … was divided by its parents in consequence of their being divorced. The court, for some reason, didn't, as it might have done, give the child exclusively to either parent, but decreed that it was to spend its time equally with each—that is, alternately. Each parent married again, and the child went to them a month, or three months, about--finding with the one a new mother and with the other a new father. Might not something be done with the idea of an odd and particular relation springing up 1st between the child and each of these new parents, 2d between one of the new parents and the other—through the child—over and on account of and by means of the child? \textit{(Notebooks} 126).

It is perhaps telling that Bosanquet would highlight those tendencies of James’s most closely aligned with her own experience. Rather than a spontaneous genius creating \textit{ex nihilo}, Bosanquet describes James as a particularly astute reporter, possessed not only of the ability to tell a story,

\textsuperscript{11}See Edel, Jonathan Freedman, \textit{Professions of Taste: Henry James, Aestheticism and Commodity Culture}. 
but to recognize a worthy one even when couched in casual conversation and to draw out from it the dramatic possibilities lying dormant within. In a certain, much more constricted sense, this was Bosanquet’s position vis-à-vis James as well; she would sit and listen as he paced and talked, she transcribing, he occasionally asking her to read back sections just spoken. For both in very different ways, the particular milieu of speech dictates the terms in which language and incident make their way from speech to writing, from event to story, from conversation to art. Bosanquet herself never commented on this overlap, but much in her writing hints at it. Though she was not acting as an auteur as James was, she seeks to emphasize those highly “situated” circumstances of writing James calls “illusory.”

Accordingly, the use of the word “medium” in the passage above could hardly have been coincidental. Bosanquet was deeply involved in the Society for Psychical Research, and convinced Henry’s brother William to join its ranks. As a participant in séances, the term “medium” would designate more for Bosanquet than a simple means of transmission, and Bosanquet most likely conceived of her typing as a similar endeavor to those of a medium. As Pamela Thurschwell writes in her study of technology and magical thinking in the fin de siècle, “The relationship of the medium to his or her living or dead dictator is one that requires a 'fluent' apparently intersubjective cooperation usually imagined as absent in the relationship between human and machine” (104). Yet the machine was absolutely crucial to James. Bosanquet notes that “at the time I began working for him, he had reached a stage at which the click of the Remington machine acted as a positive spur. He found it more difficult to compose to the music

12 One can read this confluence clearly in her diaries. When sitting down to transcribe for James, she registers her amusement at James’s condescension: “Mr. James assumes complete ignorance of any literary knowledge on the part of his amanuensis. He told me that ‘The Newcomes’ was in one word, and that it was by Thackeray!” This observation also appears in “Henry James at Work,” though shorn of its telling exclamation point (62; 34). Years later, after James’s death, she bemoans the fact that she “couldn’t ever be any use in the automatic writing work,” for the Society for Psychic Research “because one must have a classical education to be able to understand the frequent classical allusions,” presumably those of the dead (112).
of any other make. During the fortnight when the Remington was out of order he dictated to an Oliver typewriter with evident discomfort, and he found it almost impossibly disconcerting to speak to something that made no responsive sound at all” (34). Again, despite claims to the contrary, the conceptual equation between the material and the illusory remains more important to the way James imagined writing than to the way he actually practiced it.

For anyone interested in James’s process, Bosanquet’s pamphlet, diaries, and letters function as some juicy footnotes to his own prefaces and notebooks. Instead of a set of arguments, analyses, and rationalizations produced as a set of reflections on writerly process, Bosanquet provides a set of impressions of the process itself, in which the embodied, precisely situated aspects of the process turn out to be as crucial as the subtle balancing act of the “scenic method.” Bosanquet’s accounts of James allow us to recognize the gap between writing as an object and writing as an activity. Insofar as they attempt to blueprint and explicate the Jamesian canon, the prefaces and notebooks provide us with a vision of James as an artist always in the process of becoming himself.

In one register, we might look at the typist’s activity, new as it was and not broadly practiced until the turn of the century13, as a phenomenon that limns what Miles Orvell has called the nineteenth century’s “culture of imitation” and the early twentieth century’s “culture of authenticity.” The culture of imitation was “fascinated by reproductions of all sorts” and “inspired by faith in the power of the machine to manufacture a credible simulacrum,” while the

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13 The problem of pinning down the invention of a machine we would recognize as a modern typewriter is notoriously difficult. As Wilfred Beeching notes, “It would be impossible to write the history of the typewriter from its actual inception, for there was no true beginning” (quoted in Werschler-Henry 34). By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, though, there were several versions of the typewriter in production. Anybody referring casually to a “typewriter” might have conjured visions of a number of machines. Accordingly, the practical aspects of typewriting could not have been pinned down until the mechanics, or at least the layout, of the machine were standardized.
culture of authenticity reacted against this tendency, “an effort to get beyond mere imitation, beyond the manufacturing of illusions, to the creation of more ‘authentic’ works that were themselves real things” (xv). The typing amanuensis, as a mechanized reproducer of the dictator’s words, seems to belong to the culture of imitation from whence her (and by the time Bosanquet wrote her pamphlet, it was most frequently a her behind the keyboard) machine emerged. Yet in the use of the typist to capture and materialize speech, we can recognize a notion of written language’s fidelity to speech underpinning the widespread uses of the typewriter in business—the typewriter became a way to legitimate speech, make it “official,” make it real in itself. Bound in its mechanics to imitation and in its epistemic import to authenticity, the body-machine complex encompassing the amanuensis, the dictator, and the typewriter operates outside of Orvell’s dyad, interrupting the neat distinction between writing’s imitation of speech and the typed document’s self-evident authenticity.

By simultaneously disowning and incorporating the material qualities of writing, James’s writing practice and his fiction speak to the insufficiency of Orvell’s broad historical claims, but more importantly to a general misunderstanding of materiality in James’s work. The antinomies of production and figuration in James’s self-conception and in his conception of selves emerge out of the same underlying confusion regarding the ontology of the written object. “Form” is the name Anglo-American criticism has given to the liminal site of fiction; for James, form exists in the same no-space as the act of writing itself. I hesitate to claim that the latter—the prominence of the “abstract” notion of form—has emerged directly from James’s idiosyncratic conceptualization of writing. Both seem to participate in some widely and deeply-held beliefs concerning the doubleness of writing. Walter Benn Michaels has remarked that, “‘For writing to be writing, it can neither transcend the marks it is made of nor be reduced to those marks.
Writing is, in this sense, intrinsically different from itself, neither material nor ideal. And the drama of this internal division ... is ... one of the most urgent concerns of artistic representation in the half-century between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of World War I” (21). This nicely encapsulates the minimum conditions for linguistic signification, but the point for writers like James is precisely that writing is imagined to be ideal, not material. That is, for James, the act of writing itself is the enactment of a fantasy. That an ontological fantasy of writing might depart from its epistemological foundation ought to surprise no one: that’s the point of fantasy, especially for James, and especially when that fantasy involves the wholesale renunciation of material, embodied experience that later emerges in the most excited, impassioned, and meticulously detailed fashion in the lives of his characters. However counterintuitive it might seem, the notion of writing’s immateriality provides an equal and opposite counterbalance to thought’s materiality.

And for reasons having to do with its historical emergence as a device that imposes itself between the hand that writes and the writing “itself,” the typewriter often became the site around which those fantasies and anxieties accreted. Martin Heidegger was also possessed by anxieties about the typewriter, writing, and its relation to embodiment and materiality. “Man himself,” he writes in Parmenides, “acts through the hand.” For Heidegger, “only a being which, like man, 'has' the word can and must 'have' the hand” because “through the hand occur both prayer and murder, greeting and thanks, oath and signal, and also the 'work' of the hand, the 'hand-work,' and the tool” (80). The typewriter, through its elimination of “handwriting” from the relation between hand and word, “tears writing from the essential realm of the hand, i.e., the realm of the word,” while “the word itself turns into something 'typed'.” Moreover, typewriting “conceals the
handwriting and thereby the character. The typewriter makes everyone look the same” (81).  

For Heidegger, “typewriting” interrupts the essential relation between man's hand and the word, severing the continuity between the meaning imbued by man into the word and the appearance of the word on the page. The specificity of handwriting, eliminated by the printed word, signals the withdrawal of man's “work” from his “word,” renders every word like every other because no word bears the identifying trace of handwriting, the thing that would link the specificity of a man's activity to Man. “Hand” designates both anatomy and a general realm of writing tethered to identity, as when we say a letter or note is written in someone's “hand.” Heidegger views this link between anatomy and a highly individualized mark as the essential realm of man, one that exemplifies his capacity not just to acknowledge but to “greet,” not just to kill but to “murder.” “Handwriting,” in other words, serves to encapsulate the process through which the materialism of writing conjoins itself with a signifying quality that transcends it, a quality granted to it by the idiosyncracies of the writer's body. Without the linkage between “hand” and “writing,” writing's materiality loses its connection to the authority of human utterance.

If, beginning with the proliferation of commercially viable machines in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, typewriting becomes one of the most charged sites of anxiety surrounding the act of writing, it is because, in Heidegger's analysis, typewriting's radical impersonality erodes the linkage between the body of the writer (who, as dictator, is not obliged to handwrite at all) and inscription: typewriting allows all authorized, all “official” writing to look the same, eliminates personal flourishes, and deletes even those hidden aspects of personality and motive that the pseudoscience of graphology, in existence since at least the middle ages, sought to

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14 Describing the shift from handwriting to typewriting, Mark Seltzer writes “The typewriter disarticulates the relays that allow for the circular translation from mind to hand to eye (the translation between prelinguistic inwardness and the expressive materiality of writing, such that the eye guides what the hand does that the eye reads,” which perhaps helps to explicate the physiology behind Heidegger’s analysis, but without the grumpiness (10).
uncover. Typewriting transfers the authority of writing from “the properly acting hand” to “the mechanical forces [the hand] releases,” abstracts rote motion away from the animating force of the hand's grip on the stylus and transposes it onto the typewriter's keys and hammers. Here, in the crevice between hammer and paper, man’s alienation slips one notch further from an idealized, unified, speaking / writing subject. James’s room where he dictated to Bosanquet is but a modestly expanded, topologically contorted version of that crevice. Heidegger finds this recondite space to house the latest movement in a “history' of the kinds of writing,” one that contributes to “the increasing destruction of the word” (81). For James, the word can never be destroyed, as writing consists in nothing save for itself.

Heidegger's mourning of the passage from handwriting to printing to typing describes, perhaps unsurprisingly, a historical trajectory in which technology wrenches writing ever further from its origin. If “kinds of writing” have a history, for Heidegger it must always be the history of writing's decay, its distancing from the intimacies of “hand.” Typewriting (and, for James, dictation) is simply the most highly-charged location of a confusion and renegotiation over the relationship between thought and materiality, between thinking and writing. What Maisie Knew is as much a historical document as it is a novel, one that pins James’s “absurd epistemology” to broader cultural, technological, and literary shifts in the conceptualization of the novel.

V.

The problem of literary form in general, the dilemma of epistemology in What Maisie Knew, and James’s writing practice exhibit a similar structure, an ambivalent sympathy, can lead us toward some more general questions about the collusion of form and knowledge in late nineteenth century American fiction in general, and in James’s fiction in particular. In the
exchange between a conception of writing as exteriorized thought and, in *What Maisie Knew*, his conception of thinking as internalized materiality, James presents the antinomies of literary form that would remain lodged in critical discourse as a kind of common sense.

In James, though, the problem of materiality, even at a thematic or descriptive level, is particularly pronounced; as many critics have noted, the Jamesian text is forgetful and tends to misplace objects. For all the talk of “the old things” of *The Spoils of Poynton*, we only get descriptions of a few of them; we never see Jeffrey Aspern’s papers; Vereker’s “figure in the carpet” dies with those who discover its secret, never appearing to the reader; we take the crack in the golden bowl for granted; Milly Theale’s envelope; whatever Mrs. Newsome’s factory makes; and so on. The previous sentence constitutes a virtual non-catalogue of absent objects readers can not find everywhere in James’s fiction. Writing of these absent things, Bill Brown notes James’s tendency to gesture toward things while excluding them from the “descriptive register” of his texts:

This ‘that’ in the absence of a ‘what’ can expand to characterize not just the phenomenological dimension but also the epistemological dimension; it can characterize both a character’s and a reader’s experience. Readers of James who complain, as they have since the 1890s, that they don’t understand his fiction might be said to know that something is going on but not what, exactly, is going on (“Now Advertising” 12). The tendency of things not to appear, that is, recapitulates something of the reader’s experience of the late Jamesian text. The absent Jamesian thing figures (or, more precisely, does not figure) not just absence in general but, Brown claims, an epistemological problem provoked by the text. Though Brown does not discuss *What Maisie Knew*, we can recognize in the parallels he draws between things and knowledge, or the absence of things and the absence of knowledge, a familiar thematic, one that ties epistemology to materiality in way similar to *What Maisie Knew*. Though he doesn’t link this coupling of materiality and epistemology to the notion of form,
Brown’s remark does index the way in which the problem of the object’s absence from the descriptive register of the text tends to result in a more generalized confusion in the reader. It is almost as if, Brown implies, without descriptions of objects, readers are condemned to a similar variety of discomfort (though perhaps not terror) as Maisie when she imagines the boundless nature of “knowing All” on the beach. Form, then, emerges in the late manner in general as the negotiation of figuration and the reader’s experience of it, the interplay between textual materiality (rather than the appearance of material or things in the “descriptive register”) and epistemology—“things” in Brown’s vocabulary are a special case of this interaction.

Slavoj Žižek claims that those confusing, maddening features of the late manner ought to be preserved rather than remedied. He claims, one suspects half-facetiously (but really who knows), “If there was ever a work for which the commonplace that, in order to understand it in all its complexity, one has to read it repeatedly, at least twice, does not hold, it is The Golden Bowl: it should be read only once” because “repeated reading tends to cover up the cracks” (139). The ideal reading of James’s most confusing work, Žižek seems to say, ought to retain its initial confusion. To understand the book “in all its complexity,” the reader must remain content not to understand it. Regardless of the seriousness or wisdom of Žižek’s advice, he locates Brown’s perpetually baffled readership as a community of readers that actually understands what James is up to, though they may not understand that they understand.

It is not coincidental, then, that earlier in the same piece, Žižek locates an interplay between form and material in The Wings of the Dove. He utilizes Seymour Chatman’s claim that James’s late style is distinguished by “psychological nominalization,” in which “verbs that designate psychological activity are nominalized,” transformed into agents in themselves (125). Rather than indicating a syntactically embedded reification of subjectivity, Žižek claims, “it is
James’s very nominalizing of predicates and verbs, their change into substantive agents, which in
effect desubstantializes the subject, reducing it to a formal empty space in which the multitude of
agents interact—somewhat like today’s neo-Darwinist theories of subjectivity as the space in
which memes fight their battles for survival and reproduction.” Ultimately for Žižek, this “empty
space” has ethical implications, in that, as in the case of the question of the crack in the golden
bowl, normative, a priori ethical values disappear and “substance loses its substantial character, it
is no longer experienced as a firm foundation given in advance but as a fragile symbolic fiction,
something which exists only insofar as individuals treat it as existing, or only insofar as they
relate to it as their ethical substance. There is no directly existing ‘ethical substance,’ the only
actually existing thing is the incessant activity and interaction of individuals, and it is only this
activity that keeps it alive” (126). The way in which psychological phenomena take on solidity
through grammatical transformation suggests that any idea or fact is meaningless unless granted
meaning through its treatment. Therefore the symbolic-ethical implications of the crack in the
golden bowl acquire ethical force only through the discourse about it, not because it implies any
ethic in and of itself. Its treatment by the characters, and the way in which their “incessant
activity and interaction,” and therefore the ethical force embodied by the bowl, coincides with
the absence of the object itself from the descriptive register of the text.

Žižek seeks to rely on a notion of “subjectivity” as a phenomenon that isn’t described so
much as delineated—the “formal empty space” of the subject is, for Žižek, still at least a fully-
constituted space. He misses a slightly stranger aspect of James’s missing objects, which is that
they are missing for us as well. This is also to say that we know what is missing, that the
substantive lack of the object, whether that object is a thing or not, comes to us presented as a
lack and provokes us to imagine, indeed requires that we imagine, what such an object might
look like, sound like, be like. The missing “that” of ethical substance, of subjectivity, never appears; in its place, we have only a “what,” a “what” we might recognize, in its deictic qualities, as the same as the titular “what” of *What Maisie Knew*.

One of James’s most enigmatic stories of the 1890s relies on a similar referential ambiguity. In “The Figure in the Carpet,” also dating from 1896, the narrator, a nameless literary critic (is there any other kind?), gets himself invited to a dinner party in order to meet Vereker, a great writer who the narrator admires. After Vereker accidentally insults the narrator by criticizing a review he had written about one of Vereker’s books, the novelist attempts to console the critic, telling him that no one has yet discovered the animating force at the heart of his work:

“I can speak for myself: there’s an idea in my work without which I wouldn’t have given a straw for the whole job. It’s the finest fullest intention of the lot, and the application of it has been, I think, a triumph of patience, of ingenuity. I ought to leave that to somebody else to say; but that nobody does say it is precisely what we’re talking about. It stretches, this little trick of mine, from book to book, and everything else, comparatively, plays over the surface of it. The order, the form, the texture of my books will perhaps some day constitute for the initiated a complete representation of it. So it’s naturally the thing for the critic to look for. It strikes me,” my visitor added, smiling, “even as the thing for the critic to find” (*Complete Stories* 579).

Criticism, Vereker tells the narrator, is the search for the secret of form, a secret Vereker himself has planted for readers to find. “The order, the form” that “stretches … from book to book” constitutes the essential core of the work while “everything else … plays over the surface of it.” The distinction Vereker implements here between the superficial qualities of the text and the form that gives it shape spurs the narrator to spend the rest of his life searching for Vereker’s secret. As the narrator, Corvick (a friend and rival literary critic), and Corvick’s lover Gwendolen spend years chasing after the secret of Vereker’s form, it begins to take on those “desubstantialized” qualities Žižek highlights in the late fiction—though it never appears in the
text, it becomes the object of obsession for the narrator. After Corvick, believing he has
discovered Vereker’s secret, travels to Rapallo and confirms his discovery with the author
himself, he promises to tell Gwendolen the secret’s contents as soon as they are married.

As the tale progresses and the secret of Vereker’s form remains out of reach, it begins, in
the imagination of the narrator, to take on some viral qualities: “Corvick had kept his information
from his young friend till after the removal of the last barrier to their intimacy - then only had he
let the cat out of the bag. Was it Gwendolen’s idea, taking a hint from him, to liberate this
animal only on the basis of the renewal of such a relation? Was the figure in the carpet traceable
or describable only for husbands and wives - for lovers supremely united?” (601). Like a
sexually transmitted disease passed back and forth between lovers, the narrator imagines the
secret as something communicable only under certain circumstances, between certain people in
certain relations. In the story’s final paragraph, after the death of Corvick and Gwendolen, and
after the discovery that Drayton Deane, Gwendolen’s second husband, has no idea there ever was
a secret, the narrator tells him everything:

I told him in a word just what I’ve written out here. He listened with deepening attention,
and I became aware, to my surprise, by his ejaculations, by his questions, that he would
have been after all not unworthy to be trusted by his wife. So abrupt an experience of her
want of trust had now a disturbing effect on him; but I saw the immediate shock throb
away little by little and then gather again into waves of wonder and curiosity - waves that
promised, I could perfectly judge, to break in the end with the fury of my own highest
tides. I may say that to-day as victims of unappeased desire there isn’t a pin to choose
between us. The poor man’s state is almost my consolation; there are really moments
when I feel it to be quite my revenge (608).

There are, then, two secrets in “The Figure in the Carpet.” The first is the figure itself, the “form”
of Vereker’s text which refuses to materialize in the text. “Form,” in this tale, is ostensibly
something that can be described, that exists insofar as it’s recognizable, but is kept out of the
descriptive register of the text because our narrator does not have access to it. The second secret is one that we’re aware of, but is revealed to Deane: that there is such a thing a figure in the carpet in the first place. As Brown might say, the “unappeased desire” for the “what” of the figure is spurred by the knowledge of its “that.” The narrator and Deane figure James’s frustrated readers, damned by their desire for a materiality his text cannot offer. The persistent mistake these readers make, the text seems to say, is in looking for one in the first place. “The Figure in the Carpet” allegorizes form by narrating its failure to appear, a failure endemic to the very idea of form. If figuration is the textual maneuver that offers itself to perception, cogitation, internalization, form remains in some way always exterior to anyone who would seek it. Form is the name we give to the figure that never appears.

VI.

“The Figure in the Carpet” is frequently, almost intuitively, read as a message from James to his critics, a text that both tantalizes with its implication that there is a logic animating the strange flights of the Master’s style and warns that the search for such a logic will result only in disappointment, bitterness, and ruin. The abstraction of the secret of form from the “surface” of the work, the sense that it can float free of the text and metamorphose from a secret lodged within ink and paper, almost as though it were an artifact waiting to be unearthed, to a secret handed off among intimates, communicates something of the complex relations between form and epistemology I’ve concerned myself with in the earlier sections of the chapter.

The manner in which What Maisie Knew handles the transition between thoughts and things, between thoughts and their thinkers, the continuity between minds it both sanctions and prevents as a way to reimagine the epistemological conditions of its subject, its little “vessel of
consciousness,” stages a drama between the materiality of thought exemplified by figuration and the disjunction between persons exemplified by alternately uniting and dividing them grammatically. James’s late fictions thus provide a way to think through problems of materialism and formalism, the opposing senses in which James's employment of tropes suggests a model of language and thinking that could transcend the material conditions of language.

The strange thing about this notion of transcendence is the manner in which it suggests an antinomy at work at the heart of the very idea of literary form. Formalist analysis, as Stanley Fish puts it, is “generated by the assumption that meaning is embedded in the artifact,” and that it is the job of the critic to extract and present that meaning (150). As Lubbock's work demonstrates, while that meaning may be in the object itself, it is not available to immediate apprehension by the reader due simply to the novel's size—it's impossible to contain one in your head all at once. Form gains shape as a bulwark against forgetting. In What Maisie Knew, then, the figurative dimension of thought provides an analogous function for Maisie, as she's able to maintain a grip on those concepts she doesn't understand by metaphorizing them and committing them to memory. James's novel allegorizes the notion of form—Maisie is a reader of sorts, one that obeys the tenants of an analytic idea that is emerging at the historical moment of that novel's production, emerging out of the critical and novelistic practice of James himself. Even if it is too much to say that James “gave birth” to formalism or some such thing—especially given that various kinds of literary and linguistic formalisms would crop in places as far flung as Moscow and Prague in the coming half-century—Maisie, as James says in the last line of his preface to the novel, is “of 1907” precisely in that she encodes an emerging set of reading practices. In Maisie, the secret of form is not so much forbidden knowledge passed by word of mouth as the key to the epistemological schema allowing us to recognize her cognitive activities as “thinking.”
The novel is then a weirdly circular thing—it recapitulates not just its own form but the very idea of form, and it is literally produced by typewriting, a kind of writing whose very materiality, James stressed, was beside the point. Just as James is attempting to “think through” his vessel of consciousness, embodying the abstraction of reading in Maisie, he comes to think of his own novelistic production as increasingly divorced from the imperatives of a different sort of embodiment. That is, James seemed to think of writing as a thoroughly abstract activity, one that had to take shape as handwriting or typewriting only through a kind of regrettable necessity. And yet, as Bosanquet points out, writing eventually became possible only under specific material conditions (the Remington, the clacking). James's writing, from 1897 on, seemed predicated on the very idea of its relationship to materiality, on the necessity of material conditions and on the necessity of denying their necessity. The product of the simultaneous requirement and denial of the material conditions of typing leads to the production of fictions that are more and more concerned with the primacy of form as the essence of fiction, with the shuffling of the requirement of writing's materiality into the description of epistemology as a form of figuration. In denying the materiality of writing, then, James aestheticizes it. The notion of form is itself, at least insofar as it emerged in James's writing, the denial of the material conditions of writing's production.

This confluence between James's writing and development of writing technologies, then, suggests deeper connections between material practices and critical concepts. Typewriting and form are deeply connected in James, so deeply that it becomes nearly impossible not to want to speculate on the way James himself imagined these connections. The fact that the evidence in his novels clashes with James's own statements on the matter only makes the desire to speculate more dire. That his amanuensis emphasizes the importance of material practices in spite of
James's own claims makes the entire situation seemingly impossible. James’s investment in “form,” then, doesn’t merely constitute a defense of novelistic practice. Form is one node in a larger network of attitudes and aesthetic investments in materiality that encompasses both material practices as they actually happen (typing) and as they appear in the novel (figuration). These sets of entanglements and interpenetrations suggest that, for realism to remain a useful concept, it will have to be rethought in light of both its own media history, one that includes such supposedly aesthetically impoverished practices as transcription.
Chapter Six

Conclusion: Realism, Modernism, and the Transcription of Literary History

Rather than trying to define how knowledge functions in realist fiction (as though “knowledge” were conceived of in any single way in any single text, much less several different texts written by different people at different times), I’ve tried to identify the rhetorical and discursive networks that underwrite conceptualizations of knowledge emerging around the end of the nineteenth century. Accordingly, I’ve tried to show the difficulty of extricating any model of “knowledge” from the social fabric into which it is woven. Manners, taste, conceptions of race, and the technological adjuncts of writing have all come to serve as surrogates for knowledge and figures that materialize the limits of epistemic commonality. Epistemological uncertainty as it emerges from realist literature of the period is not so much a hazy suspension between belief and doubt as it is the articulation of pervasive anxiety over the dynamics of possession and originality. William Dean Howells, Harold Frederic, Charles Chesnutt, and Henry James, while representing disparate literary commitments, all evince a similar concern with the materiality and materialization of knowledge and taste. Rather than restricting these concerns to a “thematic” analysis, as though these tropes were plucked arbitrarily from the plenum of themes offered up by the literature, I want to suggest that the materiality of knowledge has something to do with the material conditions of literature’s production, with the mechanics of that production, at the turn of the century.

In other words, a more complete inquiry into the epistemological imaginaries at work in the late nineteenth century would have to engage the relationship between the changing function, economics, and social distribution of inscription technologies, not just as a matter of purely
historical interest but as part of a way to rethink realism as part of an array of mimetic practices, concepts, sciences, and behaviors. While this dissertation has limited itself almost exclusively to literature, it has become clear to me that an expanded approach to the topic is necessary not only to answer some crucial historical questions about realism, like why it peaked at the end of the nineteenth century instead of the 1870s or earlier, but to address the problems of both continuity and discontinuity raised by the persistently ambivalent reception realist writing has encountered in critics.

Considered, as it often is now, as important chiefly because it provided the enabling conditions for modernism, realism, as I suggested in chapter three, also has a rather embattled position within accounts of U.S. literary history. In her essay “What Henry James Knew,” Cynthia Ozick articulates this critical preference for the “complexity” of modern by way of an epistemological distinction. “In the fiction of realism,” Ozick writes, “knowledge is the measure of what can be rationally ascertained, and it is almost never a case of knowing too much—i.e., of a knowledge beyond the reach not only of a narrative’s dramatis personae but also of the author himself.” Realism, in other words, conceptualizes knowledge as rationally quantifiable, at least hypothetically ascertainable, diegetically present. While “the masterworks of modernism … nearly always point to something far more subterranean than mere ascertainment,” realism remains, seemingly by definition, the aesthetic of the apprehensible (102). Just as Erich Auerbach found encoded within the narrative techniques of The Odyssey and the story of Abraham two widely divergent sets of epistemological assumptions, Ozick’s delineation between realism and modernism hinges on an assumption of the latter’s striving toward transcendence and the former’s wallowing in materialism.
Elsewhere though, in her fiction, Ozick imagines the identification of realism with material knowledge and modernism with “subterranean,” or inarticulable, knowledge in quite different terms. Ozick, a dedicated Jamesian whose recent *Foreign Bodies* (2010) resets *The Ambassadors* in the Paris of the 1950s, uses her short story “Dictation” (2008) to imagine a sub rosa friendship between Theodora Bosanquet and Lilian Hallowes, Joseph Conrad’s secretary. The “specific sort of intimacy” that, for Pamela Thurschwell, permeates the relationship between the amanuensis and the dictator serves as one thematic strain in the story, while the relationship between the technologically mediated scene of writing and the substance of literary history serves as another (*Literature* 104). By way of conclusion, I want to use “Dictation” to think about the ways in which modernity’s penetration into turn-of-the-century writing arrangements can help us reconceptualize realism’s place in literary history. While Ozick’s story, as she explicitly acknowledges in a footnote, contains several “historical actualities imagination dares to flout,” she presents the conspiracy between Bosanquet and Hallowes as an occasion to imagine the agency of the “medium” of writing itself, a word, like “typewriter,” with a gendered double-definition of person and thing (50). “Dictation” provides a punctuation mark for this dissertation, imagining James, a central figure of both realism and modernism, as a writer whose work is literally saturated by the mediation of inscription technologies. Through a gesture of mediatic *nachträglichkeit*, “Dictation” imagines that the technological and laboring substratum sustaining the act of writing eventually comes to define it. The story’s valorization of, rather than panic about, an essential obscurity in the relations between originality and writing suggests a way to revalue the epistemic crises that subtend so many of realism’s social and aesthetic concerns.
In “Dictation,” meeting accidentally while James and Conrad talk at the Reform Club in London, Bosanquet and Hallowes talk over tea (20). Forward and devious, Bosanquet attempts to endear herself to a more reticent Hallowes (James: “Can you hear, my dear Conrad, the thunder on Olympus, the clash of the Remingtons?”). Each is a partisan of their respective employers, but while Bosanquet worships James as a superior artist, Hallowes is explicitly in love with Conrad. The two become friends despite Hallowes’s misgivings, going to the theater and having tea. Bosanquet bestows an uncomfortable degree of physical affection on Hallowes, who imagines that Bosanquet’s “insistent mouth was wickedly transformed into Mr. Conrad’s” when they kiss (32). Their meetings eventually lead to the revelation of what we sense was Bosanquet’s theory about her and Hallowes’s uniques positions as amanuenses. While others have transcribed the words of great men, she perceives an opportunity in the role of transcriber where others have seen only drudgery. “Why,” she asks, “must we be confined by rules, when all the world’s joys run past them?” Rather than being obscured by history as a mere tool, she hints at some plan: “The chance lies before us—we shall be the first. If only you have courage enough, we two, separately and entwined, will live forever. Forever, Lily! The generations will feel what we do” (36).

What they do is simultaneously an act of subversion and creation. James, Bosanquet tells Hallowes, is working on what will become “The Jolly Corner” while Hallowes discloses that Conrad is working on “The Secret Sharer.” While the Bosanquet and Hallowes are given the manuscripts of the stories to take off to the publishers, they delay delivery and switch passages from each into the other. Ozick describes the act of secretarial collage in terms that suggest both a culmination of Bosanquet’s sexual desire for Hallowes and a chemical event:
In Henry James’s London rooms a small dazzling fragment of “The Secret Sharer” flows, as if ordained, into the unsuspecting veins of “The Jolly Corner,” and in Joseph Conrad’s study in a cottage in Kent the hot fluids of “The Jolly Corner” run, uninhibited, into a sutured crevice in “The Secret Sharer.” There is no visible seam, no hair’s breadth fissure; below the surface — submicroscopically, so to speak — the chemical amalgam causes no disturbance, molecule melds into molecule all serenely (49).

Bosanquet and Hallowes, in other words, are “the first” in a long line of secretaries and scribes to play a constructive rather than a transcriptive role in the production and dissemination of their employers’ work. Bonding at the molecular level, Bosanquet and Hallowes splice the genes of James’s and Conrad’s stories into each other, and become the figurative parents of two new stories, two secret sharers who consolidate the parallels “Dictation” draws between its four principal characters through an act of collage. In some ways, then, Ozick’s sexual-genetic metaphor provides a climax to a building sets of associations between James and Conrad, James and Bosanquet, Bosanquet and Hallowes, and Hallowes and Conrad, a fourfold communion whose orgiastic literalization would have exceeded even Ozick’s willingness to tinker with attitudes, facts, and timelines. Ozick’s trope portrays the subversive as the natural—what might, in one view, look like mischief bordering on malfeasance here takes on the inevitability of the process of DNA replication, reminding us, with another sly anachronism, that the fundamental biochemical processes of life itself are transcriptive in nature. Rather than a violation of the author-genius’s singular generative impulse, the splicing constitutes an historic gesture of the amanuensis’s active role in constructing the text.

Yet, despite the naturalizing work performed by Ozick’s metaphor, throughout the rest of the story the typewriter seems to generate a penumbra of mechanization that extends to the typists themselves. This notion comes mostly focalized through Conrad who, on visiting James at De Vere Gardens spots “the Machine,” which “stood headless and armless and legless — brute shoulders merely; it might as well have been the torso of a broken god. Even at a distance it
struck Conrad as strange and repulsive, the totem of a foreign civilization to which, it now appeared, James had uncannily acclimated himself” (5). Like a passage from *Heart of Darkness*, the typewriter seems to signal the appearance of a negative, alienating force at work within civilization. And sounding a bit like a neurotic Heidegger, Conrad contemplates the heresy of substituting mechanization and dictation for handwriting, the intercession of another person in the writing process as an “[i]nconceivable separation of hand from paper, inner voice leaching into outer, immemorial sacred solitude shattered by a breathing creature always in sight, a tenacious go-between, a constantly vibrating interloper, the human operator! The awful surrender of the fructuous mind that lives on paper, lives for paper, paper and ink and nothing else!” For Conrad, the typewriter (both machine and operator) violates the metaphysics of writing, introduces an alienating modernity into the intimacy between hand, paper, and ink, and externalizes the internal mental processes of writing, turning “sacred solitude” into public display; typewriting is a perversion of writing.

Of course, gout eventually forces Conrad to take on a typist anyway. But, save for one more reference to “the Machine,” his hysterical episode at DeVere Gardens is the last extended consideration of the typewriter in the story. In the story’s final pages, Ozick’s narrator sums up the effect of Bosanquet and Hallowes’s action: “two amanuenses, two negligible footnote overlooked by the most diligent scholarship, unsung by all the future, leaving behind an immutable mark—an everlasting sign that they lived, they felt, they acted! An immortality equal to the unceasing presence of those prodigious peaks and craters thrown off by some meaningless cataclysm of meteorites; but peaks and craters careless nature’s work, while Theodore and Lilian humanly, mindfully, with exacting intent, dictate the outcome of their desires” (49). Here the relationship between dictator, amanuensis, and text has everything to do with the exercise of
intention. Despite the fact that their collage work presumably goes unnoticed by readers of “The Jolly Corner” and “The Secret Sharer,” they leave behind a “sign that they lived,” but a sign that remains illegible because not even the “most diligent scholarship” can see it. While Bosanquet and Hallowes “dictate the outcome of their desires” and exercise an act of intention that distinguishes the indelibility of craters and canyons from the activities of humans, their dictation remains seen by human eyes but unrecognized. In leaving their mark on history, then, Ozick conceptualizes history as a thing made by humans but illegible to them, the product of intention but inaccessible to anyone who would seek to view it from outside.

There is a sense in which the unnaturalness of the typewriter, then, its disruption of the physics and metaphysics of writing, finds itself transformed at story’s end into a model of literary historical illegibility. If it is the typewriter (the thing and the person) that, for Ozick’s Conrad, allows “inner voice [to leach] into outer,” then this same externalizing principle that exposes the internal processes of writing to external processes of dictation, that makes the radically private into the technically public, allows the private knowledge of literary subversion to subordinate the public knowledge of literary history. Anyone can read Conrad and James, and anyone can see the evidence of their interpenetrating texts, but no one can know that what they are seeing is evidence of something other than the author’s directly transcribed dictating voice. No one can know the texts interpenetrate, yet everyone can see their interpenetration. It is precisely the publicly available but universally illegible nature of this knowledge that makes it, for Bosanquet and Hallowes, indelibly historical. While the machine disappears from the descriptive register of the story, it gets absorbed into Ozick’s imagination of the very terms by which we continuously, unconsciously, and perhaps erroneously verify the origins of the work of art in the individualized expressive gesture of a single artist.
Ozick’s story of editorial mischief is itself a mischievous provocation. Rather than a realism that presents us with quantifiable, rational, and material notion of knowledge and a modernism that presents us with a subterranean, enigmatic, and transcendent notion of knowledge, Ozick presents a kind of fable of uncertainty, one that locates obscurity and enigma in the material contours of the text. Ozick’s oscillation between Jamesian and Conradian prose, her knowing mimicry of the very styles she has her two amanuenses describe within the story itself suggests that “Dictation”’s texture is almost completely defined by the forms of authorial intercession it describes. On one hand, we could consider this a “modernist” gesture, but on the other the story itself seems to encourage us to upend our certainty in the determining conditions of our literary history.

This study has tried to describe the 1890s as a period in which epistemological anxiety and social antagonism found themselves harmonized within works of literary realism. But as recent work by scholars like Wai Chee Dimock, Sianne Ngai, and Eric Hayot has demonstrated, disciplinary strictures on periodization often end up obscuring potentially fruitful ways of approaching literary history and disabling otherwise enlightening juxtapositions across temporalities and geographies. For the reconceptualization of realism’s place within the modes of aesthetic and cultural production to move forward, periodizing structures too will have to be rethought.

In the construction of an arch, the stones are placed within a stabilizing frame until the structure is complete. Then, once the keystone is in place, the frame is removed and the pressure from each stone is distributed evenly throughout the arch, allowing it to stand on its own and support weight. I would like to think that the temporal frame of the 1890s has functioned in much the same way for this dissertation, introducing a set of mutually influential epistemological
and social pressures that can find a way to bear the weight of other histories, other places. I
would like to end by suggesting that, like the epistemological imaginaries that have played such
a crucial role in this work, the way in which we imagine boundaries of centuries, decades, and
borders in the study of realism will have to be recognized as the products and motors of the same
kinds of epistemic differences they often seek to reconcile. The scholarship to come will find
itself in the position of either being dictated to by inherited periodicities or subverting those
periodicities by some other means.
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