

REFERENTIAL WORLDS

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Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Vanderbilt University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

English

December, 2012

Nashville, Tennessee

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Spencer and Nita Hines,

and

to Eli Steele, best team member ever.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation would not have been possible without the support and guidance of my committee chairman, Jay Clayton. His ideas have clarified my thinking and delivered me from writer's block countless times, while his generosity with his time and attention has made this years-long journey a rewarding one. I am also extremely grateful to the other members of my committee, Mark Wollaeger, Carolyn Dever and Lisa Zunshine, for their professional guidance and brilliant critical insights.

For taking the time to read early drafts and offer feedback (as well as the occasional tasty treat), I am indebted to Elizabeth Meadows and the other members of my graduate student writing group, Elizabeth Covington and Diana Bellonby. Thanks are also due to Brian Richardson and Michael Israel at the University of Maryland, for first introducing me to some of the research that would later be central to my thinking on narratology and cognitive science.

A large portion of the credit for this work belongs to my parents, Spencer and Nita Hines, who supplied tireless support, encouragement, and world-class editorial skills. And finally, thanks to Eli Steele for keeping morale high and always being there.

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INTRODUCTION:
REALISM AND REFERENCE IN VICTORIAN
POLITICAL FICTION

John Forster, in an October 1839 *Examiner* review Table of Contents of Charles Dickens' *Nicholas Nickleby*, praises the author's depiction of a city both authors know well.

Reading the novel,

we pass along with [Dickens] . . . misty streets in some cold and foggy morning, while but a few meager shadows flit to and fro or now and then a heavy outline of coach or cab or cart looms through the dull vapour, yet were it only for the noises he strikes from time to time upon our ears, distantly and indistinctly as though the fog had muffled them, we could not doubt that it was LONDON. We enter with him by night, through long double rows of brightly burning lamps, a noisy, bustling, crowded scene, in which he shows us the rags of the squalid ballad-singer fluttering in the same rich light that shows the goldsmith's glittering treasures, and where one thin sheet of brittle glass is the iron wall by which wealth and food are guarded from starved and penniless men, and this is the same LONDON as before. At all times, and under every aspect, he gives us to feel and see the great city as it absolutely is. We come to know better the very places we have known best. We observe more smoking and hear more singing in Golden square; the Saracen's Head on Snow hill relaxes into a grim cordiality; the Alphonses of Cadogan place reveal themselves plain Bills to our practised eye (Collins 52–3).

Forster, who would later become Dickens's biographer, was one of his greatest admirers. In praising this work, we might expect him to invoke the author's power of imagination, citing his gift at inventing telling details or crafting psychologically complex characters. Instead, in this fictional text, much of what Forster finds to praise is nonfiction: Dickens' words describe a real place.¹ Forster is intimately familiar with London and "[can] not doubt" that the London in the novel is the same in all important respects as the one his own detailed memories represent to him. One aspect of this "real" London is signified by proper names: recognizable streets, squares and businesses (Cadogan Square, the

Saracen's Head). Less specifically, some of the entities he identifies in Dickens' text are not endowed with proper names, but represent classes of entities Forster assumes exist in real life. For instance, the "penniless men" Dickens describes are not particular people, but stand in for a class of people Forster, Dickens and their readers are all aware of: the urban poor. Forster's summary paints a picture of poor men much like those he might have seen around the city, and contrasts them with the much richer Londoners who patronize the goldsmith and other luxury shops. These figures do not represent real, specific entities, but indicate classes and categories that do exist. Finally, the inclusion of these minimally sketched characters points the way to Forster's consideration of broader problems and issues that involve large classes of Londoners. Forster's review implicitly praises Dickens for directing readers' emotional attention to the widespread and recognizable problems of poverty, starvation and squalor. In viewing the miserable Londoners he alludes to, the reader is also contemplating the "squalid" conditions, the chasm between "the goldsmith's glittering treasure" and those who own nothing. A "thin sheet of brittle glass" that separates hungry men from the food they need is a realistic part of the urban streetscape, but also stands in for a social system that preserves arbitrary divisions between rich and poor, one that is like an "iron wall" although it is barely visible to the eye. This review suggests that the novel is more powerful for drawing in material from the social and political issues of the day—its textual practice "sees" poor men whom other novels might ignore, "sees" the socially regulatory sheet of glass. Forster's review assumes a tight fit between the representation in Dickens's novel and an exterior reality perceptible to Dickens and his readers—that is, he assumes the passages he cites do not just represent a world, but refer to a world.

For this sympathetic and engaged critic, the skill and emotional power of Dickens' writing was inseparable from its ability to conjure up a world Forster knew well. By contrast, today's critics are wary of claiming that fictional texts can or should achieve "realism" in this sense, making reference to the places and things that make up our day-to-day world. Recent theoretical discourses have tended to focus on language as self-enclosed play of sign and signifier, to the exclusion of real-world referents. David Herman refers to "the structuralist moratorium on referential issues" (4), and Jonathan Culler approvingly cites the structuralist principle "that literature is something other than a statement about the world" (130). Most well-known theoretical models that critics use today focus on the *failure* of referentiality, from Roland Barthes' downgrading the real to a cleverly wrought "*effet de réel*" to the critical commonplace that Victorian "realism" is just another set of generic conventions. Nancy Armstrong writes in *How Novels Think* that the type of subjectivity the novel portrays is itself a product of those textual practices: "To produce an individual, novels had to think as if there already were one, that such an individual was not only the narrating subject and source of writing but also the object of narration and referent of writing" (3). In an analysis of nineteenth century realism, Harry Levin writes that the "illusion" of representing life "may be sustained in the novel more easily than on the stage; but it is still an illusion, as Guy de Maupassant so frankly admitted, when he suggested that the realists ought rather to be known as the illusionists" (18). J. Hillis Miller writes "if meaning in language rises not from the reference of signs to something outside words but from differential relations among the words themselves . . . then the notion of a literary text which is validated by its one-to-one correspondence to some social, historical or psychological reality can no longer be

taken for granted” (85). And Barthes writes in *S/Z* that “the ‘realistic’ artist never places ‘reality’ at the origin of his discourse, but only and always, as far back as can be traced, an already written real, a prospective code, along which we discern, as far as the eye can see, only a succession of copies” (167). This moratorium is so strong that in a recent study of the roman à clef, *The Art of Scandal*, Sean Latham finds it necessary to begin his introduction “Be warned: this book commits one of literary criticism’s deadliest sins by treating seemingly fictional works from the early twentieth century as if they contained real facts about people and events” (3).²

Criticism like that of Levin, Armstrong, Miller and Barthes aims to debunk a correspondence theory of language that would align “accurate” propositions with the exterior reality they purport to describe. Nevertheless, this moratorium is more a matter of doctrine than practice. In their discussions of individual texts, most critics make a tacit assumption that is similar to the Victorian critics’: That novels refer to the world outside their pages. For example, in his recent *The Art of Eloquence*, Matthew Bevis insightfully considers “how the literary arena can be considered one in which political questions are raised, entertained, and tested” (8), a discussion subtended by the assumption that the “political questions” novels ask have bearing on our daily lives. Much thematic criticism focuses on the intersection of literature and the most contested political issues of its time, from feminism to empire to economics to law enforcement to medicine. Such criticism would be impossible without the assumption that novels can, as one 1950s critic put it, “expose social causes and plead for the emancipation of the oppressed” (Tillotson 10). Theoretical approaches to literature have not accounted for the ways elements from the referential world habitually coexist with purely fictional elements in narrative texts.³

In this dissertation, I will focus on the success, rather than the failure, of reference in fictional narrative. I argue that contemporary theory's suspicion of reference—the stance that all representations are a “series of copies” of each other, not external reality—has led theorists to ignore one of the basic aspects of fictional texts: They are full of real places, institutions and sociopolitical facts. The fictions of Dickens, Gaskell, Eliot, Hardy and others are skillful blendings of fact and invention, and are meant to be read as such. When Forster reads Dickens, he assumes that his plots will be staged against a background of real places and events. One researcher wrote that these blended texts present the reader with “the seeming impossibility of differentiating fiction from nonfiction moment by moment” (Gerrig 204), but ordinary novel readers readily accept this ontological confusion. Thomas Pavel, a theorist of fictional worlds, uses the term “ontological blends” to describe this distinctive feature of fictional worlds. I argue that the practice of ontological blending is not an exception or a marginal phenomenon, but a central aspect of fictional texts, especially those that strive for realism.⁴ And I argue that to read reference in this way is to put these novels in their correct cultural context. For a knowledgeable and sophisticated reader like John Forster, verisimilitude and faithfulness to London's sensory and economic realities were among Dickens' most important achievements. His novels' referential status was intimately connected to their aesthetic success. And contemporary readers' reactions to skillfully done realism went beyond aesthetic pleasure; as Joseph Butwin puts it, “the novel of social reform completes itself outside the novel in a multitude of acts that may include the joining of societies and the writing of checks” (167). Far from being irrelevant, real-world reference in a novel may spur readers to outrage about such issues as marriage laws, layoffs of Manchester factory

workers, or the treatment of Africans in the Belgian Congo. Vivid depictions of real-world injustices might prompt a reader to change her mind about some contentious issue, or even, as Butwin suggests, to take action.

Why do some genres, and some texts, strike readers as more successfully referential than others? To address these questions, I will draw on approaches from narrative theory, which has provided frameworks for examining (among other issues) how texts construct subject positions for their readers, and how readers assemble mental representations of a narrative using textual cues. Specifically, I will draw on recent work by David Herman, who argues that fictional storyworlds are as integral a part of the fictional text as is plot. Herman's work shows how textual features prompt readers to construct a mental image of a fictional "world," complete with space/time coordinates and an acting situation against which events unfold, as well as the events that make up the plot. He argues that this immersive "storyworld" is largely responsible for the emotionally engaging effects fictions have on us: "It would be difficult to account for the immersive potential of stories by appeal to structuralist notions of story or fabula, that is, strictly in terms of events and existents arranged into a plot by the narrative presentation. Interpreters of narrative . . . imaginatively (emotionally, viscerally) inhabit a world in which, besides happening and existing, things matter, agitate, exalt, repulse, provide grounds for laughter and grief" (Herman 2009, 119). Like other theorists of fictional worlds, Herman stresses that the storyworlds to which texts refer can range from the fantastic and unfamiliar, to those that barely differ from our own familiar world. I extend this idea by proposing that fictional texts need not always refer only to fictional storyworlds. Rather, they can refer directly to places, events, states of affairs and entities in what we take to be our own

“real” world, in much the same manner as a newspaper article or a treatise on political economy. I refer to this mental model of a real world outside the page as a “referential world.” By doing so, I hope to differentiate it from Herman’s “storyworld”—a fictional world that has no referential status outside a particular reading experience—but also to emphasize the parallels between them. Both are mental constructs, not neutral depictions of a real state of affairs

In other words, while I will assume that reference to “the real” in fictional texts is successful, in that common readers as well as critics assume that the “world” novels represent is in some way the same one we encounter in journalism, history and travel writing, I sidestep the philosophical problems of invoking “correspondence” between word and world by arguing that subjects’ understanding of fictional and “real” worlds are analogous: They are always mental constructs, not mirror images of some pre-existing reality. In each case, readers must build up a mental network of entities, relations between them, and varying degrees of probability for different types of event (including more and less likely types of causality).⁵ The worlds of realist fiction are ontological blends, combining elements that are purely fictional with those readers take to exist in reality.

Herman uses the term “storyworld” to capture the insight that “narrative understanding [is] a process of building and updating mental models of the worlds that are told about in stories.” While classical narratology has focused on stories as temporally sequenced series of actions, seeking to understand how readers extract key events (“kernels,” “catalyses”) from passages of text, he seeks to explain that understanding narrative also requires “spatializing or ‘cognitively mapping’ the

storyworld it conveys” (*Story Logic* 8). Storyworlds involve the same types of entities and concepts we encounter in real life: places, actants, states, events, goals and so on. But the storyworld in each fictional text is different, and must be mapped anew by each reader. He refers to an “ecology of narrative interpretation,” a surrounding environment and network of entities against which the events of a story make sense. “An action becomes perceptible and salient only because of the acting situation or ‘opportunity for action,’ in which it unfolds, and that consists of the state in which the world would have been if it had not been for the action at issue” (14). While Herman focuses on fictional worlds, he emphasizes that all reading experiences involve mentally “relocating” oneself to the here and now in which the text’s events take place.⁶

Mentally representing a storyworld allows a reader not just to understand the events of the plot, but to reason flexibly about relationships and possible events in characters’ worlds. Herman points out that the storyworld is analogous to “linguists’ use of the term discourse model . . . a global mental representation enabling interlocutors to draw inferences about items either explicitly or implicitly included in a discourse” (15). His focus is on the storyworld’s difference from the world readers encounter in their day-to-day experience. Nevertheless, he also discusses “contextual anchoring”: “the process by which cues in narrative discourse trigger recipients to establish a more or less direct or oblique relationship between the stories they are interpreting and the contexts in which they are interpreting them” (8). In the chapters that follow, I argue for the widespread role of such anchoring in making possible even basic understanding of fictional narrative texts.

To understand stories, readers are able to construct conceptual mental “spaces” *ad hoc* as they read; these mental spaces are created for a particular purpose and can be richly or sparsely populated. To address the seeming paradox that these spaces can contain real and imagined entities with no apparent contradiction, I will draw on the theory of “conceptual blends,” a concept pioneered by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner. Conceptual blending addresses the ways in which people habitually think creatively by constructing blended mental spaces that allow them to explore specific problems. Blended spaces are constructed mental spaces that contain input from two pre-existing concepts, for the purpose of thinking through a particular situation. A blend “inherits partial structure from the input spaces and has emergent structure of its own” (Fauconnier 149). For instance, a philosophy professor may frame his points as arguments between thinkers, making statements such as “Kant disagrees with me on this point” (157). Such statements make use of conceptual blending, borrowing input from the real situation of a classroom lecture, as well as the familiar frame of a real-time verbal argument, to allow for the more gripping idea of a “great debate” among philosophers. Novels create similarly impossible and counterfactual, but vivid, blended spaces.

In the chapters that follow, I identify textual features that realist and social-problem authors use to achieve reference and alert readers to their specific ontological blends. But I am eager to look at the reactions of real readers, not just textual narratees and “ideal readers.” For this reason, I will use techniques from the more recent school of cognitive cultural studies. Although literary theory has had relatively little to say about external reference in fiction, this subject has been researched extensively in recent years by psychologists who study cognition. In the past two decades, psychology has produced a

sizable body of work that addresses questions about fiction similar to my own: whether fictional texts can contain facts, “teach” readers about the world, and make persuasive arguments about real-life issues.

Compared to the close readings and theoretical strategies deployed in literary criticism, psychological research methods are crude. Laboratory experiments on the reading process typically involve having subjects read brief “textoids” (sometimes as short as a sentence), and answer questions about the information in the stories. Subjects may have their eye movements tracked, or be timed as they read sentences on a computer screen. All of these research methods are very different from the practices of real readers, and cognitive research cannot come close to addressing interpretive questions about what a text means. Nevertheless, applying insights from this relatively young field of study can have beneficial effects for a theoretical investigation of reading practices. Because this discipline begins with different assumptions from those of traditional literary theory, it can provide new answers to old questions. Cognitive insights can augment traditional analysis and theorizing, sometimes by challenging critical dogmas. In recent years, using ideas drawn from cognitive research has resulted in subtle and insightful work by critics including Lisa Zunshine, Mary Thomas Crane, Elizabeth Hart, Amy Cook, Andrew Elfenbein, and others. In Elfenbein’s words, research in cognitive processes can “yield new insight into how readers judge a work of art and how their judgments change their experience of and memory for it” (2008, 428). These ideas are a valuable addition to narrative theory. In addition, looking at cognitive theory can remind us of the similarities between the reading of literature and the less exalted reading practices that most of us engage in frequently. Most of the skills and techniques required

for advanced literary analysis are, in fact, the same we habitually use in our day-to-day lives. As Mark Turner notes, “the central issues for cognitive science are in fact the issues of the literary mind” (Preface).

Specifically, a cognitive approach to literature throws into doubt the notion of “willing suspension of disbelief”: The idea that skepticism is the default state when reading, that readers can suspend it only through an intentional process, that this state of fictional “belief” is too brief to touch on real-world convictions, and that reading imaginative literature is very different from reading nonfiction. All of these assumptions still color critical approaches to the reading process.⁷ As I will argue, research into persuasion through fiction suggests that the opposite is true. Recent scientific work shows that believing some of what they read is automatic for fiction readers, that it is *disbelief* that requires cognitive effort, and that stories with realistic, believable settings can persuade them to revise some of their ideas about the world. There is no “toggle” that would cordon off fiction from biography, history or economy. While it is entirely possible for readers to be skeptical of what they read, or to distinguish fantasy from reality, fiction is also free to engage directly with the issues that interest its readers.

Realism and Reference

How do novels gain referential purchase on a broader sociopolitical field? Victorian realism—specifically, the class of literary works known variously as the Industrial novel, social problem novel or Condition of England novel—will serve as a useful starting point for my investigations. These early Victorian works investigated realms of British life that earlier novels had avoided; Suzanne Keen uses a common metaphor when she writes that the social novels “allow readers to ‘enter’ the dwelling

and factories of the exploited working poor” (67). These novels sought to portray the real world more minutely and accurately than ever before, using techniques of formal realism; their authors and readers assumed that complex, honest depictions of places, institutions and social problems could enlighten readers, change their minds, and even influence legislation. In the early Victorian period, authors discussed “the whole of human (and supernatural) life as they saw it. Reviewers in their turn responded by tackling all these subjects as they arose in the works under scrutiny” (Skilton 7). Industrial novels, which rose to prominence in the 1840s, seemed new both in their subject matter and their approach. Realism, as has often been noted, is a genre with a “most accurate and detailed knowledge of the political situation, the social stratification, and the economic circumstances of a perfectly definite historical moment” (Auerbach 455). Auerbach goes on to add that in *Le Rouge et le Noir*, “the characters, attitudes, and relationships of the dramatis personae . . . are very closely connected with contemporary historical circumstance; contemporary political and social conditions are woven into the action in a manner more detailed and more real than had been exhibited in any earlier novel, and indeed in any works of literary art except those expressly purporting to be politico-satirical tracts” (457). The works of early Victorian realism disregarded longstanding conventions separating fiction from nonfiction genres. Sean Latham writes that “the historical novel shares [with history proper] this sense of temporal priority, insisting that certain events, say, the fall of Rome, or the French Revolution—exist outside the text, even if the characters experiencing them do not” (13–4). And while the Industrial novel was a relatively short-lived genre, its influence resonated throughout the nineteenth

century and beyond, in works by D.H. Lawrence, E.M. Forster and Joyce whose novels addressed the “condition” of their native countries.

The industrial novel seemed unique, to its original readers as well as to later critics, in the degree of contextual anchoring it attempted.⁸ Novels like *Mary Barton* anchored their plots, characters, and incidental details to the referential details of working-class life and political conflict. Kathleen Tillotson in *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* lays out what was, in fact, novel about the new genre. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, the ground that novels could cover had been “restricted,” with readers eager to read silver fork tales of aristocratic high life set in the familiar central parts of England. The reader did not care for representations of lower-class people unless they were the dashing criminals of the Newgate novel, and “he, or more probably she, seems to have looked askance at novels even of ordinary middle class life” (83). By contrast, she cites a “reaction against the predominance of social novels” underway by 1839, when *Oliver Twist* was published. The book broke new ground in the author’s as well as the public’s view. Dickens proposed to represent “such associates in crime as really do exist,” not romanticized criminals but “the cold, wet, shelterless midnight streets of London; the foul and frowsy dens where vice is closely packed and lacks the room to turn; the haunts of hunger and disease; the shabby rags which scarcely hold together” (76). The reasons for the new development were partly economic, as writers and publishers learned what would sell. In the 1830s “there had been a slump in the market for novels . . . because no one could think of anything except public events” (124). By contrast, ten years later “people read novels more than ever, for the novel was now ready and able to absorb and minister to their ‘speculations on reform’” (124).

Social problem novels were intended to educate, to “open people’s eyes to certain evils of the time” (78). The authors of these texts addressed themselves to middle-class readers who knew very little about the lives of their fellow citizens. Michael Wheeler refers to the task of “educating middle and upper-class novel-readers, many of whom had formerly been quite ignorant of what was going on in the manufacturing areas of Britain” (19). Works such as *Mary Barton* had to convince readers of the accuracy of their representations, even as they attempted to represent what their readers had never seen. One *Fraser’s* reviewer documented the genuine surprise this occasioned when he wrote that “[This is] Manchester life, not . . . Indians, cholera, famines, or Piedmontese persecutions, or old New Caledonian butcheries” (Skilton 80). Writers owed some of the success of this contextual anchoring to their works’ closeness to other discursive practices—“they were often following up on the evidence disclosed by Royal Commissions on factory labour, health of towns and so on” (81). Joseph Butwin explains that “in the case of *Hard Times* the original readers were encouraged to see the novel as a form of journalism to be read continuously with *Household Words*, the weekly magazine in which it appeared. The novel of social reform exists in a continuum with journalism” (167). The new genre provoked contrasting aesthetic responses. One reviewer of novels-with-a-purpose complained of “find[ing] ourselves entrapped into an essay on labour and capital” (Tillotson 117). But readers also found the new works bracing. Tillotson notes that “the formal ordering of ideas into narrative, the presentation of ‘views’ through persons, the creating of a world which bore a strangely close relation to the actual contemporary world and was nevertheless newly created—all these were problems which exercised the novelist’s art to the utmost,” as writers sought to ““make something’ of this

new, raw and recalcitrant material” (119). For many readers, realist novels were exciting because they drew their ideas from the world outside the text, not just from the world of literary convention.

In contemporary critical discourse, “realism,” like “reference,” draws critical suspicion for its supposed arrogance in claiming a seamless fit between word and world.

Francis O’Gorman writes that realism “is a mode that depends heavily on our commonsense expectation that there are direct connections between word and thing” (105), and that commonsense expectation will seem naïve to many theorists today.

Michael Wheeler discusses several contemporary senses for “realism,” but concludes that they all “are related to the writer’s (impossible) attempt to depict everyday things as they are ‘actually and historically’ . . . a concept which itself begs several philosophical questions” (7). Pure realism in this sense is indeed impossible. If realist novels are held to a standard dictated by a correspondence theory of language—one that demands their language present a complete picture of reality, or access reality in a way that is neutral and pre-ideological—then their goal of “correspondence between word and thing” will indeed seem naïve, problematic, circular and even paradoxical.⁹

In striving to present a truthful and recognizable picture of the world, literary realism does not differ from such nonfiction genres as history, economics and journalism. While they strive for objectivity, these genres inevitably impose values, point of view and cultural convention on the raw material of life. And as with realism, recent theorists have cast doubt on their claims to reference. Such philosophers as Paul Ricoeur, Arthur Danto and Hayden White have questioned history’s ability to represent the past. While modern historical writing presents itself as a neutral depiction of the facts, White shows how

narrativizing history replaces unmediated events with meaningful stories: He remarks upon “the artificiality of the notion that real events could ‘speak themselves,’ or be represented as ‘telling their own story’” (3). And Louis Mink writes that “narrative form in history, as in fiction, is an artifice, the product of individual imagination. Yet at the same time it is accepted as claiming truth—that is, as representing a real ensemble of interrelationships in past actuality” (218). But the conventional and mediated quality of nonfiction texts does not prevent them from being recognizable to readers, or from exerting an effect on the real world they claim to depict. As Wheeler notes, “the reformist measures which followed the first Reform Act of 1832, such as the Factory Act or ‘Children’s Charter’ (1833) and the Poor Law Amendment Act (1834) were launched on a sea of paper: parliamentary reports, or ‘blue books,’ political tracts, newspaper articles, and social-reform literature” (18). The success of referentiality in any of these texts is not an *a priori* effect of accurate language use—words which perfectly mirror the world—but is determined by conventions, including implicit rules for what counts as a coherent story, and canons of probability that determine which events are plausible. What is important, for my purposes, is that texts succeed in convincing their readers that they achieve a reasonably correct fit with real-world conditions. If so, they may lead readers to update their mental representations of a real world, and even affect their behavior.

In discussing works of realist fiction, I will place them in context by putting them alongside relevant documents such as newspaper articles, blue books, historical works, and other nonfiction that would have influenced readers’ reactions to the fictions they read. In doing so, I emphasize the extent to which these texts took on meaning by

convincingly anchoring themselves to urgent issues in the here and now. These fictions share similar goals to nonfiction discourse, such as persuading readers of the rightness of a point of view. And novelists often took advantage of the pre-existing knowledge readers had gleaned from newspapers and political tracts to lend plausibility to depictions of unfamiliar corners of the world. I will also attempt to get closer to the impressions of contemporary readers by using available records of those reactions—in reviews, letters, and diaries. While reader response theorists like Wolfgang Iser have usefully dealt with the reading experience as a way of analyzing texts, I want to test my thoughts and assumptions about readers by using what records exist of their reactions.¹⁰

Narratology

Reader response theorists have grappled with the complexities of the ways in which a series of printed words may encode instructions for readers to construct an elaborate mental representation, and how readers may resolve apparent problems or “gaps” in the textual instructions. They have understandably felt that this task was difficult enough without addressing such potentially messy questions as whether these mental constructs can change readers’ factual beliefs, affect their moral and ethical assumptions, or even prompt them to behave differently. As Robyn R. Warhol notes, “a reader’s response cannot be enforced, predicted, or even proven” (26). As a result, narratology has devoted little attention to inquiring how fictional texts might prove persuasive to individual readers

In *The Act of Reading*, Wolfgang Iser focuses on the ways novels provide detailed instructions for readers to construct their own mental representations for each text they read, models which are constantly being updated during the reading process (and even

afterward), and which vary according to a reader's life experience and prior knowledge. Iser sees reading as structured as much by a text's "blanks" as its content. These blanks are inevitable gaps in textual information that prompt readers to imaginatively reconstruct the missing meaning, leading to intense and vivid acts of cognition. He discusses how the process of blank-filling functions, using a variety of canonical examples from the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While Iser addresses social problem novels, he does so only to point out that they are less complex and provide few "blanks" and leave little scope for imagination: "In the *roman à thèse*, such as Cardinal Newman's *Loss and Gain*, the purpose is didactic or propagandist, and so the connectability of the textual schemata is carefully regulated. The number of blanks is reduced and so too is the activity of ideation granted to the reader" (189). For Iser, to have a "thesis" about the issues of the day, a political axe to grind, tends to restrict rather than enlarge the reader's opportunity for thought. Such a work "reduces blanks in order to indoctrinate" (194). Such an argument passes negative judgment on many works of that time period, including those that Victorian readers saw as most engaging.

The Act of Reading views political or ideological commitment on the part of a reader, as well as the text, as a potential problem for the reading process, since readers will be resistant to taking up the "ideal reader" role the text constructs for them. "The more committed a reader is to an ideological position, the less inclined he will be to accept the basic theme-and-horizon structure of comprehension which regulates the text-reader interaction. He will not allow his norms to become a theme, because as such they are automatically open to the critical view inherent in the visualized positions that form the background" (202). If a "theme," as Iser defines it, is a concept questioned by being held

up to opposing ideas, readers will not want their beliefs subjected to such scrutiny. “And if he *is* induced to participate in the events of the text, only to find he is then supposed to adopt a negative attitude toward values he does not wish to question, the result will often be open rejection of the book and its author.” Iser assumes that having flexible ideological standards will enable the reader to inhabit a wider variety of the literary viewpoints she is likely to encounter, and inhabit the role of authorial reader more successfully.¹¹ But he does not fully consider the implications of this claim, that subjects who have political commitments—or, indeed, any views or certainties about the world at all—make poor readers. It is problematic to assume that a reader who has no strong beliefs would be better at interpreting works, like those by Dickens, Eliot, Hardy, Forster and Lawrence, that engage with serious moral, social, philosophical and political issues.

More generally, Iser’s argument demonstrates the difficulty of constructing systematic accounts of the reading process that address a work’s persuasive effects. While the scope of reasonably successful interpretations an experienced reader can make of a given text is relatively limited (no one will claim that *Heart of Darkness* is primarily about marriage reform, or that *Jude the Obscure* is primarily concerned with imperialism), the ways in which she might respond to that interpretation are far more difficult to foretell, just as the forms that a subject’s political engagement might take are impossible to predict. Iser does not consider the possibility that political differences might lead a reader to change her real-world beliefs, either as a result of one very influential reading experience or gradually, over the course of a lifetime.

Other systematic accounts of the reading experience have similarly disregarded the ability of fiction to make arguments or claims that are rooted in reference to the real

world. For example, Gerard Genette's classic *Narrative Discourse* is a detailed and nuanced account of the ways in which the different aspects of a text relate to one another, with special attention to the fictional time-scheme in *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Genette focuses on relations "between narrative and story, between narrative and narrating, and (to the extent that they are described in the narrative discourse) between story and narrating" (29).¹² He shows that part of this text's complexity and uniqueness derives from the way it negotiates the relationship between two fictions, the series of events in the narrator's and others' lives, and the narrator's act of telling. Genette's text has nothing to say about the relationships between these fictions and the contemporary social background that might affect the characters' experiences—for instance, changing attitudes toward gay people in the early twentieth century, or the rise of the middle class and corresponding decline of the aristocracy. Proust's text itself does little to draw explicit attention to such issues, and works like his that adhere closer to modernist aesthetic standards have been more popular as objects of narratorial analysis. Narratology has been more interested in character, plot, narration, and the relations between *sjuzet* and *fabula*.¹³ It has devoted correspondingly little attention to setting, especially physical space and historical time—the two aspects of the novel that are most likely to be referential.

Other theorists of narrative have insisted on a close relationship between plots and reality. Robert L. Caserio's *Plot, Story and the Novel* was published in 1979, and addresses itself to a cultural context in which the concept of "the direct bearing of literature on life" had come under increasing suspicion (xv). Caserio argues that "modern critics have been stripping literature of its connections with what is allegedly non-

literary” (xiv), citing Frye, Barthes and Said as three who reject this idea. His strategy for defending it is to cite plot as the medium through which those “connections” become visible—a privileged aspect of the literary which mediates between pressing historical concerns and aesthetic form. In critiquing a loss of faith in reference, he connects it to a co-temporal loss of faith in story, evident in the work of novelists such as Woolf who attempt to do away with traditional plot in favor of the flux of experience. “Novels such as Dickens’ trust that story not only makes life intelligible but also discriminates our moral values. It does this complexly and arrestingly by disclosing meanings and values through intellectual structures at whose center is the experience of reversal” (xix). In his analysis, stories turn the raw matter of life into something intelligible, because their use of peripeteia places events in meaningful relationships: “Because story and plot are the means whereby experience is understood as a relation, as a comprehensible or coherent sequence or chain of relations, they make the experience they tell ‘tell’” (6). Narrative creates a relation between text and reality that a realistic description or character sketch never could.

Caserio insists novels can and should comment on history and our times—“external causation, historical conditions, and personal situations” (xvi). And his work is insightful in seeing literary form not as a refuge from politics and social reality, but potentially as a profound and highly sophisticated way of engaging with them.¹⁴ But he limits his discussion of those realities by assuming that “the close relation of fiction to nonfiction cannot be proved” (xiv). Readers must be prepared to accept on faith that fiction can exert pressure in the real world the way that more purposeful works can, even though he analyzes examples of history and autobiography in his text. He adds that “to fully

demonstrate [the novels' ties to external historical reality], this book would have had to attempt an historical and sociological analysis of contexts and effects of novelistic narration. That task was beyond me" (xv-vi). Caserio treats reference and historical engagement as matters that are difficult for the critic to prove without abandoning his natural territory of textual analysis.

Peter J. Rabinowitz, in an analysis of literary convention that presumes "the very act of interpretation is inevitably a political act," explicitly links literature to "the systems of power relations among groups . . . in any social situation—systems that may be in part formalized (for instance, through law), but that are always in part invisible" (5). His work is devoted to addressing what comprises those readerly expectations, including rules of notice, of cohesion, of balance, and so on. In a discussion of racist or otherwise abhorrent texts, he points out that it is a good thing readers bring their real values to bear, since "books are in fact capable of moving readers in immoral as well as moral directions" (34). But he does not address related issues of when and whether the "politics of narrative interpretation" extend to the politics we use to interpret the world at large. He seems to echo Caserio when he writes that "I will leave for some other book the vexed relationship between action and understanding," going on to add parenthetically that "I believe one can argue that there is a sense in which a racist whose actions were neither changed nor examined after reading [Chester Himes'] *If He Hollers* had not 'understood' the book" (16). This claim provocatively links understanding of a text with politically motivated behavior, in a way that most other theorists are reluctant to do. But he points out (correctly) that this relationship is more "vexed" than are purely intertextual issues.

Nevertheless, it is not inevitable for narratology to enforce such a strict line of separation between text and the world around it. Although no structuralist analysis can predict a work's effect or popularity, a critical practice that questions truisms about the radical separation of fictional and actual worlds can make fine-grained distinctions that might otherwise be missed. One such work is Robyn R. Warhol's *Gendered Interventions: Narrative Discourse in the Victorian Novel*. Warhol's work is similar to that of recent cognitive literary theorists, in that she focuses on the existence of a real reader who "must, after all, exist for the text to have any function or meaning" (xii). Discussing "the poetics of gendered discourse" (15), Warhol argues that in the nineteenth century, direct address to the reader was a tactic that authors of fiction could use for sincere purposes (as well as the ironic or metafictional uses that have attracted more critical praise). In addressing arguments and pleas to "you," authors sought to speak through the page to groups of real individuals, not just to textually constructed "narratees." The attention Warhol pays in *Gendered Interventions* to this "direct" use of deictic terms allows her to shed light on different textual and rhetorical strategies among authors of the same era. She draws a useful distinction between authors who use direct address to readers ironically, including Trollope and Thackeray, and those who use the "feminine" style of sincere address: Gaskell, Harriet Beecher Stowe and Dickens, among others. Warhol demonstrates that "ironic" narratees are ones that are described too specifically to match any real reader very closely, or ones that are obviously unsympathetic. On the other hand, authorial techniques she identifies for engaging rather than distancing the reader include "avoid[ing] naming the narratee or us[ing] names that refer to large classes

of potential actual readers” (33), avoiding irony, and portraying the act of narration itself as serious and not a game.

Warhol’s argument is similar to mine, in that she argues authors often try to efface the difference between their world and that of the characters. She identifies this tactic with the narrative device Genette calls metalepsis: the crossing of diegetic levels. These writers “[insist] that the characters, narrator, and narratee all populate the same world, the ‘real worlds’ of nineteenth-century England” (Warhol 60).¹⁵ But Genette’s text assumes this subversive crossing of levels is done to provide a metafictional *frisson*: “the most troubling thing about metalepsis indeed lies in this unacceptable and insistent hypothesis, that the extradiegetic is perhaps always diegetic, and that the narrator and his narratees—you and I—perhaps belong to some narrative” (36). In my analysis, as in Warhol’s, metalepsis is not always done to disturb. And as my argument suggests, the “hypothesis” Genette refers to is at least somewhat true. The reader does live in a world that she experiences partly through texts, and understands largely through narratives. Readers of *Mary Barton* were part of an ongoing narrative; they were caught up in the same rhetorically constructed class conflict as were Gaskell’s characters.

One genre of works that we might expect to engage in similarly fine-grained analysis of referential strategies is those that take fictional reference as their subject. These include a small body of philosophical texts in the tradition of possible-worlds theory, including Lubomír Doložel’s *Heterocosmica*, Marie-Laure Ryan’s *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*, Paul Werth’s *Text Worlds*, and Thomas Pavel’s *Fictional Worlds*. These works purport to describe how reference functions in texts, such as novels, that refer to fictional worlds.¹⁶ But although “reference” is central

to each writer's philosophical project, they are using the term in a specialized sense, and are not interested in direct reference to real-world entities. Rather, they see textually constructed fictional worlds as the object of fictional reference, "the main repositories of structural features employed for referential purposes" (Pavel 145). This emphasis on fictional worlds often leads these theorists to insist that novels and stories *cannot* refer to real entities; Doložel argues that "the actual world cannot be the domicile of fictional particulars" (3). This philosophical stance prevents the fictional-world theorists from asking questions about what happens when fictional particulars *are* drawn from the actual world.

The one exception to this rule is Pavel, who devotes several pages of his study to the "ontological blends" that occur in fictional worlds (28). He insists that "the real world . . . cannot be kept out of fictional texts: theories of fiction often stumble up against what John Woods calls 'mixed sentences' that combine real and fictional elements" (28–9). Pavel presents an account of how readers make sense of textual worlds which could apply equally well to fictional and nonfictional texts. For example, he argues that the reader of a newspaper must either integrate its ideas into what he knows about the world, or, if the information is presented as uncertain or unproven, "use his decision procedure in order to see if he can integrate the new information in at least one world H compatible with the actual world G" (48). When reading a narrative, a reader would work to imagine a hypothetical world, compatible with the real one, in which the text's events occur. If new information "contradicts too forcibly what he knows," he will reject it. Fictional worlds are closely bound up with reality: "Literary artifacts often are not projected into fictional distance just to be neutrally beheld but . . . they vividly bear upon the beholder's world"

(145). Unlike Ryan and Doložel, Pavel is open to the idea that fictional texts can achieve reference to real-world entities—in other words, that the worlds of fiction are actual and not just apparent “ontological blends.” But because Pavel’s work focuses on reference to fictional entities, he does not discuss in any detail how readers identify and interpret this blending.

Willing Suspension of Belief

In the past two decades, a body of cognitive literature has arisen that addresses fundamental questions about the relations between fiction and belief. This research starts from the commonsense assumption that fictional texts usually contain some reference to real-world facts. Cognitive scientists ask when and how statements of fact affect readers’ real-world beliefs, how this occurs, and whether factual inaccuracies affect the reading experience. In doing so, they provide a fresh perspective on a long-running theoretical debate about the relation between literary fiction and other genres. This research suggests that reference in novels and other fiction works the same way that it does in nonfiction genres, potentially leading to short-term and long-term changes in belief. It thus challenges many long-standing assumptions of literary studies, including Coleridge’s well-known postulate that fiction reading stimulates a “willing suspension of disbelief.” This work may also confirm the assumptions of critics such as Caserio, Rabinowitz and others who assume that fiction bears a vital and even influential relation to the sociopolitical reality that surrounds it. In the pages that follow, I will summarize some of its conclusions.

There is nothing remarkable about the claim that readers often interpret texts in terms of their intended reference to the outside world, and that taking them this way is part of

basic literary competence. Jonathan Culler writes that poetry readers follow an unwritten rule instructing them to “read the poem as expressing a significant attitude to some problem concerning man and/or his relation to the universe” (115). But theorists have often viewed it as strange or anomalous when readers act on that supposed connection. In *Experiencing Narrative Worlds*, Richard Gerrig starts from the opposite assumption: “Persuasion by fiction is the *default* outcome: it is only under circumstances encouraging special scrutiny that readers will treat the fictional information in such a fashion that its impact is attenuated” (227).¹⁷ He produces the dramatic example of moviegoers who, after seeing *Jaws*, were afraid to swim in the ocean. Gerrig uses the *Jaws* viewers as a prelude for considering the seeming paradox of fictional texts that affect readers’ mental representations of the real world. He responds to Culler’s remark about poetry by claiming it “can be straightforwardly extended to prose to yield the conclusion that everyday readers fundamentally believe that fictions are intended to have real-world significance” (201). He goes on to critique “toggle theories” of fiction reading (like Coleridge’s) that claim readers switch off their engagement with the real world when they read. He uses the results of experiments to build his argument empirically, but points out that “there is no real mystery about how fictional information can have real-world effect” because “fictional information in fact fails to refer to a category that has any *a priori* psychological coherence. Information becomes tagged as fictional only as a function of readers’ conscious scrutiny.”

Gerrig presents the results of three series of experiments to argue for “some amount of incorporation of fictional information into nonfictional knowledge structures” (208). I will briefly summarize the results of the experiments below. In the first, researchers

presented subjects with statements about historical figures “belonging to a fantasy world that included the individuals named” (208). At the end of the experiment, the subjects took longer to verify well-known facts about the personages than they did about other topics. Although they knew the story statements were false, they had a harder time separating them from what they knew to be correct. This result “strongly argues for integration of the fantasy facts into preexisting memory structures” (209). But the result makes it difficult to tell “whether, or how strongly, information that constitutes a narrative is drawn together into a coherent representation” (211). In other words, it was unclear whether readers remember “facts” they have learned in the context of a text, or whether the ideas become dissociated from their source.

A later experiment explores the difference between what Gerrig calls “context details,” which are true only in the world of one fictional story, and “context-free assertions” that also hold true in the real world. For example, a fictional president would be a context detail; the claim that presidents can be corrupt would be a context-free assertion (216). These two extremes represent “a continuum of influence on judgments outside the fictional world” (217). In an experiment by Potts *et. al*, subjects were presented with facts about fictional entities such as a bird called the Takahe. Some were told that the facts had been verified, others that they were “fictional and constructed for use in the present experiment” (212–3). Potts and his colleagues theorized that if facts learned from texts are stored as new nodes, distinct from those pertaining to a topic, then “there ought to be a performance advantage when the critical statement is verified in the story context rather than in the non story context” (212). They found this was the case. But this performance advantage—the association of a fact with a particular text—applied

even when the subjects thought they were reading nonfiction. “The process of creating new nodes cannot, therefore, be considered special to fiction” (215). This fits Leda Cosmides and John Tooby’s claim, in an influential recent paper, that readers “consider the source” when storing new information of any kind.¹⁸

Finally, Gerrig and his partner wrote two versions of a short story introducing some information that was consistent and some that was inconsistent with the real world. The dialogue in the stories contained counterfactual statements about the US speed limit and the effects of penicillin. The experiment “examined the extent to which fictional information of the two types affected judgments about the truth of the statements apart from the fictional setting” (219). The experimenters hypothesized that “context details cannot . . . bear on circumstances in the real world. Context-free assertions might. Readers should therefore give more strategic weight to fictional context-free assertions.”¹⁹ When the subjects were presented with questions about the stories, their response times indicated that “when returning from the narrative world, the readers left context details behind but retained some information about context-free assertions . . . the fictional information was incorporated into pre-existing long-term memory structures” (220). The researchers also, however, demonstrated that “story information of both types retains some features of a representation that is compartmentalized in memory” (221) and ideas from the same story were “stored coherently in memory” (222); that is, the mind retains source tags that associate ideas with a particular text.²⁰

The texts used by Potts *et al.* were highly simplistic and artificial compared to real works of fiction. Nevertheless, their experiments have bearing on the functioning of the reading mind in more natural circumstances. These results make it plausible that each

text does, as David Herman claims, have its own discrete “storyworld.” They also dismantle the idea of a fiction-reading mind that differs dramatically from the mind doing other tasks. Rather, “the only representative toggle is between narrative and preexisting information” (223). New knowledge is stored separately in the reader’s mind, becoming gradually integrated into her knowledge and beliefs. “Although some features of narrative representations might allow experiencers to discriminate them from real events”—for example, an event read about in a text might differ from one stored as a sense memory—“those features will most likely not function as a diagnostic tool to exclude fictional information from real-world consideration” (223). When a storyworld seems verisimilar, holding it up to doubt may come at a cognitive cost. Gerrig’s research reinforces Mark Turner’s argument that the “literary mind” is really just the ordinary mind, and that the reader of fiction uses “the repertory of cognitive processes that is otherwise required for everyday experience” (239).

In the intervening time, dozens of studies and papers have been published exploring the ways readers experience narrative worlds. Nevertheless, I summarize Gerrig’s argument at some length because I find his model of literary engagement to be useful in its general outlines, and recent research has tended to confirm it. Appel and Richter claim in a recent article that “no one has ever convincingly argued for an automatic switch or toggle that prevents fictional information from entering real world belief systems” (114). Research repeatedly calls into question the idea of such automatic disbelief.²¹ In a 2004 article, “The Neuropsychology of Narrative,” Raymond A. Mar writes that “stories have the power to change our beliefs about the real world. Researchers have repeatedly found that reader attitudes shift to become more congruent

with the ideas expressed in a narrative after exposure to fiction” (1414).²² Recent research has offered evidence for why this might be by showing that understanding of fictional texts is closely tied to a reader’s pre-existing knowledge of the real world. Since words on a page “merely provide the scaffolding for the meaning of a text,” and would be meaningless by themselves, readers can only make sense of them by relating them to information and beliefs drawn from real experience. For example, Fernando Marmolejo-Ramos *et al.* argue that textual processing is a matter of building mental models, and that “readers mentally represent information that is not explicitly mentioned in the text, but derived mainly from the process of *inference making*” (79). Their study demonstrated that under “normal” reading conditions (that is, when readers are not working with a specific “goal-directed strategy” [80]), readers make a wide variety of inferences, drawing conclusions about such information as the genders and emotional states of participants when such things are not mentioned. This idea, common to fictional-world approaches to literary theory like Herman’s, suggest that information a text doesn’t supply about the characters and setting will be drawn from the reader’s store of knowledge. Cognitive studies has succeeded in separating the meaning of a text from the words on its page, demonstrating that readers forget specific wording while remembering many facts that are not explicitly mentioned, but are the product of inference. These models of text comprehension make it a likely assumption that viewers imagine fictional worlds in some detail, and imagine them as similar to the real world in most respects: In Rick Busselle and Helene Bilandzic’s words, “the story world model starts with the assumption that the fictional world works like the actual world,” and that “the default condition is verisimilitude” (256).

Most research focuses on “facts” that are easy to isolate from surrounding matter. But the aspects of reality that fictional texts reference are not confined to small tidbits of information; Forster’s *Nicholas Nickleby* review cited elements of the text ranging all the way from individual street names to large-scale political and ethical ideas about rich and poor. One study, Appel’s “Fictional Narratives Cultivate Just-World Beliefs,” is notable for focusing on a more diffuse set of ideas, the so-called “belief in a just world” (BJM). This folk belief, much discussed in psychological literature, asserts that people tend to get what they deserve in the end. It is a widespread attitude to life, although often disproven by the randomness of actual events. Appel’s study investigated the beliefs of people who watched different genres of television shows, contrasting shows with narrative lines that tended to restore justice to more neutral or non-narrative programming. It confirmed that viewers of the former type of show were more likely to hold just-world beliefs (although the study did not prove causality). It also discussed “mean-world” beliefs, the idea that life is filled with crime and danger. The results of the study showed that this type of worldview was similarly influenced by televised fictions, although (perhaps surprisingly) not incompatible with belief in a just world. These results are not conclusive, but they do come closer than others do to engaging with ideology. The study suggests that not only isolated tidbits of information, but the more general implications of a story’s plotline, are available to be integrated with a subject’s worldview.

If stories can contain credible information, there is also some evidence that stories perceived as credible are also more emotionally engaging and involving.²³ This evidence confirms a common critical intuition; as Robyn Warhol notes, the idea “that a social problem novel should be realistic to be engaging has been taken for granted by

commentators on the genre from J. Cazamian to Kestner” (48). In a 2008 article, “Fiction and Perceived Realism,” Busselle and Bilandzic point out a recent consensus that “narrative engagement mediates relationships between exposure and acceptance of story-related beliefs” (255). They consider two alternate possibilities: that authentic-seeming stories are more likely to cause involvement, or that readers who are wrapped up in a story read less critically, and thus are left with a sense of authenticity (256). Their work distinguishes between “narrative realism,” which relates to whether elements in a story are internally consistent, and “external realism,” relating to whether the story fits reality. While these two types of realism are different, because only one relates to accurate reference, Busselle and Bilandzic emphasize their similarity—in each case, the reader’s sense of verisimilitude will break down if she cannot maintain a relatively coherent mental model of the text and its world. Breakdowns in realism result from inconsistency between a readers’ prior knowledge, mental representation of the storyworld, and incoming narrative information.

These recent findings confirm Gerrig’s general claims that there is no inherent difference between fictional and non-fictional treatment of facts. However, while these researchers often assume that readers relate fictional stories to the real world by assimilating them to “everyday” or “day-to-day” experience (Gerrig 239), I wish to complicate that dichotomy. I argue that not all referential worlds correspond to a subject’s everyday world, and may seem very distant (as Gerrig’s example of Napoleon, in fact, suggests). Readers could be convinced that Joseph Conrad’s Congo in *Heart of Darkness* was real, while being titillated and shocked at its difference from the “civilized” world. The model of text comprehension outlined by cognitive research

makes it seem likely that viewers imagine fictional worlds in greater detail than is described—they fill in missing information—and that they imagine them as similar to the real world in most respects: “The story world models starts with the assumption that the fictional world works like the actual world”; “extending story world rules in deviation from the actual world is a normal activity in processing fiction, and moreover it leaves intact the other, unspecified rules of the real world” (266). The texts I will be discussing demonstrate that works of fiction can go even farther than this. They seek not merely to reproduce referential worlds the reader is familiar with, but to expand the range of the referential world.

Busselle and Bilandzic’s research points toward one reason nineteenth century political realism might have struck its readers as a new, exciting genre. They discuss readerly evaluations of a text’s realism as something that affects a reader’s interest in, and enjoyment of, that text. But they suggest these judgments are only noticeable when realism fails: “There is little reason to expect online recognition of positive realism. Simply put, if one is viewing realistic content, there is no reason to judge its realism” (268). It is probably true that in fictions deemed realistic, the work’s style is transparent and does not distract from character and plot. But the enthusiastic response of Dickens’s and Gaskell’s contemporaries suggests that successful realism can be a noticeable and aesthetically pleasing effect. The term “realism” began to be used in English in the early 1850’s, and critics often used it as a positive value, a word denoting the type of detailed verisimilitude novels should strive for. An influential 1853 *Prospective Review* essay insists that “all genuine fiction . . . is the idealized transcript of actual experience” (“Recent Works of Fiction,” Skilton 85). George Eliot wrote that the proper ingredients

of fiction are “genuine observation, humour, and passion” (“Silly Novels” 180). For critics like these, realism was not just a neutral expectation, as Busselle and Bilandzic suggest it should be. Rather, seeing real elements of their world (like Eliot’s recognizably flawed characters) transcribed on the page was a positive source of meaning and aesthetic pleasure. Any reader who did not perceive it during the reading process was missing one of its most important effects. Thriving debates surrounding realism in the nineteenth century show that many critics were divided about the value of placing fidelity to life at the center of the novel’s mission. If a reader had decided to use “realism” as one of her main aesthetic criteria, she would have reason to judge realist works positively while reading.

Why Use Cognitive Studies?

Some critics might worry that applying insights from cognitive studies to literature might imply naïve empiricism or the elevation of scientific facts above “mere” subjective interpretations or theoretical insights. But in the past few years, a variety of insightful new approaches to cognitive literary studies have arisen that have demonstrated how studying cognition can strengthen rather than contest standard critical approaches. Using scientific insights to enrich or test our theoretical paradigms can lead to striking new insights that call into question critical dogmas, and allow for a more nuanced look at how culture interacts with human brain architecture in the production and consumption of works of art. For example, Lisa Zunshine’s *Why We Read Fiction* argues that the psychologizing interpretations most readers pursue are not simply the result of learned conventions or a culturally contingent faith in the “Cartesian subject” (as many new historicists have argued), but are the result of a specific human cognitive endowment.

Humans possess a “theory of mind” that drives us to interpret others’ actions as driven by interior goals and psychological states. Zunshine uses recent cognitive research to show that this is a uniquely human ability, and subsequently to show how this ability shapes historically contingent reading practices. Mary Thomas Crane’s *Shakespeare’s Brain* uses the cognitive science consensus that “the mind is what the brain does” to shed new light on the materiality at the source of Shakespearean texts. Taking a cue from brain researchers’ view of subjectivity as necessarily fragmented, irrational and largely unconscious (because the brain is divided up into many functions, and it can only be aware of a small fraction of its operations), she writes that “if you do not expect human cognition to be unified or logical, a way is cleared to supplement deconstruction (which essentially rediscovers its fragmentation and irrationality over and over again) with analysis of the patterns that do emerge from cognitive processes” (13). Crane adds that “the uses of concepts from bodies of knowledge known as ‘sciences’ [does not] prevent us from acknowledging the role of culture in shaping their assumptions and investigations” (10). Similarly, Zunshine writes that “there is no such thing as a cognitive ability, such as [Theory of Mind], free-floating ‘out there’ in isolation from its human embodiment and culturally concrete expression. Evolved cognitive predispositions, to borrow Patrick Colm Hogan’s characterization of literary universals, ‘are instantiated variously, particularized in specific circumstances’” (37). The best work in this genre shares this interest in cultural circumstances and historical specificity.

In a 2006 PMLA article, “Cognitive Science and the History of Reading,” Andrew Elfenbein seeks to bridge the gap between cognitive and critical approaches to the same subject, “the complexities of the reading process” (484). Elfenbein insightfully addresses

some possible objections literary theorists might have to cognitive researchers' work on the reading process. He points out that while scientific descriptions of reading processes might sound overly mechanistic, referring to "representations to be 'accessed' or 'manipulated,'" such semi-automatic responses are part of the ambiguous and polyvalent readings we value. "Far from leading to shallow or superficial results, such routinization enables sophisticated literary-critical readings, since it allows critics to move quickly past many basic processes that occupy less skilled readers and concentrate on more involved ones" (485). In his paper, Elfenbein focuses on one element of reading: the ability to construct a satisfyingly usable mental model of a text. He frames his argument in terms of the key concept "standards of coherence"—historically and personally specific guidelines for what a reader is willing to accept as a usable mental model—that depend on factors like "background knowledge, skill level, alertness, sense of the text's difficulty" (490). He aims to observe contemporary readers' model-building in action, so far as is possible, by looking at reviews of Browning's *Men and Women*. In these reviews, intellectuals detail their struggles with the difficult material, and come to different conclusions about where its meaning and value lie. Elfenbein's readings show how Browning's contemporaries are working with different goals; for instance, Margaret Oliphant seeks emotional transportation, while George Brimley of *Fraser's* values the "more elite standard" of "Coleridgean organic unity" (493). Elfenbein demonstrates that each reading strategy places extensive, although different, demands on a reader's limited cognitive resources, and each has different success finding coherence in an apparently incoherent text.

This dissertation will make similar use of reviews and other readerly reactions to novels. I will put these texts in dialogue with cognitivist claims about the process of reading, asking what expectations and standards an individual reader held to reach the conclusions and value judgments she did. While Elfenbein's article focuses on successful coherent representations, I am interested in something different: Interpretation of a particular storyworld as a referential world that maps reasonably well onto their beliefs about exterior reality. In other words, I will discuss what leads to readers seeing some texts as "realistic" and accurate. Like judgments of coherence, these will vary widely depending on knowledge and ideological stance. Some readers found *Mary Barton* almost painfully real, while others panned it as an unfair attack on the upper classes. Dickens' contemporaries may have accepted his female characters (like Esther in *Bleak House*) as reasonably accurate portrayals of virtuous women; readers today may take them as ideological myths or fantasies, attempts to impose as "natural" a set of normative behaviors. Referentiality is a continuum, not an either-or decision.

Living in the Blend

Many critics have noted that sentences, paragraphs and, indeed, whole worlds within novels seem to blend real and fictional entities. The blended spaces they present seem like paradoxes, and theory struggles to account for them. Meanwhile, these ontological blends pose no difficulty to the average reader; few readers will be confused by the spectacle of the imaginary Sherlock Holmes, Esther Summerson or Adolf Verloc walking down a real London street. The ease with which readers accept and understand ontologically blended worlds suggests that theoretical accounts are missing something when they treat ontological blending as an anomaly. One theory that seems ready-made

to account for such problems is the concept of “conceptual blends,” recently articulated by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner in such works as *The Way We Think* and Fauconnier’s *Mappings in Thought and Language*. In this theory, conceptual blends are one of the mind’s main avenues of creativity, a flexible tool for generating new insights, inferences and conclusions from familiar concepts and knowledge. Conceptual blends are similar to conceptual metaphors, but defined more broadly as a partial mapping of information from two input spaces into a third “blended” space. “The blend inherits partial structure from the input spaces and has emergent structure of its own” (Fauconnier 149). This third space is a useful tool for thinking because the “emergent structure” it contains was not available in either of the input spaces. One example Turner and Fauconnier discuss is the following passage, from *Latitude 38* magazine: “As we went to press Rich Wilson and Bill Biewenga were barely maintaining a 4.5 day lead over the ghost of the clipper Northern Light, whose record run from San Francisco to Boston they’re trying to beat. In 1853, the clipper made the passage in 76 days, 8 hours” (qtd. in Turner 67; Fauconnier also discusses this example in *Mappings in Thought and Language*). This paragraph, and the situation it describes, has two input spaces: a voyage in 1853 and one in 1993 that traced the same route. The writer conceptually combines them with the purpose of helping readers better understand and visualize Great America II’s attempt to beat a record. The idea of a “race” is, strictly, a fiction. But as Turner notes, real readers don’t confuse fiction with reality, or suspect the writer of believing in ghost ships. “Readers easily distinguish and manipulate these three spaces, and they know what each space is good for” (Turner 67). The writer combines the stories of the two journeys because it is only by imagining them both happening at once that readers

can access the concept of a boat race. Not only is that a more exciting and suspenseful way to conceive of *Great America II*'s voyage, it may make it easier for the reader to visualize how much faster the newer ship sailed. The blend makes intuitive sense and, as Turner points out, it affected people's interpretation of the real journey. "This frame provides emotions and intentions of the crew and of fans, which can be transferred to the space of 1993. A victory party, with all the standard rituals and conventional photos, was held for the crew of *Great America II* and reported in the customary fashion in *Latitude* 38. The blended space made a profound mark on the feelings and actions of everyone involved. The blended space left its trace on reality" (68). Other types of blends that are available to shape reality are found in places as variable as literary stories, scientific thought, and common grammatical constructions (Fauconnier 165–171).

Blended spaces can help people think through problems, imagine possibilities, and access emotional frames of reference that would not otherwise be available. I contend that the "ontological blends" found in novels are conceptual blends in the same way as is the phantom boat race. They are a special type of conceptual blend that, instead of combining two inputs from the real world, combine elements from the real world with fictional "storyworld" elements that the text prompts readers to imagine. "Storyworld-specific" elements include psychologically complex people, places, and causally connected chains of events. "Referential world" elements include places, laws, institutions, social problems, familiar historical events, and (occasionally) real people. In blends, as Fauconnier explains, entities from two inputs can be fused (there is only one Atlantic Ocean in the "boat race" story), they can be carried over independently, or they can be left behind. In Fauconnier's terms, the Atlantic Ocean in the first input would be

A₁, in the second input A₂, and in the blend A` (A prime). In realist novels of the nineteenth century, many details from the referential world are drawn into the blend to interact with fictional entities. In a subject's understanding of her political world, there would be proper-name entities like England, Manchester, the Chancery Courts, and so on. But in these novels, characters are often marked fairly explicitly as social types or representatives of a class. Middlemarch is a typical English village; Nicholas Higgins in Gaskell's *North and South* is, as Reverend Hale realizes with alarm, "a drunken infidel weaver!" (206). This creates the opportunity for a unique kind of fused entity: Characters are not just fictional entities, but representatives of a class that exists in the real world. Readers would have been familiar with such groups as factory owners, striking union workers, and so on, as parts of their political landscape. Giving them distinct fictional identities in the blended space allows authors to present these groups in more personalized ways, and allow readers to make judgments of them that are more sympathetic than they otherwise might have.

Figure 1, below, represents one simplified version of how characters function as blends within the overall blended space of a fictional storyworld. In *Mary Barton*, Mary's father John is introduced to readers as a "Manchester born" factory worker (3). We learn soon after that Barton, goaded into rage by his son's death from scarlet fever and malnutrition during a work stoppage at a factory, has become politically radical and is "chairman at many a Trades' Union meeting; a friend of delegates, and ambitious of being a delegate himself; a Chartist, and ready to do any thing for his order" (21). In Chapter VI, we first hear of "the Messrs. Carson," co-owners of the mill that employs Barton and his friend George Wilson. After a fire in the mill, the Carsons make the

financially sound but morally questionable decision to cease running the factories temporarily, in order to drive up demand for their goods and thus squeeze better prices out of their buyers. The Carsons's factory (never identified with a more specific name in the book) is an example of a real phenomenon, factories laying off workers due to decreasing sales, thereby throwing those workers into "a deep and terrible gloom" (52). Two of the characters, John Barton and John Carson, are representatives of two primary groups in the class struggles of the day: masters (factory owners) and Chartist factory workers. The diagram represents the way the blended space combines elements that are referential with fictional storyworld elements. The first box, Input 1, contains elements drawn from the referential world: the city of Manchester, as well as factories, masters, and Chartist factory workers. Input 2 contains storyworld-specific elements: Carson's factory, John Barton, and John Carson. The third box shows how these elements are combined in *Mary Barton*. The lines between circles represent identity: John Barton is the novel's representative of a Chartist (one of them, at least), so they are indicated with the same letter. D_1 and D_2 combine to become D' in the blend. Manchester is carried over from the first input space to the blended "storyworld" space; it has no counterpart in the second input space because it is meant to be taken as the real Manchester, and not as a fictional representative of anything. This is one fairly crude example of the way ontological blends function in realist novels.

Blended spaces can be complex, because the qualities of their emergent structure may not be clear on first hearing. Instead, "we can 'run the blend' to uncover its structure" (Fauconnier 165). An example he gives is the sentence "in France, Watergate wouldn't have done Nixon any harm" (158). This sentence alone does not make entirely

clear which of his “real” characteristics Nixon would retain in the hypothetical blend; the speaker might be proposing we imagine Nixon the biographical individual as president of France, or suggesting we imagine an entirely different French president responsible for a burglary similar to Watergate. “There is no really precise indication of the properties of Nixon in the blend that come from Input 1 rather than Input 2. All this is negotiable in further elaborations of the conversation” (159). Similarly, a novelist who creates an ontologically mixed world “runs the blend” over the course of the novel, resulting in surprising conclusions. *Mary Barton* shows the effects of economic hardship on a character who is presented as a good, loyal, hard-working family man; Gaskell’s text presents itself as a sort of experiment, demonstrating the effects of injustice on a richly drawn hypothetical person. The conclusion of *Mary Barton* offers a hypothetical version of how the class tensions in the novel might be eased: In this case, the solution is individual sympathy much like the type Gaskell prompts readers to experience. Once Carson the factory owner is able to feel understanding rather than rage towards John Barton, the murderer of his son, he abandons his wish for vengeance: “Something of pity would steal in for the poor, wasted skeleton of a man, the smitten creature, who had told him of his sin, and implored his pardon that night.” Carson has never known “the grinding squalid misery he had remarked in every part of John Barton’s house, and which contrasted strangely with the pompous sumptuousness of the room in which he now sat. Unaccustomed wonder filled his mind at the reflection of the different lots of the brethren of mankind” (357–8). For Carson, as for many readers, the new experience of “entering” the homes of the poor brought about new emotions and changed thinking. These novelistic thought experiments are not always totally effective. Critics have repeatedly

critiqued Mary Barton's conclusion for (among other things) throwing the burden of historical change onto individual sympathy instead of collective action. Nevertheless, textual strategies like Gaskell's represent attempts to think through problems in a way that engages readers' intellects and emotions all at once.

I have argued that the worlds of novels are "ontological blends," combining what does and does not exist. Mary Cook's recent article "Staging Nothing: *Hamlet* and

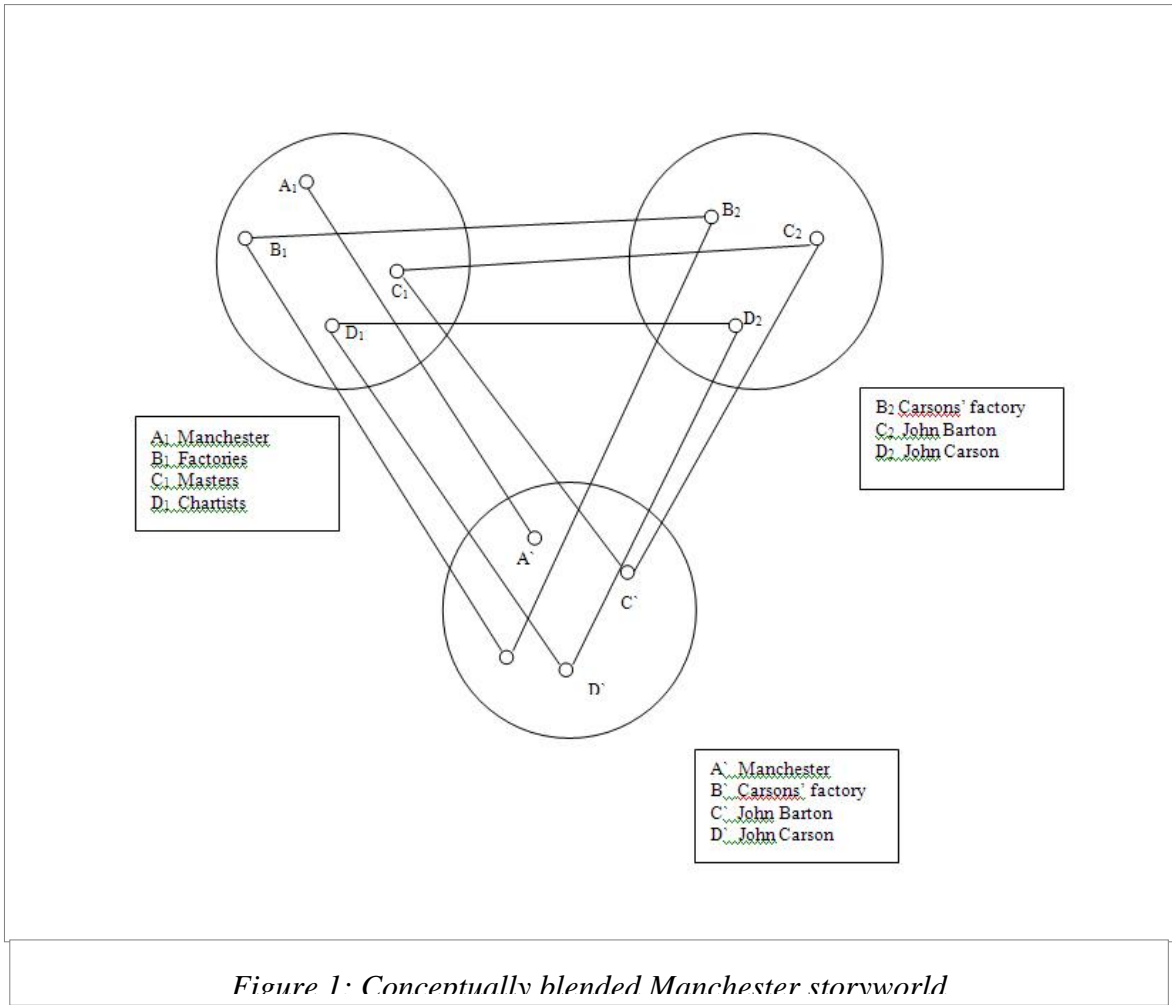


Figure 1: Conceptually blended Manchester storyworld

Cognitive Science” provides a parallel argument about theater. She uses the prominence of the concept “nothing” in Hamlet as a pretext to discuss the ways in which a staged performance is a blend of fiction and reality. Shakespeare’s play uses “nothing” as a paradoxically charged, meaningful concept, and Cook points out that the concept of “nothing is itself a blend.” That is because the idea of nothing is created entirely through cognition—by definition, it refers to no entity in the real world, but instead is a mental marker for what does not exist, “the articulation of a gap” (85). This mental construct can allow for such seemingly oxymoronic phrases as “the missing chair.” A missing chair “inherits its physical characteristic of being a gap from the actual input,” while resembling a chair in all other ways (for instance, it takes up the same amount of space as a real chair). “This presence in absence is the emergent structure of Hamlet’s ‘nothing’” (87). On the stage, nothing always becomes something, because a line that is purely fictional on the page is spoken by a real, flesh-and-blood actor. “When Shakespeare writes ‘who’s there,’ it is fiction; when the actor says it onstage, it is partially fiction and partially a real question asked by a real man in a real situation” (88). Cook’s text complicates the idea that a play is pure fiction.

Cook accounts for audiences’ emotional involvement in fictions not by invoking suspension of disbelief, but by explaining that audiences are “living in the blend” as they view a play being performed. While Hamlet famously asks of the weeping player-king, “what’s he to Hecuba, that he should weep for her,” outside the bounds of literature it is not uncommon to weep for literally “nothing” (for instance, when someone cries because her boyfriend failed to call her). A dichotomy between fiction and nonfiction “is unnecessary in theories of embodied cognition, since the brain is seen as constantly

composing narratives to function and make sense of its environment” (89). Composing such narratives, Cook says, is a function of conceptual blending. And the fantasy worlds we construct about possible events in the past, the future, or across town are not different in principle from literary stories that we know to be fictional. She stresses that living in the blend is an emotionally powerful as well as cognitively engaging experience. “The feeling evoked by Hecuba need not be any different from the feeling evoked by one’s mother. Both are reactions to representations” (96). The experience of “living” ontological blends through realistic fiction is not unique to artistic appreciation. It is an extension of ordinary human cognitive behavior.

What Is a Referential World?

A referential world differs from a fictional “storyworld” because it is taken to be real, and because it need not be associated with one particular text or author. It is a schematic mental model of something the subject considers to be the real world, whether her own or that of some other time and place. Thus it is subject to being revised at any time with plausible new information. In other respects, though, it is similar to the fictional storyworlds associated with particular texts: It models a particular setting, with its own characters, entities, and associated ideas about what kinds of actions and events are possible or likely. As such, it is not a neutral or transparent depiction of any real state of affairs. David Herman makes the point in *Storyworlds* that a reader’s mental model of a textual world corresponds to one of the real world: “On the one hand, interpreters build conceptual models as part of the process of representing the space-time profile, participant roles, and overall configuration of storyworlds. On the other hand, interpreters rely on analogous, model-based representations of the world(s) in which they

are trying to make sense of a given narrative” (331). Herman then goes on to add that fictions effect “contextual anchoring” by encouraging readers to draw parallels between these two types of representation. This is an insightful claim. But Herman’s language here implies that the nonfiction world is relevant only as “context” for making sense of a work of fiction. It may misleadingly imply that each storyworld is comprised of elements that are unique to the story. I use “referential world” to emphasize that much of the fictional storyworld is drawn from a mental model (the author’s, but one which she expects readers to accept or share) that represents the real world independent of any text. Storyworlds contain elements readers already know about: the Chancery courts, Parliament, London, Manchester, Chartism.²⁴ They draw on real-world knowledge, but often introduce new knowledge, and encourage readers to update their ideas about the real world accordingly (as when Gaskell’s text helps bourgeois readers understand the reasons behind a factory worker’s proletarian rage). Referential worlds are not just the context in which readers try to make sense of what they take in; they are also part of what they read.

I argue that the storyworld of a particular text is a blend of elements that are unique to that text (storyworld-specific elements) and elements associated with the referential world (referential-world elements). My terminology is intended to emphasize that storyworlds are conceptually blended spaces. They contain unique emergent structure because they combine a “world” of the author’s own making with the world in which author and reader mutually exist. The referential world corresponds with Input 1 in Figure 1, above. Manchester, Chartists, unions and factories are all storyworld elements drawn from the referential world. On the other hand, Gaskell’s fictional characters, John

Barton and John Carson (along with Carson's factory and many other elements of the plot and setting) are storyworld-specific elements. Although Gaskell attempts to make her characters believable and mimetically convincing, they are not references to specific real people. The third box in the diagram, the blended space, shows how referential and storyworld-unique elements combine in the ontologically blended space.

I work from the assumption that a reader's cognitive grasp on a world or setting takes into account both direct sensory experience, information learned through conversations and hearsay, and textual sources including books and periodicals. This information can add up to a coherent cognitive model of a referential world, although a subject may keep track of the sources for some of the information. For example, during a recession, a citizen might directly struggle with rising prices, stagnating wages, and a fear of losing her job. She might observe businesses in her town closing; she would probably speak to friends, family members, and co-workers about their experiences. She might also gain a sense of the recession's broader significance by reading about its effects in places she had never visited. She might also seek to understand its causes by reading or by listening to political speeches. The borders between textual and non-textual might be permeable. She might hear a speech by a union leader with whom she was personally acquainted, or hear from a friend about an article he had read in the newspaper. And this person would seek to understand the situation by knitting all this information into a consistent view of the situation. While reading a book differs markedly from direct experience, I work from the assumption that these sources all interact in the mind of a reader seeking to piece together a consistent view of a situation. Keeping track of the source for every element

in a referential world would be an impossible task, and often it is likely that a subject would quickly forget how she took in a particular piece of information.

Furthermore, direct versus textual experience would not have an enormous effect on a reader's ability to construct a referential world in the way a text directs her to. When *Middlemarch* was published in 1871, some of its readers would have lived through the historical period in which it is set, the 1830s. Others would have been born too late, but would have had an adequate degree of textually acquired knowledge, because the period was still in living memory (just as a reader today might have an adequate grasp of the political and social movements of the 1960s). Such readers would not be prevented from fulfilling the role of "informed reader," although an older British citizen might have had a richer experience of Eliot's text through being reminded of her personal experiences—or might have her reconstruction skewed in unpredictable ways by her preconceptions.

Storyworld and Referential World

While this study will focus on a subset of genres that aimed for extremely detailed verisimilitude, I will assume that these insights apply more generally to all fictional narrative texts. For example, in *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks offers a narratological analysis of the fairy tale "All-Kinds-of-Fur." The story offers no detail about place, historical era, or any personal traits of the characters; it has none of the detailed richness of the realist novel. Nevertheless, Brooks' analysis makes clear that we cannot make sense of this story without relating it (or contextually anchoring it) to "real" problems or issues. In this case, it is the problem that young people must overcome family ties to get married and form new families: In the story, "the overly eroticized object—the daughter become object of desire to the father—loses all erotic and feminine attributes, becomes

unavailable to desire, then, slowly . . . reveals her nature as erotic object again, but this time in a situation where the erotic is permitted and fitting” (9). The story is fanciful, but context-free categories like “the erotic” and the father-daughter relationship are not. Brooks argues that the tale “matter-of-factly takes on the central issues of culture—incest, the need for exogamy—without commentary.” In his analysis, the story is contextually anchored in some minimal way because key storyworld elements *really are* “the central issues of culture” in the referential world. This contextual anchoring is not as historically specific as the type that appears in Condition of England novels; Brooks’ remarks imply that marriage and incest fears are transhistorical parts of all “cultures.” But it is possible to argue that *all* contextual anchoring is historically specific to some extent. A feminist reading of “All-Kinds-of-Fur” might question the story’s assumption that heterosexual marriage is the default goal for all young women, and such a reading would suggest that the story’s concerns are not as “transhistorical” as they appear to be. Furthermore, I contend that *any* analysis of the story would be based on the assumption that some elements of it are referential, with bearing on extratextual events. A feminist reading that questioned the value of a woman being made into an “erotic object,” for example, would assume that sexual objectification was a real problem faced by women in various historical contexts, part of the critic’s referential world.

In order to be intelligible, all narratives must bear *some* relation to what the reader perceives as her “real world.” On a basic level, a narrative storyworld must involve actors who have human-like goals and preferences, a spatial setting, and some version of causality. On a much more detailed level, it can carry over many referential world elements: cities, streets, businesses, political parties, and even real people. In one chapter

of *Ulysses*, for example, the reader encounters such entities as St. George's church (46), Dlugac's butcher (48), Dorset Street (49), Sandow's exercises (50), *Photo Bits* magazine (53), and, on a more general note, Bloom's observation that it would be a "good puzzle" to walk through Dublin without crossing a pub. Readers who share Joyce's background might recognize these entities, while others are introduced to them for the first time. The referential status of, for example, Larry O'Rourke's restaurant might be less clear, because Mr. O'Rourke himself puts in an appearance in the chapter; and local references like these take hundreds of pages in Don Gifford and Robert J. Seidman's *Ulysses Annotated* to untangle. In its premeditated difficulty, the text seems to call for what Marie-Laure Ryan, in another context, calls "a mythical 'model reader' or super-reader with whom no reader will identify" (2007, 218). Between these two extremes are other genres engaged in their own struggles to create an illusion of the real. One Victorian reviewer, writing in the *Quarterly Review* in 1863, notes that "the sensation novel . . . is usually a tale of our own times. Proximity is, indeed, one great element of sensation. It is necessary to be near a mine to be blown up by its explosion; and a tale which aims at electrifying the nerves of the reader is never thoroughly effective unless the scene be laid in our own days and among the people we are in the habit of meeting" (Skilton 77). A text's use of contextual anchoring is a matter of degree, not a simple yes or no.

Often, whether a particular detail is real or fictive is ambiguous even to a competent reader. While the ideal reader may be someone who is familiar with all the referential world elements, this is not really necessary to a basic understanding of a text. Referential world elements may have less or greater thematic importance. For example, in *Jude the Obscure*, a young Jude Fawley's passionate wish to study at Christminster comes up

against a power structure designed to exclude people like him. To fully grasp all the nuances of Hardy's storyworld, a reader must know that Christminster is "really" Oxford, with all that implies about elite learning and hereditary privilege. By contrast, it would be less important for the reader to know whether a certain Great Wessex Agricultural Fair that the principle characters attend in Stoke-Barehills (now known as Basingstoke) ever really took place, even though an important plot development occurs there. (Jude's estranged wife, Arabella, sees him with Sue Tillotson and forms a plan to win him back from her; 229). In fact, a competent reader might read the chapter without considering whether the fair or Stoke-Barehills really existed. David Herman claims that differences between the referential status of storyworlds map onto genre differences: "The world evoked by the text may be more or less accessible to the world(s) in which that narrative is produced and interpreted, providing the basis for a typology of genres" (2009, 114). From this point of view, readers might resolve ambiguities through reference to their understanding of genre conventions. A reader who was familiar with Dickens as a typically "realist" writer might decide, on this basis, that the fictional "Coketown" in *Hard Times* must be based on a real English city. Many readers did just that, identifying Coketown with the industrial town of Preston (Butwin 176–78).

In addition to seeking readers' trust, authors can create unique artistic effects by playing on readers' expectations about accurate reference. *Ulysses* includes so many allusions, and so many referential world elements, that its "ideal reader" must be someone who has not only read as widely as Joyce, but has lived in Dublin in the first decade of the twentieth century. And because many of the book's references take place in characters' memories and extend much farther back than 1904, even this might not be

enough. Because the book was intended for a cosmopolitan readership, not for a tiny parochial group, *Ulysses*' ideal reader is likely very different from any particular real reader. Joyce aims for a specific literary effect by filling his novel with far more referential world details than convention dictates, or verisimilitude requires. This type of self-conscious play is not confined to modernist texts. *Mary Barton*, a canonical realist novel, contains a surprising scene in which Will Wilson the sailor tells the other characters about his friend Jack Harris's encounter with a mermaid. "Jack used to say she was for all the world as beautiful as any of the wax ladies in the barber's shops; only, Mary, there were one little difference: her hair was bright grass green. . . . She were all the while combing her beautiful hair, and beckoning to them, while with the other hand she held a looking-glass" (143–4). Job Legh, a naturalist, ridicules the story; his skepticism provides us with a possibly trustworthy authorial viewpoint. But Will goes on to criticize Job when he credits Will's story of a flying fish: "Well, now, you'll swallow that, old gentleman. You'll credit me when I say I've seen a critter half fish, half bird, and you won't credit me when I say there be such beasts as mermaids, half fish, half women. To me, one's just as strange as t'other" (146). The novel does not simply present its facts as realistic, but draws attention to the difficulty of figuring out which sources are trustworthy and which facts are too "strange" to be accepted.

Authors employ creativity about which elements of a storyworld are to be carried over from the referential world, and which are fictional.²⁵ But conventions also exist for how these items are combined. Peter J. Rabinowitz, in his discussion of authorial and narrative audiences, writes that "there are areas of overlap between the two audiences, beliefs about reality that are common to both the authorial and the narrative levels. . . .

second, there is a more or less systematic way in which the areas of disagreement are mapped out” (100). For example, it is common in the novel for countries and cities to be drawn from the referential world, but characters are more often fictional. Sean Latham points out in *The Art of Scandal* that “the worlds constructed in the social problem novels of the nineteenth century, like Gaskell’s *Mary Barton*, may have been drawn extensively from parliamentary blue books but nevertheless are populated with invented characters” (21). (Gaskell, of course, knew the world of *Mary Barton* not just from blue books, but from her own experience as the wife of a Manchester clergyman.) The reasons for embedding fictional characters in referential worlds may lie in novelistic conventions that serve authors and readers well. The novel as a genre has historically focused on complex interiority, and the intricacies of a person’s thoughts and feelings can only be known if that person is invented. While a city can be described in accurate detail, Queen Victoria’s private thoughts cannot. Furthermore, it is easy to identify with a fictional character. Another reason, though, is the strictures of libel law, which left authors and publishers open to costly lawsuits if they used a real person’s name or made them recognizable by other means. As Latham explains, British libel laws were founded on attempts to protect public figures from criticism, and increasingly strict laws in the eighteenth century “made it more difficult for narratives to rest in some grey area between fact and fiction. Those narratives that bore too close a resemblance to the world, that were too factual, ran the risk of being legally actionable; those narratives that clearly asserted their fictionality and that bore little resemblance to the world were unharmed” (Lennard Davis, *Factual Fictions*, qtd. in Latham 78). Writers shied away from obviously referential approaches to character in part because they had to, not because

separation from reality was the inevitable choice for the novel. “The tort of defamation—by legally separating fact from fiction—provides the framework through which a piece of writing is presumed to be pure invention . . . Libel thus essentially constitutes the law of fiction” (Latham 78). It was not until the late 1930s that the trend for increasing strictness began to abate, as precedent took a more relaxed attitude toward the scope of these laws (83–88).

Most novels obey the convention that characters are fictional people with fictional names. One group of works that depart from this convention are romans-à-clef like *The Green Carnation* and *The Apes of God*, which include thinly disguised versions of figures from the referential world. Such works prompt readers to wonder how closely these characters’ adventures approximate real events, and tempts them with the idea that they are learning about the personal lives of celebrities. Similarly, novel plots are usually made up of fictional events, but authors can attempt to draw their narratives particularly close to current events by incorporating real events into the plots that shape their characters’ lives. *Middlemarch* ties the opening of Chapter LXXXIV to “just after the Lords had thrown out the Reform Bill.” It is rare for novels to redraw the map of the world, but Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* does so, encouraging readers to question their ideas about society and human nature by positing the existence of fictional countries that can be reached by sailing. Genres like science fiction prompt a similar reaction by establishing the existence of fictional planets and species. Authors can create more striking effects by combining storyworld and referential world elements in idiosyncratic ways. In a recent story by Miranda July, “Making Love in 2003,” the main character visits the home of her college writing professor to discuss her possible writing career; the

professor is not home, and his wife, *A Swiftly Tilting Planet* author Madeleine L'Engle, treats her brusquely. July explains in an author's note that "although Madeleine L'Engle did write a book called *A Swiftly Tilting Planet*, the character who bears her name in the story is a complete fiction, as is the character of her husband" (129). The character of L'Engle in the story is a conceptual blend in a different sense than are characters like John Barton; she is midway between a historical person and a fictional character. She shares the real L'Engle's name and literary career, and thus represents an intimidating level of success to which the unnamed protagonist aspires, but her actions in the story seem incompatible with the sensitive and humanistic values espoused in L'Engle's novels. The character's presence disturbingly suggests a radical disconnect between literary personae and authors' real personalities, and, because it explicitly defies our expectations about the blending of truth and fiction, contributes to the story's surreal tone. The ontological blending of fictional worlds is just one more forum in which artistic works may create rich admixtures of canonicity and breach.²⁶

How Many Referential Worlds?

Mark Turner observes that "we do not live in a single narrative mental space, but rather dynamically and variably distributed over very many" (136). In most cases, our understanding of the world includes the understanding that there is just one "world": All times and places are connected, and obey the same law of physics. "Absolutely speaking, there is only one [actual world]" (Ryan 1991, Glossary). But while most subjects strive to understand the world as a totality, I argue that "referential worlds" most of the time conceptually map smaller and more easily dealt with patches of this larger reality. Lisa Zunshine suggests that it may be advantageous for humans to construct different

representational worlds because “some relationships . . . are ‘true’ only temporarily, locally and contingently rather than universally and stably” (52). In different periods and places, or even, sometimes, in different social circles or milieux, subjects expect to encounter different types of objects, people and behaviors, and different states, events and actions become possible. For the ordinary citizen, today as in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, different referential worlds fall under the sway of different laws—social, moral, and political, if not physical. Furthermore, referential worlds may cover smaller or larger units, depending on the conceptual uses to which they are being put; East and West are grand opposites in the epistemological regime Edward Said sets out in *Orientalism*, while at the opposite extreme, middle-class comfort may shift abruptly to poverty from one London street to another.

In this dissertation I will assume that the borders of “referential worlds” are elastic, that a referential work as mental construct does as much work as a reader needs it to.²⁷ Further, authors can bring together entirely separate referential worlds, to striking effect. This is part of the point of the famous speech in *Sybil*, claiming that England is comprised of “two nations, between whom is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are as ignorant of each other’s habits, thoughts, and feelings, as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets,” although these two classes live physically close to each other (76). Authors often create dramatically piquant scenes by showing that two “worlds” can exist only streets or doors away, as in one *Mary Barton* scene in which Wilson appears at the Carsons’ house to seek medical care for Ben Davenport, a factory worker stricken with typhoid fever. His two-mile walk takes him from a filthy basement apartment, completely bare of furniture, food, or heat, to the

Carson's tastefully decorated mansion, where "in the luxurious library, at the well-spread breakfast-table, sat the two Mr. Carson's, father and son. Both were reading—the father a newspaper, the son a review—while they lazily enjoyed their nicely prepared food" (62). The family languidly debates whether half a guinea is too much to spend for a rose for Rachel Carson, who insists that "life was not worth having without flowers" (64). The servants fail to offer Wilson food; "they were like the rest of us, and not feeling hunger themselves, forgot it was possible another might" (61). Carson meets the worker's impassioned plea with urbane courtesy, admitting that "I don't pretend to know the names of the men I employ; that I leave to the overlooker" (64). Wilson's hunger and desperate resolve is impossible to imagine here.

In Dickens' *Bleak House*, the extradiegetic narrator asks "what connexion can there be, between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in powder, and the whereabouts of Jo the outlaw with the broom? . . . What connexion can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world, who, from opposite sides of great gulfs, have, nevertheless, been very curiously brought together!" (167). This sense of contrasting referential worlds co-existing within feet of each other would have been familiar to real citizens. Franco Moretti, analyzing an 1889 color-coded map of London, describes how class status can shift abruptly in the city landscape. "Heading north, the same two hundred meters would land us in the brilliant gold of Russell Square and Montague Place; heading east, in a working-class area with patches of chronic unemployment and misery. . . . It is striking how rapid the transitions are, between the urban sub-systems; how poverty replaces wealth at every unpredictable turn of the street"

(Moretti 1998, 78). Social novels repeatedly depict these “great gulfs” and present the trope of different worlds “very curiously brought together.”

One work that explains the way single texts can encompass multiple storyworlds is Suzanne Keen’s *Renovations of the Victorian Novel*. Keen focuses on a subset of nineteenth and twentieth century texts that contain what she calls narrative annexes, small textual spaces that “are initiated by a combined shift in genre and setting that changes the fictional world of the novel,” and that “carry the reader across a boundary and through an altered, particular, and briefly realized zone of difference” (1). Examples that her book considers include Mary Barton’s trip to the Liverpool docks, Jane Eyre’s suffering and near-starvation in the wilderness after leaving Thornfield Manor, and George Ponderevo’s murderous interlude in Africa in Wells’s *Tono-Bungay*. These annexes are “real” spaces in the context of these novels (not dreams or fantastic wonderlands), but feel like different worlds to readers, the author, and often the characters. For characters, crossing into these annexes often involves challenging class, race or gender norms. Keen writes that the presence of these subversive spaces draws attention to the lack of fit between generic conventions and social norms, challenging “prescriptive models for representation” (42). Keen sees novel-writing as an exercise in worldmaking (albeit one highly determined by convention), and emphasizes the existence of multiple “worlds” in what is, after all, one fictional universe. Not all referential-world elements in a text will be familiar to its readers, or drawn from the lived experience of the typical middle-class novel reader.

Deixis

I have argued above that novels can refer directly to the places, people and institutions that they name. I will make a similar assumption about the use of deictic terms such as “I,” “you,” and “here,” claiming that novelistic texts can (although they do not always) use them in a direct and literal sense, much as a journalist or historian might. Deixis is an aspect of language that anchors it to a specific context of utterance: In the sentence “I am here now,” each word lacks concrete semantic meaning, except as it takes meaning from the specifics of who is speaking, where she is located, and when the words are produced. While deixis may seem like a special use restricted to just a few types of words, almost all language includes some element of deixis—for example, a grammatical system of tenses marks one short span of time as the present, and other times as prior or subsequent to it. Deictic language is less straightforward in written language, because long gaps can exist between writing and reading: “I am here now” written on a page might be unintelligible to a reader without an explanation. The deictic center of a piece of discourse “is a structure which lends coherence to a text when that coherence is not directly represented in the syntax or lexicon” (Herman 15)—that is, the reader must know who is speaking, where she is, and when the words are spoken, to fully interpret the sentence “I am here now.” Deixis in fiction is even less straightforward, because the deictic center may be remote from the author’s actual location in space and time, while the “I” who narrates may never have existed.

How, nevertheless, can deixis in fiction be comprehensible to the reader, and thus successfully lend coherence to narrative texts? When linguistic theorists have tackled this problem, solutions have centered around “deictic shift theory,” the notion that the reader ignores her real time and place in favor of a fictional deictic center that the text

constructs. According to Erwin M. Segal, “readers and writers of narrative sometimes imagine themselves to be in a world that is not literally present . . . as if they were experiencing it from a position within the world of the narrative” (14). He adds that “the deictic function in narrative is constituted at the level of the story world rather than in the act of utterance, or moment of communication between author and reader” (30). In a recent volume, *Deixis in Narrative*, applications of this theory include fine-grained analyses of issues like the uses of deictic verbs “go” and “come” in helping readers map out character movements. As with other referential uses of language in the novel, however, the issue is not so simple. The idea of deictic shifts captures an essential aspect of narrative comprehension, since any novel reader must make an imaginative shift to the specific time and place that contains the characters in each scene of the book. But as it is currently used, it is too fully invested in what Gerrig calls a “toggle theory” of literary response, one that presumes no continuity between the reader’s world and the one in which she becomes involved. Deixis in the novels I will be discussing is not confined to the imaginary world to which the reader is transported, but sometimes encompasses elements of the “real” act of communication that is taking place between author and reader, as well as successfully making reference to the author and readers’ real identities. When Eliot writes that “things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been” (578), when Gaskell writes that “I know what is the truth in such matters: but what I wish to impress is what the workman feels and thinks” (20), or when Dickens addresses his readers as “men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts” (*Bleak House* 655), readers need not make a shift to a different time, place or identity to make sense of them.

Conclusion

This dissertation examines British novels in the Condition of England tradition. Chapter 1 discusses two texts from the genre's beginning in the 1830s and 40s; the following two chapters analyze works from later decades that make use of Condition of England conventions such as industrial settings, political subject matter and riot scenes, and the "gentle murderer" trope that extends from Bulwer's *Eugene Aram* to Arnold Bennett's *The Old Wives' Tale* some 70 years later. By exploring works that are thematically similar but come from different historical moments, I aim to show that creating successfully referential works is not merely a matter of accurately reflecting the real world. Techniques for writing rich referential worlds change over time, not only with the world around us, but with the author's and readers' beliefs, preconceptions and experience of other fiction.

In Chapter 1, "'A Good Story Badly Told': *Mary Barton*, *Eugene Aram* and the Conceptually Blended Storyworld," I explore in more detail how fictional texts successfully combine story-specific and referential world elements. I contrast Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, an early realist novel almost universally praised on publication, with Edward Bulwer Lytton's now-obscure *Eugene Aram*. While each story combines reality with fiction to narrate a potentially lurid tale of poverty and crime, Gaskell's work achieved greater artistic and critical success by producing a conceptually blended storyworld that is easy for readers to make sense of, while Bulwer's blending was incoherent and internally inconsistent. This analysis suggests that the concept of the conceptually blended storyworld can help explain why readers perceive some fictions as more realistic or plausible than others.

The following two chapters take on two different elements of the referential world, each of which has been denigrated or viewed as problematic by traditional literary criticism. Chapter 2, “Convention and Realism in Trollope and Eliot,” explores the role of convention in creating believably referential texts. Critics often assume that convention is realism’s opposite. Drawing on recent research on how people make sense of what they read and integrate new knowledge, I argue that some degree of convention is essential if a text is to be believable, or even comprehensible. To make this point, I analyze two novels that made use of Condition of England conventions a generation after Gaskell — George Eliot’s *Felix Holt, the Radical* and Anthony Trollope’s *Phineas Redux*. By the time these books were published, in the 1860s and 70s, the generic conventions they used were firmly entrenched and familiar to the public. This makes these works a good place to explore why authors create intentionally conventional works. Eliot and Trollope not only make skillful use of contrasting conventions for portraying referential worlds, but comment reflexively on the way conventions determine all representational practices.

While conventional texts are often dismissed as failing to reflect the real world, detailed description of settings is denigrated for the opposite reason — its supposedly inartistic focus on the details of the referential world. In Chapter 3, “Description, Cognitive Mapping and Schematic Spatial Analogies in Bennett and Lawrence,” I take issue with the critical doctrine that spatial description’s referential focus makes it less meaningful than other elements of a text. Analyzing recent empirical evidence, I argue that readers make sense of spatial description by constructing schematic analogies that connect spatial features with a text’s “connotative signifieds.” Readers will perceive

spatial description as meaningful when they can easily connect spatial features to relevant ideas (as in conventional realism). When they cannot, the descriptive passages will seem extraneous or opaque. This was the case with the two novels discussed in this chapter, Arnold Bennett's *The Old Wives' Tale* and D.H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow*. These two texts' extensive descriptive passages frustrated readers' expectations – subtly in Bennett's case, dramatically in the case of Lawrence. Their anomalous use of description sheds light both on how conventional realist spatial description creates meaning, and how descriptive passages contribute to a text's generic identity. This analysis further confirms John Forster's intuition that real-world reference is not opposed to a text's meaning, message and aesthetic value— rather, they are closely intertwined.

CHAPTER I

“A GOOD STORY BADLY TOLD”: MARY BARTON, EUGENE ARAM AND THE CONCEPTUALLY BLENDED STORYWORLD

In an 1852 letter to Sir John Potter, Elizabeth Gaskell begged leave to address a misunderstanding. The source of the trouble was the murder, some halfway through her novel *Mary Barton*, of the mill owner's son Harry Carson by her protagonist, John Barton. The incident had distressed one reader in particular, Mary Potter, née Ashton: “On coming to the chapter of the murder she suddenly realized that it was a description of her own brother's murder, and she fainted” (qtd. in Uglow 216). The Ashtons were a prosperous north England manufacturing family; Samuel Ashton owned two mills in the vicinity of Pole Band, Werneth, and his 24-year-old son Thomas was shot dead in 1831. The case seemed insoluble, until in 1834 an informer gave evidence against two unemployed factory workers who conspired to kill “on account of the Union—the turnout” (Middleton 91), and they were subsequently tried and executed.²⁸ Mary Ashton, then 12, had been the last to speak to her brother alive. Gaskell's letter to the young woman's brother-in-law was an attempt to make peace by denying the connection: “I had heard of young Mr. Ashton's murder at the time when it took place; but I knew none of the details, nothing about the family, never read the trial (if trial there was, which to this day I do not know;) and if the circumstances were present in my mind at the time of writing *Mary Barton* it was so unconsciously”²⁹. She went on to add that “I would infinitely rather never have written the book, than have been guilty of the want of all common feeling, and respect for misfortune, which I should have shown if I had made Mr. Ashton's death a mere subject for a story” (492).

This incident, in which a reader with an idiosyncratic personal history discovered a roman à clef where none was intended, suggests many of the reasons that referentiality in the novel can be such a troublesome issue. The first is that it can easily be mistaken for mimesis. Potter saw reference (to Ashton) where Gaskell had intended only representation (of a plausibly lifelike wealthy young man). Because judgments of referentiality depend on readers' expectations and pre-existing knowledge, no piece of writing can ensure that readers will attribute a name, or words on a page, to a specific entity in the real world, or prevent them from doing so. Even in this seemingly most straightforward of realist novels, there is room for ambiguity about the referential status of the characters; and so even now, it would be difficult to say for certain whether Potter's reading was really a misreading.³⁰ Secondly, the letter suggests that the use of real-world reference in fiction is governed by a set of unwritten rules and conventions. Gaskell assumes that certain details from the real world should not find their way into a "mere . . . story." She insists that it is wrong to grieve a family by exploiting their sorrow in fiction, and clearly feels that the Potters would resent her if they thought she had done so. Maintaining some separation from the referential world (in particular, real characters and incidents) is essential to the book's aesthetic integrity—the perception by readers that its composition has been guided by a mature artistic judgment, free from commercial or sensationalist topical concerns. One focal point of Gaskell's self-defense is the trial scene in her novel. She pointedly insists that she did not base it on that of Ashton's murderers, indeed could not have done so since "I do not to this day know if there was one." Gaskell's insistence with regard to the artistic autonomy of her trial suggests that in her view, an author, not the historical record, is responsible for passing judgment on

her characters. The incident shows that real-world reference is not a neutral category, unconnected to a novel's emotional effects and moral tenor. On the contrary, it is intimately bound up with them.

The critical reception of *Mary Barton* shows that Potter's reaction to the novel was an exception. The novel's other readers did not pick up on Gaskell's potentially sensational echoes of a true story, but focused on the book's humor, pathos, wholesome moral message, and above all, its timely engagement with serious economic and political issues. One of the most enthusiastic endorsements, by novelist Charles Kingsley, grandly asked of the public, "Do they want to know why poor men, kind and sympathizing as women to each other, learn to hate law and order, Queen, Lords and Commons, country-party, and corn-law leaguer, all alike—to hate the rich, in short? Then let them read *Mary Barton*. Do they want to know what can madden brave, honest, industrious North-country hearts, into self-imposed suicidal strikes, into conspiracy, vitriol-throwing, and midnight murder? Then let them read *Mary Barton*" (153).³¹ The novel's appearance in the same year revolution broke out across Europe, a circumstance that made readers more interested in causes and cures for proletarian outrage, further strengthened its perceived relevance in the public mind.³² Although it dealt sympathetically with angry union members, and depicts a murderer who dies without being subject to legal justice, it was roundly praised as moral and wholesome.³³ Even negative reviews based their judgments on the novel's generally accurate depiction of working-class misery. *Mary Barton* became a bestseller and quickly went into multiple editions, making the first-time author one of the most respected novelists of her day. Gaskell's rectitude with regard to the norms of fiction paid off.

Sixteen years earlier, a different novel was earning widespread critical attention for very different reasons. Like *Mary Barton*, it centered on a shocking murder committed by an otherwise good but desperately poor man, to the dismay of the community, and like *Mary Barton*, it climaxes with a dramatic trial scene that determines the characters' fates. Edward Bulwer Lytton's novel *Eugene Aram* is a true-crime account of a mild-mannered scholar who "would tread aside to avoid the worm in his path" (43), yet was hanged in 1754 for a murder he committed long before. The story of the historical Aram was well-known to nineteenth century readers, from the *Newgate Calendar* and other sources, and Bulwer's famously lavish prose style invested it with further interest. But unlike Gaskell's debut novel, *Eugene Aram* is little read or even mentioned today. And while the book was a bestseller at the time, its success with the public was not matched by the same degree of critical approbation. Although some reviewers praised its genius and insight, many others lambasted it for what they saw as a ludicrous failure of verisimilitude. The few positive reviews it received were balanced out by mixed evaluations that express confusion over the protagonist's contradictory qualities, and by scathing critique and outright mockery (notably from W.M. Thackeray and the new journal *Fraser's*). These critics objected to the novel's moral tone and found Bulwer's practice of applying high romance to Newgate subjects implausible. Typical was William Maginn's review in *Fraser's*, which savaged the novel for presenting truth "overlaid with tinsel frippery, [and] spun out into tedious dialogue and vapid declamation" (95). The negative reactions suggest that Bulwer, despite drawing extensively on historical source materials, failed to create a believable storyworld.

Comparing these two texts sheds light on the textual strategies authors use to believably depict referential worlds. Because the *Mary Barton* praise and the *Aram* ridicule both center around issues of verisimilitude and real-world reference, criticism of these two works provides clues to how individuals perceive reference in the realist novel. And by focusing in this chapter on Bulwer's apparent failure (and its relation to Gaskell's success), I hope to shed more light on the strategies that constitute successful referentiality. Specifically, I argue that the success of *Mary Barton* was largely connected to its providing a clear blueprint for a conceptually blended storyworld space. *Mary Barton* succeeds not just through use of accurate details drawn from the referential world—which middle-class readers would have been in no position to judge—but through a textual strategy of tightly connecting each character and entity in the story to groups readers can recognize as real. Throughout the text, she introduces characters as members of carefully sketched “particular classes” that she positions as part of the referential world. Furthermore, she renders Victorian novel readers receptive to this new information through complex play with deixis and narrative point of view that takes their ideological biases and genre-based literary expectations into account.

Next, I move on to *Eugene Aram*, showing that the novel's perceived failures in verisimilitude were not just the result of lapses in factual accuracy. Rather, Bulwer provoked his critics by producing a conceptually blended storyworld that was inconsistent and incoherent. The process of reading *Aram* prevents the reader from building up one mental model of the storyworld, because Bulwer's text suggests conflicting answers about what elements are storyworld-specific. For instance, Aram is presented both as an exemplar of a certain type of eighteenth century scholar, and as an

anomaly, set apart from other people and only related to the referential world through the facts of his biography. Accordingly, critics saw *Eugene Aram* as contradictory—it was at the same time too faithful to outside reality, “plagiarizing” from nonfiction accounts of Aram’s life (Maginn 111), and not faithful enough, dishonestly depicting its murderer protagonist as a noble idealist. Although Bulwer, like Gaskell, built up a storyworld out of both referential world and storyworld-specific elements, he did so in a way that was too incoherent for readers to make sense of. The critical reactions to these works demonstrate that referentiality in works of fiction is conditioned by the specific and historically contingent sets of expectations that readers bring to texts.

“From the Life and to the Life”: *Mary Barton* and the Manchester Storyworld

“Manchester life,” wrote *The Critic* in 1848, “will strike many as an unfit subject for a novel; the romance of spinning-jennies, devil’s dust, and power-looms; the poetry of steam chimneys, manufactories, trades unions, and anti-corn-law leagues!” Although this reviewer makes such a juxtaposition sound comical, he goes on to declare its deployment a success, writing of the still-anonymous author that “he has found ample food for his fancy, even here; he has woven a tale of profound interest, although it is but a story of common every-day life; he has discovered that the smoky atmosphere of the metropolis of manufactories covers the same passions, good and bad, as did the azure sky that hung over the castles of the Norman barons” (77). With *Mary Barton*, Gaskell triumphed over what many perceived to be the middle-class reader’s natural antipathy to reading a “romance” about impoverished north England factory workers. In its first year in print, her book was the subject of at least twenty-two reviews (and one published poem); bibliographer Angus Easson writes that Gaskell was “was remarkably lucky in the

number of reviews of *Mary Barton* and the space devoted to it” (19). And of these, the vast majority were positive. Critics praise the new author for her psychological acuity, power, freshness and vigor.³⁴ But most of all, they are impressed with the author’s innovative use of real-world details about the working poor, crediting Gaskell with absolute accuracy although they could have known very little about this working class “world.” The experience this text created was so vivid that many critics sought to convey it through the metaphor of a guided tour: “The author takes the reader by the hand, and enters with him the miserable noisome cellars, where the *unemployed* and starving workman grovels with his wife and family” (*Standard of Freedom* 12).³⁵ Through an accumulation of telling details, the author introduces readers to a political, economic and social landscape that she has not encountered before, but accepts as real.

Although all fictional narratives construct or gesture to a referential world, it was the newness of this one, and its closer than usual ties with contemporary events, that made this novel remarkable. Although Gaskell’s material (a term much used by critics) was not entirely new, readers had heretofore only encountered it in nonfiction genres such as journalism.³⁶ The most famous example is Edwin Chadwick’s 1842 blue book *The Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population of England*, a much-read although dense work which offered descriptive and sometimes horrifying accounts of poor habits and dwelling places. The *Standard of Freedom* reviewer wrote that “it seems that not only the journalists and pamphleteers, but even the poets and novelists, have got hold of the ‘condition of England’ question” (12). In a letter to Gaskell, Thomas Carlyle wrote that “your field is . . . new, important, full of rich materials,” and that her subject has “lain dumb too long” (72). The *Literary Gazette* calls it “a vivid and complete picture of

a state of society hitherto only known to the rest of the world by scraps, and even to many an indweller in that place, much that is entirely new will be found in these volumes” (65).³⁷ The idea that this new information will shock is common to the more progressively minded critics, including Charles Kingsley: “Not of Indian cholera famines, or Piedmontese persecutions, or old New Caledonian butcheries, or any of those horrors, which distance of place and time makes us quiet, easy-going folks, fancy impossible in civilized, Christian, nineteenth-century England; but of the life-in-death—life worse than many deaths, which now besets thousands, and tens of thousands of our own countrymen” (153). These assumptions fit in neatly with Gaskell’s own rhetorical positioning of her novel as innovative. In her Preface, she claims she was motivated to “give some utterance to the agony which, from time to time, convulses this dumb people” (60).³⁸ The apparent novelty of *Mary Barton*, a major selling point for critics and author alike, was also a risk, since it might create incredulity by describing scenes its readers “fancy impossible.”

Critics expressed their faith in Gaskell’s accuracy through a recurring metaphor, associating Gaskell’s success with something they refer to as “material.” Referring to the real-world facts, details and social forms from which the storyworld was apparently drawn, this term is suggestive because it serves to separate elements of the text that are created or largely controlled by the author, such as plot and style, from those that describe a referential world. And while critical opinions of the novel’s plot vary unpredictably, reviewers are united in their view that she selected and used her “material” well. Thus the *Examiner* writes of “the holiness and simplicity of her materials” (19). Partaking of the metaphor of real life as “raw material” for the novelist, these evaluations

make a point of separating *Mary Barton*'s subject matter from the literary elements Gaskell used to process it. The critical differentiation of materials and other elements need not mark a referential distinction. Nevertheless, in these reviews, the consistent fascination with "material" suggests that the subject's obvious referentiality renders it especially distinct from the work's more conventionally "artistic" qualities.³⁹ Thus Charles Kingsley draws a line between style and content: Despite the work's "artistic excellency . . . the matter puts the manner out of sight" (153).⁴⁰ Plot and prose style are specific to the novel; *Mary Barton*'s "material" exists outside it.

Critics' extravagant praise of *Mary Barton* suggests it is uniquely accurate and convincing. But their evaluation leaves open the question of how Gaskell achieves this, because rather than pointing to any specific textual strategies and techniques, they cite the book's "self-evident truthfulness" (*Inquirer* 73). In the section that follows, I try to determine the cause of this powerful impression of "truthfulness," looking at one passage that reviewers often quoted at length. In the book's first chapter, we are introduced to the characters, enjoying a day out at Green Heys Fields some eight years before the main action of the plot begins. The Bartons and Wilsons discuss such worries as the disappearance of Mary's aunt Esther, before heading back to the city for a meal. This opening chapter is relatively uneventful, and is not an emotional high point of the story; in fact, its main function is to introduce readers to the Manchester storyworld. The fact that it is excerpted so often by reviewers (five times, in *The Literary Gazette*, *Critic*, *Eclectic Review*, *Standard of Freedom*, and *British Quarterly Review*) suggests readers too were aware it is doing important work, moving readers from distance to familiarity and emotional engagement.

Deixis and Point of View

The opening pages and paragraphs of *Mary Barton* are focused on easing readers into a referential world that is unfamiliar and potentially disorienting. Gaskell achieves this by providing points of similarity to other novels and well-known literary texts, before gradually moving into unfamiliar territory. The first words in the text after the author's Preface are the title of Chapter I, "A Mysterious Disappearance." Gaskell thus introduces her narrative apparatus with a phrase that is clearly addressed from author to reader. It frames the topics of the chapter in terms of the narrative interest these events have to us as fiction readers, and speaks in language that will be familiar to novel readers (unlike the uncouth spoken dialect of the Lancashire workers). What follows is a different type of communiqué from author to reader. As an epigraph, Gaskell presents a poem, untitled but anonymously cited as a "Manchester song." The verse is a light-hearted lament: "Oh! 'tis hard, 'tis hard to be working/ The whole of the live-long day,/ When all the neighbors about one/ Are off to their jaunts and play." This poem introduces the novel's main theme—the struggles of working life—in a much briefer and less tragic register than the text that follows. The second stanza introduces characters, meant to generically represent "neighbors about one": "There's Rich he carries his baby/ And Mary takes little Jane." Placed where it is, "Manchester song" occupies an ambiguous space between fiction and nonfiction. While it contains the seed of a story, and named fictional characters, it is presented not as a tale, but more as the sort of document a folklorist or ethnographer might collect. Gaskell's identifying the poem as a Manchester song leads us to believe it is a real folkloric artifact, representing the typical concerns of the city's residents. It presents a piece of Manchester dialect, mediated by the hand of a folklorist or outsider (likely Gaskell herself) who has transformed a piece of the local oral culture

into written literature. By doing so, “Manchester song” creates a link between Gaskell’s fiction and nonfiction discourse about the city. This epigraph thus reassures the reader that working people’s lives will be seen through the lens of an educated, middle-class subjectivity.

In this section, Gaskell repeatedly introduces new storyworld elements, then indicates that each is part of the real world by closely associating it with a familiar referential world element. The chapter itself begins with a piece of landscape description: “There are some fields near Manchester, well known to the inhabitants as “Green Heys Fields.’ . . . In spite of these fields being flat, and low, nay in spite of the want of wood, . . . there is a charm about them which strikes even the inhabitant of a mountainous district, who sees and feels the effect of contrast in these common-place but thoroughly rural fields, with the busy, bustling manufacturing town he left but half an hour ago” (1). Gaskell’s textual practice here is subtle. She gives the name of a familiar referential world element, Manchester, before mentioning another proper name that is presumably unknown to the reader but “well known to the inhabitants.” In doing so, she spatially connects them, telling us that Green Heys Fields are “about two miles” and a half hour’s walk from the city. Such a description is a way to show that these fields are an authentic part of the Lancashire landscape, not just a typically rural backdrop such as we might find in the more conventional novels of the time. Gaskell use similar techniques throughout the novel to connect the known and the unfamiliar. By introducing the tactic early, she primes us to expect that the proper names and storyworld elements we are introduced to in the text are likely to be real.

While Gaskell prompts her readers to associate the places and entities she names in the novel with ones they have encountered in nonfiction discourse, she also creates parallels between her novel and other literary works, emphasizing what is familiar and potentially enjoyable about this material through the use of recognizable generic tropes. Thus she opens the novel on the type of welcoming rural landscape that many readers would recognize as the novel's appropriate territory. The text anticipates readers' preexisting beliefs about the proper concerns of a novel before easing them into what they will perceive as the ugliness of the "busy, bustling manufacturing town." (While Dickens often opens with London streetscapes, Manchester was uncharted territory, and readers were still more familiar with stories of country or village life.) It is only in the next chapter that we are introduced to the city, which is made up of "many half-finished streets, all so like one another, that you might have easily been bewildered and lost your way" (9), and told that "although the evening seemed yet early when they were in the open fields—among the pent-up houses night, with its mists and its darkness, had already begun to fall" (10). The text begins in a familiar genre, the pastoral, before moving into the new genre of industrial novel. But Gaskell prepares us for this innovation by presenting the sylvan landscape from the implied perspective of a city dweller for whom these fields, and the occupations associated with them, are not part of everyday life. The fields are "well known" as a place to visit, not a residence. "Here in their seasons might be seen the country business of hay-making, ploughing, etc., which are such pleasant mysteries for townspeople to watch. . . . You cannot wonder, then, that these fields are popular places of resort at holiday time" (1-2). Although the narrator is explaining the townspeople's motives, she also suggests a similarity of viewpoint between the

townspeople and the reader, unlikely to be a farm worker and hence also inclined to regard these activities as “pleasant mysteries.” The passage suggests that these factory workers are sophisticated urbanites in their own way (she writes in the next paragraph of the “acuteness and intelligence” of their faces); somewhat like the intended reader, they are separate from the rural pursuits their grandparents might have engaged in, and as we find out later, they are able to navigate labyrinthine city streets while losing “not a step” (9). This subtle emphasis on urban caniness mitigates what would otherwise be a stark distance between reader and characters.

In this opening section, Gaskell uses deictic terms to allow the here and now of readers’ real experience to orient their building of a storyworld. I have argued in my introduction that the idea of a deictic shift is too simplistic to describe the experience of fiction reading. This chapter provides an example. The Gaskell reader does not simply remain in her own experiential world, or make a deictic shift to the storyworld. Instead, Gaskell uses a combination of diegetic and extradiegetic terms to gradually immerse readers in the storyworld, to acknowledge the unfamiliarity of this environment while reminding the nineteenth century reader that it is part of *her* (i.e. the reader’s) world. After a passage of description, the narrator moves on to specific events that took place one May evening, “now ten or a dozen years ago” (2). The deictic “ago” suggests that the deictic center is not the incident being described, but the reader’s actual present. This passage is fairly precise about time, anchoring the events of Gaskell’s narrative to the large-scale events of the outside world, but at the same time leaving two years’ leeway—enough to span most of the time between Gaskell’s beginning to write and the book’s publication.⁴¹ This avoids the awkward conflict between Gaskell as narrator and as

writer that would result from a more precise time frame (after all, is the “now” of the text the date of first writing, publication, the act of reading, or something else?). Other deictic terms are similarly reader-oriented, as when she writes “you cannot wonder” or frequently refers to herself in the first person (“I do not know whether it was on a holiday granted by the masters,” and so on). But elsewhere in the passage, the narrator uses the scene itself as center, as when she writes that “here in their seasons may be seen . . . hay-making,” and refers to “these fields.” Although the narrative gradually moves to establish the Lancashire setting as deictic center, using deictic terms in their direct and literal sense remains an option for this narrator throughout the text. Thus she famously writes in Chapter VI that “the vices of the poor sometimes astound us HERE; but when the secrets of all hearts shall be made known, their virtues will astound us in far greater degree” (74). In this sentence “us,” “here,” and the present tense that implies “our current mortal life on earth” are all used to striking emotional effect.

The text continues that “these fields were thronged” on the evening of Gaskell’s opening scene, and the narrator’s literary diction here suggests the evening’s poetic qualities: “It was the April of the poets . . . the willows . . . were now of that tender gray-green which blends so delicately with the spring harmony of colours.” This is a type of language that is implicitly not available to the characters, whose discourse, when it is introduced, is much blunter. The revelers make no remarks on the landscape beyond the practical suggestion “Sit you down here; the grass is well nigh dry by this time” (4). The text thus suggests the reader’s and author’s more sophisticated mindset, distancing them slightly from the characters. These characters she brings into focus gradually, first describing them as “Groups of merry and somewhat loud talking girls” wearing “the

usual out-of-doors dress of that particular class of maidens; namely, a shawl, which . . . if the day were chilly, became a sort of Spanish mantilla or Scotch plaid, and was brought over the head” (2–3). Although this group includes the main character, she is not named until several paragraphs later. Before presenting events through her characters’ eyes, Gaskell describes them as if to an outsider.

On the first page, a number of subject positions are invoked as possible viewers of the Lancashire setting Gaskell describes: She refers to the hypothetical “inhabitant of a mountainous region” who might find this landscape dull, while her description of rural pastimes as “mysterious” expresses the opinion of author and townspeople as well as reader. Gaskell’s use of multiple points of view suggests she believes that presenting events through her character’s perspective would be disorienting or alienating for the reader. While later scenes will have Mary (or other characters including John, Jem Wilson or George Wilson) as the focalizer, this scene is externally focalized, describing things as they might look to a first-time visitor. “The only thing to strike a passer-by was an acuteness and intelligence of countenance, which has often been noticed in a manufacturing population” (3). It is through this outsider perspective that she finally introduces actual characters—“two working men [:] . . . one was a thorough specimen of a Manchester man; born of factory workers, and himself bred up in youth, and living in manhood, among the mills.” The narrator cites his typical features, such as a “slightly made” physique, before moving on to his individual moral qualities: “At the time of which I write, the good predominated over the bad in his countenance.” The first lines of dialogue introduce the main character’s name, and set the plot in motion, as the as-yet-unnamed George Wilson asks “Well, John, how goes it with you . . . any news of Esther

yet?” The scene that follows is presented largely in dialogue, and showcases the workers’ dialect (“ay, she was a farrantly lass; more’s the pity now”) and facts about the referential world: “That’s the worst of factory work for girls. They can earn so much when work is plenty, that they can maintain themselves any how” (5). This passage gives us a great deal of relevant information: that factory work can be lucrative, that it gives women a degree of independence they lack in other walks of life, and that the workers expect times of “plenty” to alternate with scarcity. (This is a message Gaskell reinforces in her preface when she cites the “lottery-like nature” of their lives [60].) Although most readers would notice the “factual” or educational orientation of this passage, it is Gaskell’s rhetorical and stylistic choices that will prompt those readers to accept it a reliable depiction of the world.

The Individual and the “Particular Class”: Conceptual Blending

In the passage above that introduces Mary Barton as part of a group of girls, Gaskell emphasizes the group’s regional peculiarities by saying that their appearance was typical of “that particular class of maidens.” Although this specific phrasing does not recur, the idea Gaskell introduces here of the “particular class” is an important one that will persist when fictional characters and entities are introduced. It suggests a set with relatively homogeneous behaviors and interests, recognizable as a group but small enough to be “particular.” The narrator here brings her focus on to not just “the working class,” but Manchester factory girls “twelve to twenty,” sketched as having practical dress and bold, assertive manners. As she introduces each character, she draws them into the reader’s referential world by indicating what social “type” they are intended to represent.⁴² For example, John Barton is “a thorough specimen of a Manchester man,” and his wife has

the qualities “characteristic of the rural inhabitants” (3). Chapter V, similarly, introduces the character of Job Legh by positioning him as a member of a larger class, Manchester amateur naturalists.

There is a class of men in Manchester, unknown even to many of the inhabitants, and whose existence will probably be doubted by many who yet may claim kindred with all the noble names that science recognizes . . . In the neighbourhood of Oldham there are weavers, common hand-loom weavers, who throw the shuttle with unceasing sound, though Newton’s ‘Principia’ lies open on the loom, to be snatched at in work hours, but revealed over in meal times, or at night. . . . There are botanists among them. . . . There are entomologists. . . . Margaret’s grandfather was one of these” (33-4).⁴³

This device is not limited to characters, but can define other entities; thus in Chapter VI, “‘the fever’ was (as it usually is in Manchester) of a low, putrid, typhoid kind” (55).

This textual strategy has a multiple functions. First, it makes the contours of the book’s conceptual blend clear. In *Story Logic*, David Herman points out that the use of deictic terms that are balanced between diegetic and extradiegetic reference (as in many novels) results in possible ambiguity about a book’s relation to the world: It creates “a fitful and self-conscious anchoring of the text in its contexts, as well as a storyworld whose contours and boundaries can be probabilistically but not determinately mapped, the inventory of its constituent entities remaining fuzzy rather than fixed” (332). In other words, it is not clear to the novel reader which referential world elements have been carried over into the blend, or what types of storyworld-independent elements could appear. This haziness applies to any novel, since no text could be capacious enough to list every object, person, and past or present event that exists within its storyworld.

Gaskell’s tactics work to minimize this confusion, and draw attention away from the “hazy” borders of her textual world that her text is unable to map. By introducing characters as members of a group, Gaskell creates conceptual blends her readers can

easily make sense of and keep track of. Each character is a member of a real sociological class, although his or her words and actions are unique and dictated by the fictional story events. Figure 2 presents one example of how readers might interpret a character, John Barton, as blend; sociological traits common to his “class” are combined with psychological and physical traits the author has supplied him with. By contrast, another author might emphasize her hero or heroine’s singularity, her difference from the more vulgar crowd she shares the stage with. Jane Eyre, for instance, is a singular child before she joins the ranks of mistreated charity school children, and Bulwer introduces his heroine, Madeline, as “the beauty and the boast of the whole country,” with a forehead “higher and broader than it usually is in women,” “eminently thoughtful and high-wrought,” and with a “remarkable love for study” (9). Although we can easily read novel characters like these as “types,” they are types in a different sense—literary rather than sociological. As we shall see, readers may read characters as types in a negative way, drawing them out of the story by reminding them of other texts it is derivative of. Defining each character as a relatively typical member of a class is part of what marks *Mary Barton* as a social problem novel.⁴⁴

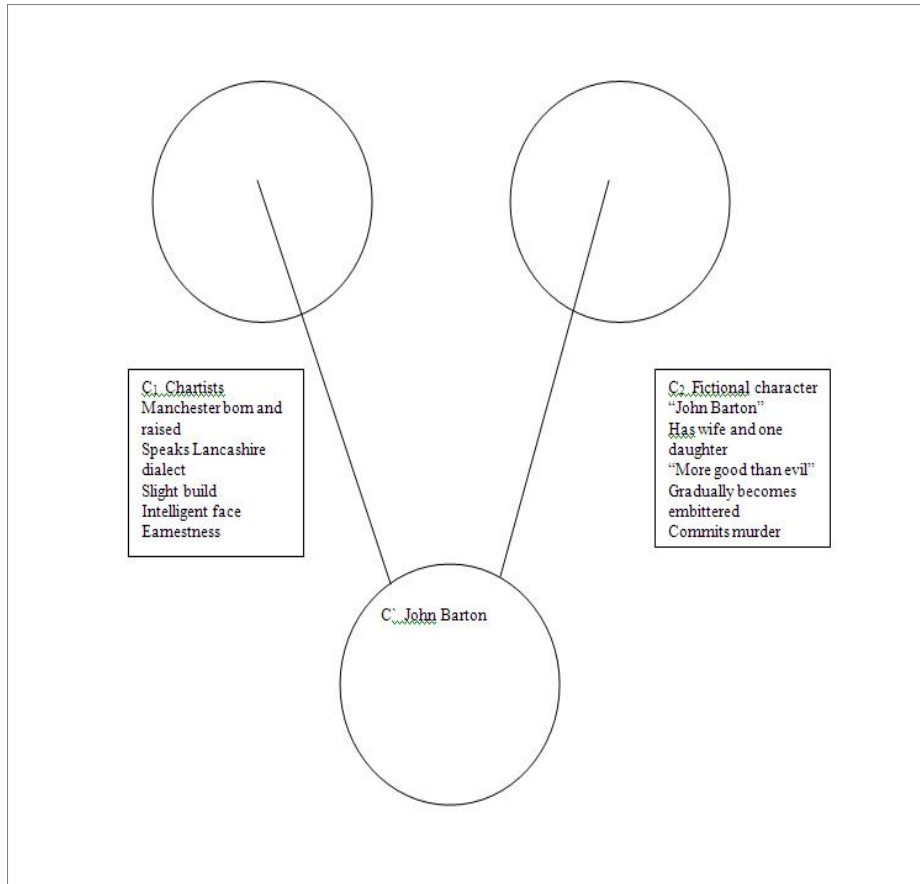


Figure 2: John Barton as blended character

Although Gaskell introduces readers to new and unfamiliar aspects of the referential world, she relies on their having some knowledge of that referential world already. Thus she uses phrases such as “rural inhabitants” and “natives of the manufacturing towns” that would have sounded familiar to readers who had read about these topics in nonfiction media. For readers of *Mary Barton*, the sad state of workers in manufacturing towns was a much-discussed subject; *The British Quarterly Review* reminded citizens that “the condition of the poor of England is a subject which has attracted a large amount of attention of late . . . A flood of light has been let in upon the condition and prospects of large masses of the community” (102-3). The reviewer goes on to write that “a work

which professes to exhibit the condition of this class of the population takes its place as one of a series,” citing such other examples as Lord Ashley’s reform efforts (104).

Gaskell’s use of sociologically charged phrases like “natives of the manufacturing towns” ties her characters in with the obviously referential discourses of journalism and reform politics.

While Gaskell’s narrator does not specify an addressee for her words, her careful play with point of view and deictic center shows they were assembled for a specific audience, one comprising middle-class English people who have never been to the manufacturing towns and are unfamiliar with working class life. The specificity of this intended audience is indicated by the divergent reaction the book got from an American periodical. Writing in the *Christian Examiner*, J.E. Bradford speculated that “we are aware that to a foreigner one peculiar charm of the work must be lost; for, to enjoy it thoroughly, one must have knowledge of the locality, the dialect, the manners and the habits of the poor in England, and of Lancashire in particular” (132). The enthusiastic reactions of London reviewers suggest this was not so; as we have seen, they specifically enjoyed the sensation of being “led by the hand” into new realms of experience.

Bradford was an American who had lived in Manchester during the 1830s; as such, he differs from Gaskell’s intended audience in two important ways. He is missing the perspective of the typical English reader, who saw the northern cities as marginal and mildly exotic. And because he knew Gaskell’s subject matter by personal experience, he misses the sense of “learning” it for the first time.

I have argued that *Mary Barton* creates effective “social novel” characters by positioning them explicitly as conceptual blends that are easy for readers to understand in

terms of social groups. This does not mean, however, that her characters must be simplistic or flat, since most readers would agree that they are not. Rather, the conceptual clarity with which these characters are introduced creates a stable framework that allows Gaskell to introduce nuance and individual quirks without risking confusion. The passage that first introduces John Barton presents him as a typical politically active worker, while gradually shading from collective to individual traits. Barton is “a thorough specimen of a Manchester man; born of factory workers, and himself bred up in youth, and living in manhood, among the mills” (3). These, it appears, are typical qualities. What follows is more ambiguous: “He was below the middle size and slightly made; there was almost a stunted look about him; and his wan, colourless face, gave you the idea, that in his childhood he had suffered from the scanty living consequent upon bad times, and improvident habits.” While it seems likely many of the workers are small, the novel will go on to show us that not all of them have “improvident habits.” (Jem Wilson, for example, is able to save money for emergencies.) This is a description specific to Barton, that also takes into account how his environment has shaped him. Finally, “his features were strongly marked, though not irregular, and their expression was one of extreme earnestness; resolute either for good or for evil, a sort of latent stern enthusiasm. . . . The good predominated over the bad in the countenance” (3). This sounds like a description not of a type, but of one fictional character (one with a tragic destiny). But we learn, later in the book, that some of these traits are common to his peers: In a passage that contrasts the worker’s delegation with a spokesman for the factory owners, we learn that the richer man looks “far from earnest, among the group of eager, fierce, absorbed men” (178). Although the text makes clear what conceptual blends are

comprised of, it does not always specify immediately which traits are specific to the storyworld (or the character) and which are elements of the referential world. Instead, readers update their version of the storyworld as our mental model of the characters and the storyworld becomes more nuanced. For example, discovering that Barton's fellow union members are all "eager, fierce, absorbed men" may cause us to revise our belief that Barton's "earnestness" is a mark of his specific character. Doing so does not cause us to abandon our preexisting mental model of Manchester life, but to update it, making it more complex.

Mary Barton's more recent critics have focused on the textual strains and ideological contradictions resulting from Gaskell's conflicted attitude towards her subject matter. Catherine Gallagher points out "an ambivalence about causality" that "creates an irresolvable paradox": "Barton's political radicalism is presented both as proof that he is incapable of making moral choices and as an emblem of his moral responsibility" (67). In *Culture and Anarchy*, Raymond Williams draws attention to Gaskell's complex identification, noting that she focuses on the workers for only the first few chapters, before redirecting the "flow of sympathy" to the "less compromising figure" of Mary (102). Deborah Epstein Nord comments on the way the murder plot both represents a middle-class fear of crime, and a functions as a "projection" of Gaskell's own anger. "The murder, then, places Gaskell imaginatively in two conflicting positions: as fearful middle-class victim of working-class violence and as enraged perpetrator of that violence" (565). Gaskell is uneasily balanced between solidarity with the workers and fear of their potential violence. I agree with these assessments, and I do not want to suggest that *Mary Barton*'s defining feature is an unmarred stylistic and ideological

unity. Rather, what I want to argue is that for its first readers, the novel conveyed an *impression* of unity, which made these contradictions less visible. Gaskell created a text that read as consistent and rhetorically effective to readers at the time. It is this perceived clarity (ideological and otherwise) that made the book so widely read, and that ensures it is still read—indeed, still well known enough today to be subject to these more deconstructive readings.

Eugene Aram and Bulwer's "Two Creeds"

After impatiently debunking *Eugene Aram's* many inaccuracies, *Fraser's* editor William Maginn objects to its reliance on accurate source materials. "The trial, the defense, the attempted suicide, the execution, the bequeathed confession, are detailed almost in the words of the original; only we must avow our preference of Mr. Bulwer's plagiarism to his invention" (111). This paradoxical critique is typical of the reaction to a book that often moved readers to bewildered self-contradiction. The book is at once too faithful and too inventive, "plagiarism" and lies. And the passage indicates that *Aram's* problems lie with its contrasting reliance on, and cavalier disregard for, the real-world material on which it is based. It is indeed too faithful to the referential world in some places, while ignoring it in others. In *Mary Barton*, overall clarity about the contents and contours of the blended storyworld allows for a more nuanced ambiguity, which allows readers to build up an increasingly complex (and, from their perspective, realistic) storyworld model as they read. The text of *Eugene Aram*, by contrast, contains conflicting and irreconcilable directions for building a storyworld, and in doing so prevents readers from creating a coherent mental model against which to make sense of the events of the plot.

Negative appraisals of *Eugene Aram* return again and again to the idea that the text is inconsistent and has two incompatible philosophies. Reviewers often themselves seem confused about the book, or make incompatible claims, as if the novel's incoherencies had infiltrated their writing. Comparing these reader reactions to evidence from the text suggests the reasons for their confusion. As I argue above, most nineteenth century novels use the simple formula "fictional characters and plot, real history and setting" as a foundation for creating imaginatively rich, believable characters and inventive situations; Sean Latham uses Gaskell as an example of this convention when he writes that "the worlds constructed in the social problem novels of the nineteenth century, like Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, may have been drawn extensively from parliamentary blue books but nevertheless are populated with invented characters" (21). Bulwer, by contrast, blends history with fiction in an idiosyncratic way, while using comparatively wooden characters and stock situations. It is clear critics found this approach less effective. Below, I give a relatively brief summary of the novel, first summarizing the historical facts on which it was based.

Bulwer's novel concerns a story with which his readers would have been familiar: The arrest and execution of Yorkshire-born scholar Eugene Aram, in 1758, for the murder of a man, Daniel Clarke, who had disappeared in 1745.⁴⁵ "Aram was well remembered for nearly a century and a half following his execution" (Tyson 36), and Leigh Hunt writes that "this story of Eugene Aram, by means of Newgate Calendars, Wonderful Magazines, and Biographical Dictionaries, is known all over England" (394). For eighteenth and nineteenth century readers, the story's interest revolved around the protagonist's status as a "gentle" murderer, and the series of odd coincidences that led to

his arrest for a crime committed so long ago. Aram was the son of a gardener, but had a strong inclination for learning from an early age, and by the time he was a young man he had gained a degree of erudition that was impressive for someone of his background. Among his passions were botany and etymology, and he is given credit for being the first linguist to recognize that the Celtic languages were part of the Indo-European family (Tyson 22). Nevertheless, he spent his life as a lowly schoolmaster, and it is likely he would have lived and died in obscurity were it not for the enormous interest sparked by the story of his crime, arrest and execution.⁴⁶ In 1745, Aram unexpectedly left Knaresborough, Yorkshire, where he had been serving as schoolmaster. His travels eventually took him 120 miles south to Lynn, Norfolk, where he became an usher at Lynn Grammar School. He was not heard of again in the north for another 17 years. In June of 1758, a Yorkshire horse dealer passing through Lynn recognized Aram, and confirmed his identity by asking the townspeople who he was. On August 1 of the same year, in Knaresborough, a workman digging for lime discovered a human skeleton. The finding of the bones reminded the townspeople of the unsolved Clarke case; an inquest was ordered, and the man most strongly suspected of the crime, Richard Houseman, was called in to look at the bones. When confronted with this supposed evidence, Houseman nervously exclaimed “this is no more Dan Clark’s bone than it is mine!” (Tyson 2). His certainty on the matter made it clear he knew something about Clarke’s fate. Upon further questioning, Houseman led the authorities to the real remains of Clarke, buried in nearby St. Robert’s cave.

Houseman’s deposition singled out Aram as the real murderer of Clarke. He claimed the three men had conspired in crime (specifically, defrauding their fellow townspeople

of goods borrowed on credit), and that he had seen his accomplice strike down Clarke on the moonless night of February 8. Aram would have been untraceable, but for the horse-dealer who had seen him recently in Lynn; by an improbable coincidence, he happened to be passing through Knaresborough and volunteered his information. Constables proceeded 120 miles south to Lynn and arrested Aram in the grammar school on August 19. After his arrest, Aram signed a deposition in which he denied committing the murder. He was held prisoner at York Castle and tried nearly a year later. Acting as his own defense, he used his research skills to put together a clever speech focusing on his previous good character and, especially, the faultiness of the prosecution's circumstantial evidence. Although many witnesses found the speech impressive (including the future theologian William Paley, then 16 [Tyson 27]), he was found guilty almost instantly. Aram was hanged the following Monday, after an unsuccessful attempt at suicide. Despite a forged jailhouse "confession" that circulated later, Aram went to his death without ever admitting guilt.⁴⁷

Bulwer's version of this well-known tale took inspiration from a long tradition of popular and literary interest in the story. William Godwin used the story as a source for his political novel *Caleb Williams*, picking up on its themes of a poor but gifted young man struggling to better himself, and of a "gentle" murderer being called to justice after many years.⁴⁸ It also inspired another political novel, Thomas Holcroft's *Memoirs of Bryan Purdue* (1805). There was thus precedent for Bulwer to see Aram's downfall not just as a melodramatic crime story, but one with philosophical and political implications about guilt, poverty and justice. The immediate impetus for its writing, though, was probably the appearance of Thomas Hood's poem "The Dream of Eugene Aram."

Hood's work portrayed its protagonist as a guilt-stricken Lynn schoolmaster, buttonholing an innocent young student to tell him, Ancient Mariner-like, about a "dream" of hideous guilt. The poem was an instance classic on its appearance in 1829 and proved that a work on this theme could be a success.

Bulwer's version, which is dedicated to Godwin, often invites comparison to Godwin's tale by drawing attention to the injustice of poverty.⁴⁹ A crucial chapter in Godwin that narrates the circumstances of the murder has Aram complain that "My abilities, by bowing them to the lowliest tasks, but kept me from famine. . . . There lay my life imprisoned in penury as in the walls of a jail" (494). Despite its early publication date, *Aram* thus seems to have some features in common with Victorian realism and the social novel, including its interest in "true" poverty and crime. This is consistent with a critical view of the Newgate Novel as a sort of naïve precursor to realism.⁵⁰ Although the genre was short-lived, Keith Hollingsworth explains in *The Newgate Novel*, these works were among the first to introduce a contemporary underworld or lowlife setting (indeed, *Pelham* is credited as the very first novel to do so). Authors' use of crime stories still fresh in the public mind directed readerly attention to contemporary issues and events. As Hollingsworth notes, they showed "a primitive impulse toward realism" (34).⁵¹ This interest in true life and current issues makes *Aram*'s unreality all the more glaring.

The real-life drama of Aram's story would seem to make it eminently suited for narrative treatment; Tyson writes that his apprehension involved "a coincidence to rank with Hardy's best" (24). In trying to shape it into a novel, though, Bulwer produces a strange blend of history and fiction that is not entirely successful as either. His detailed verisimilitude with dates, and his quoting historic speech, contrasts oddly with his

willingness to invent incidents out of whole cloth, and to bring fictional characters face to face with the historical Aram. Chapter I of the novel opens in Grassdale (the author's stand-in for Lynn), 1758, and proceeds to people the "sequestered hamlet" (1) with a panoply of stock comic characters, such as Jacob Bunting, "the beau and bachelor of the village" (3). Bulwer's narrator then introduces and focuses on a family, the Lesters, comprised of a widower, Rowland, his two daughters, and his nephew Walter, abandoned by a ne'er-do-well father who has long since disappeared. Their personalities are sketched in familiar terms. Rowland Lester is the benevolent patriarch, "a man to be respected. . . [and] beloved." Walter Lester is the manly young gentleman, "high-spirited, bold, fiery, impatient"; Rowland's daughters are the "thoughtful and high-wrought" Madeline and the "equally gentle, but less elevated" Ellinor (10). "How is it, complained Maginn in *Fraser's*, "that novelists always make the eldest daughter pale, tall, with black eyes and hair, *penseroso* in thought and demeanor, while the younger has invariably blue eyes and a sunny smile, with a bosom too pure and innocent for sadness?" (107). Although these are major characters who will share the stage with Aram, they are not real historical personages, but drawn from genre conventions.

Aram's name is introduced in Chapter II, when another character observes that despite his middling fortune, "if he were as rich as my lord, he could not be more respected; the greatest folks in the country come in their carriages-and-four to see him. . . . There is not a name more talked on in the whole country than Eugene Aram" (21). He has lived in Lynn for two years and established a reputation for scholarship, but (in Ellinor's words) "he seems melancholy as well as thoughtful; and he leads so secluded a

life” (28). When Aram is finally introduced directly, the narrator dwells on his sensitive and aristocratic physiognomy:

His hair, which was long, and of a rich and deep brown, was thrown back from his face and temples, and left a broad, high, majestic forehead, utterly unrelieved and bare; and on the brow there was not a single wrinkle; it was as smooth as it might have been some fifteen years ago. There was a singular calmness, and, so to speak, profundity of thought, eloquent upon its clear expanse, which rather suggested one who had passed his life rather in contemplation than emotion. It was a face that a physiognomist would have loved to look upon, so much did it speak both of the refinement and the dignity of intellect (31-1).

This verbal portrait suggests some of the liberties Bulwer took with his historical source material. His Aram is well-off enough to devote all his time to study, while the real Aram had to work in schools throughout his life. The historical Aram was not enough of a gentleman to socialize with “the greatest folks in the country.” (Court records describe him as a “yeoman” [Tyson 7].) As the narrative progresses, more fabricated details about Aram will emerge. Most significantly, Bulwer’s character Aram lives off an inheritance from a relative, which he learned of just three days after the murder of Clarke (505). This Aram is single, has never known love, and is thus free to woo Madeline; while the real Aram was married, having abandoned his wife and eight children when he decamped from Knaresborough in 1745 (Tyson 3). But even early on, the style of the description makes it clear that Bulwer is presenting an idealized version of his protagonist. Bulwer’s Aram is a vessel for such desirable traits as selflessness, unworldliness, and intellect (by contrast to his foil, Houseman, with his “small, sunken eyes . . . a thick, flat nose, high cheek-bones, a large bony jaw from which the flesh receded, and a bull throat” [15]). The description corresponds too closely to a Romantic literary ideal of the perfect man to suggest it could describe a complex historical personage. It also suggests we can read Aram’s character in his face. While the text will go on to suggest that people are

complex and essentially unreadable, like the “calm pool” Bunting sees that may contain “something dark at the bottom” (73), this passage suggests they can be taken at face value. Although the narrator proceeds to ambiguously add that “such was the person—if pictures convey a faithful resemblance,” Bulwer’s evident enthusiasm for his hero’s “refinement and dignity” does not allow this epistemological uncertainty to take hold. Aram will retain his seemingly unmixed good qualities.

Bulwer’s plot gets into motion when Richard Houseman, Aram’s former accomplice, arrives in town and hears of Aram by chance at a local inn. Later his sinister appearance frightens Madeline and Ellinor when they encounter him on a lonely road, and they seek help at Aram’s nearby house. Gazing into each other’s “unfathomable orbs” (33), Aram and Madeline are instantly fascinated, and soon afterward, Aram begins socializing with the Lesters, drawn out of his isolation by his attraction to Madeline. Thus the novel’s romance and retribution plots are both set in motion at once. In the chapters that follow, Aram broods high-mindedly about the importance of autonomy, and the novel frequently drops hints about his terrible secret—already known to almost any reader—without explicitly revealing it. For example, in one passage, encountering an old beggar woman while on a walk with Madeline, Aram observes “how many noble natures, how many glorious hopes, how much of the seraph’s intellect, have been rushed into the mire, or blasted into guilt, by the mere force of physical want!” (79). As Aram and Madeline’s inevitable engagement looms closer, it is revealed that Walter has long loved Madeline, and is a disappointed rival for her affections. Hoping to cure his passion, and to “see the world” (87), he embarks on a year-long journey around England. Just before leaving, though, he reveals another motive: “I have spent whole hours in guesses at my father’s

fate, and in dreams that for me was reserved the proud task to discover it. . . . In travel it will become my chief object” (136). Like its predecessor, *Caleb Williams* (and like Bulwer’s earlier *Pelham*), the novel reveals itself as a narrative of crime and detection, with Walter as amateur sleuth.

In the novel’s middle third, Walter follows a string of clues stretching back from the last hints of Geoffrey Lester’s existence. His detective work leads him to the north of England, where he learns the truth from an old family friend: His father had taken the false name of Daniel Clarke, had received a large inheritance from a colonel he had befriended in India, had been living in Knaresborough, and had “disappeared in rather a strange and abrupt manner” (317). The dual identity of the murdered man, as Clarke, the Knaresborough petty criminal, and the fictional Geoffrey Lester, is one of the book’s oddest features. He changes names partway through, and in the process, a real historical figure is endowed with a fictional (and secret) backstory. As the plot thickens, history and fiction converge. Travelling to Knaresborough, Walter encounters Houseman on the way to visit his sick daughter; thus both are both present when a workman, “digging for stone for the limekiln,” discovers “a bleached and mouldering skeleton” (407). In this version of the story, Houseman conveniently wanders onto the scene just as the crowd begins to murmur that the bones must be Clarke’s. The crowd accuses him of the murder, and he impulsively leads them to the real location of the murdered man’s bones, in St. Robert’s cave. On further questioning, he insists “the murderer is Eugene Aram!” (411). Walter Lester leads a troop of officers south to Lynn, where they arrest Aram in his home, just a few hours before he was to have been married to Madeline.

As the above plot summary suggests, Bulwer weaves the historical material of the Aram story into a tightly knit narrative combining facts from the *Newgate Calendar* with a romance plot and detective story. The chapters that follow bring the potential contradictions of this approach into even sharper relief. The rest of the Lester family cannot believe in Aram's guilt. The stress of the year-long imprisonment gravely weakens Madeline's health, prompting Aram to morbidly exclaim "let her die; *she* at least is certain of heaven!" (454). The narrative culminates in a dramatic trial scene, at which "the remarkable light and beauty of [Aram's] eye was undimmed as ever" (471). After Houseman and others give depositions, Aram gives "that remarkable defence still extant, and still considered as wholly unequalled from the lips of one defending his own cause" (474-5). Bulwer evidently felt that since this speech was such a famous part of the historical record, he had to reproduce that record when retelling the story; the fictional Aram's speech is an abridged version of the one that appears in the *Newgate Calendar* (and other published versions of Aram's life). Bulwer even refrains from presenting the remarks of other speakers at the trial, including the judge, on the grounds that their words have not been preserved: "It is greatly to be regretted that we have no minute and detailed memorial of the trial, except only the prisoner's defence. The summing-up of the judge was considered at that time scarcely less remarkable than the speech of the prisoner" (482). The jury, however, finds Aram guilty almost immediately, and he is sentenced to be hanged. Walter seeks to put his mind at rest by obtaining a confession; Aram writes a chapter-long letter to be opened after his death, explaining his motives and the circumstances of his guilt. In this novel, Aram slits his wrists on the

morning of his execution, and “the law’s last indignity was wreaked upon a breathless corpse!” (515).

With Aram dead and buried, the narrative shifts to Bulwer’s purely fictional characters. Aram has exerted a tragic influence on the Lester family. Madeline collapses after arriving home the very day of the trial, her father dies two years later, and Walter, who has seemingly inherited Aram’s guilt in driving his own family members to death, has spent five years in self-imposed exile, serving as a soldier for king Frederic of Prussia. He reunites with Ellinor, the quiet younger sister, and proposes marriage to her; the two are happily wed, but the “dread and gloomy remembrance” of Aram hangs over Walter’s life as a cautionary example: “In every emergency, in every temptation, there rose to his eyes the fate of him so gifted, so noble in much, so formed for greatness in all things, blasted by one crime. . . . And that fate, revealing the darker secrets of our kind, in which the true science of morals is chiefly found, taught him the two fold lesson,—caution for himself, and charity for others. He knew henceforth that even the criminal is not all evil; the angel within us is not easily expelled” (529).

This idea of human character as radically indeterminate, of behavior as dependent on the contingencies of circumstance, is one of the novel’s most interesting features. Bulwer viewed his work as an investigation of human psychology, writing in a preface that “whenever crime appears the aberration and monstrous product of a great intellect, or of a nature ordinarily virtuous, it becomes . . . a problem for philosophy, which deals with actions, to investigate and solve: hence the Macbeths and Richards, the Iagos and Othellos” (xvi-ii, preface, 1840). He frequently defended the novel as one of “metaphysical speculation and analysis” (preface, 1840); as Tyson points out, the term

metaphysical “signif[ied] approximately what psychological means today” (83). And he remarks in chapter VI, volume 3, that Aram’s confession will be a tale “not of deeds alone, but of thoughts how wild and entangled; of feelings how strange and dark; of a starred soul that had wandered from how proud an orbit, to what perturbed and unholy regions of night and chaos!” (490-91). Although Bulwer is often viewed as a sentimental and old-fashioned writer, this conception of character can make him seem more modern than Gaskell and the other Victorian realists who eclipsed him. Bulwer’s idea that crime is a possibility for each person is radical.⁵² And his presentation of his protagonist’s unique dilemma adds up to a fascinating, if uneven, reading experience. General readers apparently loved the book, which was a bestseller. A clue to its sales comes from an 1849 letter of Bulwer’s: “The subscription was only 1000 copies—but it sold 3000—of the 3 volume form” (quoted in Tyson, 89). The first edition sold out quickly; there was enough demand for multiple printings, and a revised edition fifteen years later. Nevertheless, contemporary readers are likely to agree with the majority of 1830s critics that the pieces of *Eugene Aram* do not add up to a satisfying whole, and that the novel is a complete or partial failure. Tyson expresses a critical consensus when he adds that “in comparison with later masters of psychological inquiry—Conrad or Hardy or Dostoyevsky—Bulwer’s attempt at penetrating the secret wellsprings of character, however earnest, seems superficial and melodramatic” (83). In the section that follows, I argue that critics’ difficulty with the book springs from the impossibility they faced of piecing together a coherent mental representation of the referential world.

Bulwer, Storyworld and Referential World

Bulwer's method for making *Eugene Aram* into a novel will strike many readers as bizarre. It is typical for a roman à clef to create a titillating mixture of truth and melodrama. But rather than supplying both, *Aram* fully achieves neither. It is difficult for the reader to have the experience of "learning" about the real criminal's motives (as with a nonfiction novel like *In Cold Blood*); it is equally difficult to become absorbed in a fictional melodrama, as readers might if the novel advertised itself as loosely based on the Aram story. Readers noticed Bulwer's transgressing of fictional conventions, as when poet and critic Leigh Hunt complained that "Mr. Bulwer has thought fit to do injustice to his powers of invention, and injure the effect of his book, by wantonly sporting with the truth, and giving us an Aram partly fictitious! It is as if he had offered us a portrait of Aram for the genuine one, with half the features avowedly altered!" (395). As I have suggested above, Elizabeth Gaskell successfully handled the same potential problem, combining purely fictional data with referential world facts, by being explicit about which elements of her text were referential, and constructing conceptual blends that were easy for readers to grasp and follow. Bulwer's depiction of a storyworld contrasts with Gaskell's by its inconsistency, presenting a challenge to any reader who wishes to assemble a coherent mental representation.

One example is Bulwer's portrait of the village of Lynn. This is an important element of the storyworld, since it is introduced within the first few paragraphs and will serve as the setting for most of the novel's chapters. In the novel, this village where Aram resided at the time of his arrest is referred to as "Grassdale," and peopled with fictional characters; the narrator first refers to it as "a sequestered hamlet" in "the county of _____" (1). The grammar school that employed the real Aram is not mentioned.

Given this, we might wonder whether the village is a pseudonymous version of the real town—in the same way that Gaskell’s Milton and Hardy’s Christminster, in *North and South* and *Jude the Obscure*, are thinly veiled versions of Manchester and Oxford—or a fictional creation of the author. The text leaves it unclear whether Grassdale should be read as referring to a real town (Grassdale *is* Lynn), or as a fictional town which is connected to other English towns by means of exemplarity (Grassdale *is like* an English village). Bulwer seems suspended here between reference and representation. Leading us to believe the former is the fact that Grassdale corresponds to the place in which Aram was living in 1758, that it is in approximately the right spot (a few days’ journey by horse south of Knaresborough) and that Bulwer is scrupulous throughout the novel about accuracy with places and dates. But it is unclear why he would make such a choice; although he adds that he will “give [it] the name of Grassdale,” there would seem little reason for the narrator to give an already well-known locale a discreet pseudonym, or to conceal its county. And the book’s most thorough hostile review complains that “instead of Lynn, in Norfolk, we are presented with the ‘lovely and picturesque hamlet of Grassdale’” (Maginn 109). The narrator goes on to increase the confusion with a deictic sentence that praises Grassdale as “a place . . . which I have never left without a certain reluctance and regret.” This “eyewitness” approach is a common device for creating verisimilitude, but it seems unnecessary in a story that includes real events. The pseudo-deixis simply reminds us that the author was not around when the story took place, and did not really see the events he is describing.

Next, “the place . . . is associated with the memory of events that still retain a singular and fearful interest.” Although this sentence, too, would not be out of place in a

more conventional novel, readers' preexisting knowledge will instead lead them to interpret it as referential. Bulwer's description portrays an idealized site of "pastoral beauty": It is "situated in a valley, which, for about the length of a mile, winds among gardens and orchards laden with fruit, between two chains of gentle and fertile hills. Here, singly or in pairs, are scattered cottages, which bespeak a comfort and a rural luxury, less often than our poets have described the character of the English peasantry" (1-2). This ambiguous sentence seems to begin by suggesting the cottages bespeak rural luxury, but by the end, implies that rural living does *not* "often" imply the sort of comfort poets have ascribed to it. This sentence, with its tangled syntax, is emblematic of Bulwer's difficulties throughout the text. Its ambiguity springs from the way it addresses the book's main themes. Bulwer will go on to suggest that rural poverty, such as Aram experienced in Knaresborough, is not necessarily tolerable, let alone comfortable or luxurious. Bulwer here seems torn between a conventional novelistic representation of village life as wholesome and pastoral, which would make Aram's crime an anomaly, and one in which village life typically falls short of this ideal. In this reading, the Knaresborough of the novel is exemplary of English rural life, with its grinding poverty, mercenary crime, and long-kept secrets. If every English hamlet contains as many corpses in unmarked graves as Knaresborough does, rural life is indeed very different than "the poets have described." In this case, Aram's descent into crime would be more typical of the "character of the English peasantry."

This inconsistent representation of the book's setting results in at least two conceptual blends that the reader might use to mentally "diagram" the incidents and entities of the text. In the first case (straightforward reference), the town represented as

“Grassdale” would be a conceptual blend of a real town, Lynn, and some fictionalized details specific to this novel. Figure 3 shows a simplified version of how readers would mentally construct such a blend. Box A¹ is the referential input, the real Lynn; information carried into the blend includes its location (Norfolk) and its status as the home of Eugene Aram and the location of historical events such as Aram’s arrest. Box A² shows the storyworld-specific elements of the blended concept “Grassdale,” including its fictional residents (the Lesters, Jacob Bunting, and so on) and its status as the location of fictional events, such as Aram’s courting of Madeline Lester. These elements are combined into the novel’s “Grassdale” (A³). Some referential-world elements that readers would have been aware of, such as Lynn Grammar School, have not been carried over into the blend. This mental model is analogous to Gaskell’s Manchester—or to the pseudonymous Milton in Gaskell’s *North and South*. It constructs a setting as a real place fleshed out with fictional details.

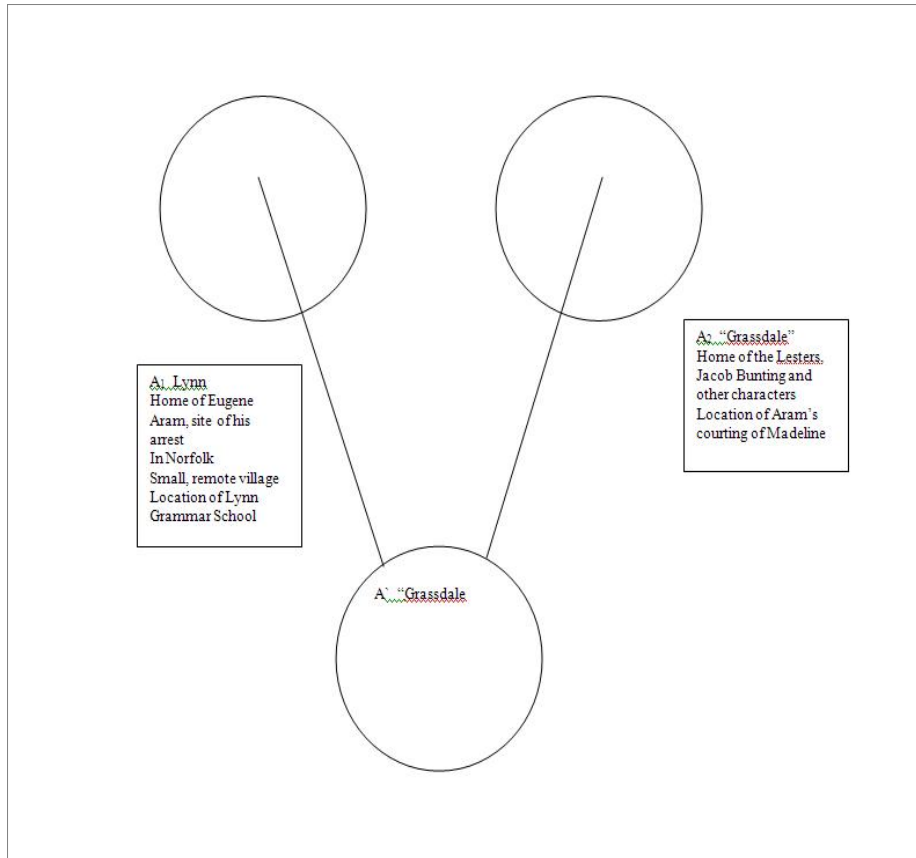


Figure 3: Grassdale as fictionalized version of Lynn

Figure 4 represents a different but, from the reader's point of view, equally possible blend. In this case the two inputs are the referential concept "typical English hamlet of the eighteenth century," and a set of fictional particulars conceived of as specific to *this* town. Again, box A¹ shows elements drawn from the referential world, in this case the supposed qualities of "typical" English villages: their "rural luxury," picturesqueness, and so on. Box A² represents the storyworld-specific elements of Grassdale; it is the home of the fictional Lesters, and in this reading of the text, it is the fictional home of Eugene Aram as well. It is this interpretation that Maginn favored when he wrote that "instead of Lynn, in Norfolk," Bulwer brings readers somewhere else entirely. Although a reader

could mentally construct and keep track of either of these blends, it is important to note that they are incompatible, and could not serve to account for the *same* fictional blended space. To add to the confusion, there is another possible reading in which Grassdale is a fictional entity meant to be more pastoral, peaceful and harmonious than any real place could be: In this case, it is not referential in either of these senses. This reading would be consistent with Bulwer's literary reputation as an advocate of "the Beautiful and the Ideal" (Thackeray 136). This novel's opening description of Grassdale, then, is not just ambiguous, but inconsistent—it does not just make two (or three) readings possible, but decisively suggests both.⁵³

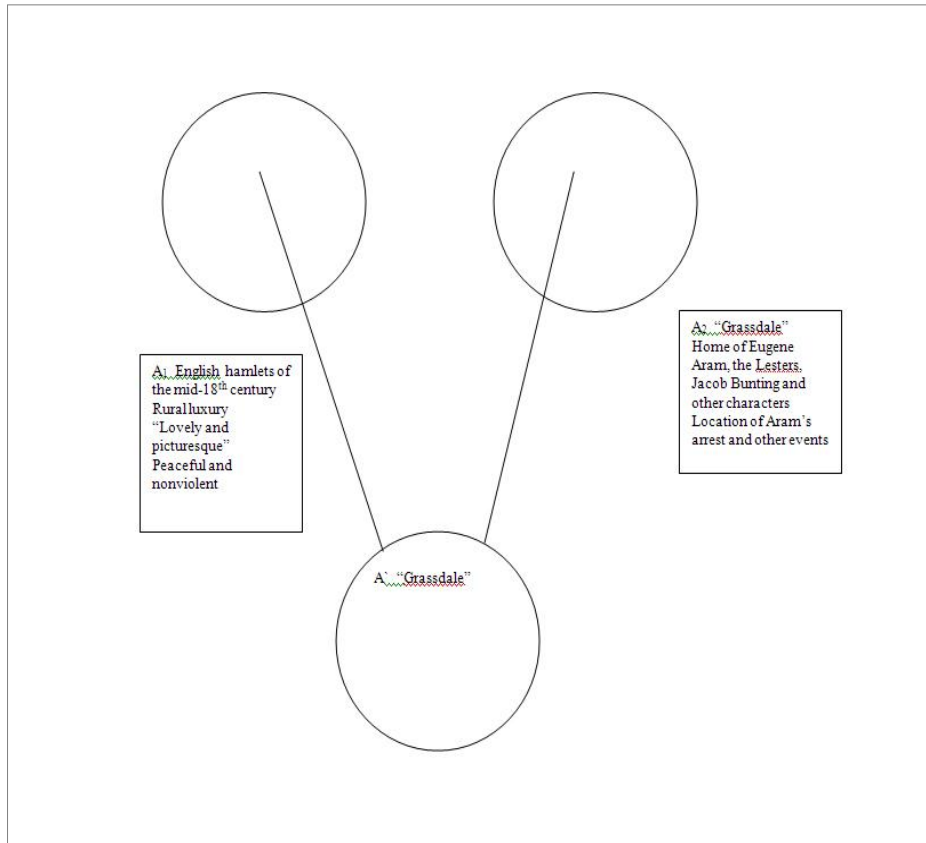


Figure 4: Grassdale as typical English town

This analysis suggests problems with the *Aram* storyworld as actual physical setting. But storyworlds include more diffuse concepts, including rules of causality (whether “fate” or other supernatural forces are allowed to influence the proceedings) and general expectations for which types of event are possible or likely. In *Story Logic*, for example, David Herman writes that “to tell and to comprehend stories is to operate within a system of probabilistic rules in which events are preferentially (but not absolutely or inevitably) viewed as goal-directed actions,” and goes on to explain that genres are partly differentiated by their preferences for different event types (30-31). Here, too, *Eugene Aram* presents its readers with a confusing multiplicity of mutually incompatible rules.

The novel's penultimate chapter most clearly demonstrates these causal issues, because it bears the burden of explaining the rest of the novel. Here Bulwer tries to fulfill his claims for "metaphysical speculation" by showing how a "benevolent" and "humane" man stoops to one sordid crime.⁵⁴

This chapter, which takes the form of a letter from Aram to Walter Lester, is a protracted external analepsis that reveals the secrets of Aram's past life. Aram describes himself as a humbly born young man, prevented by poverty from satisfying his love of knowledge. Frustrated, he is influenced by the counsels of Richard Houseman, his distant relative, who tells him that "self-preservation is an instinct more sacred than society, and more imperious than laws," and that he should "take from the superfluities of others what your necessities crave" (501). Aram is gradually won over by these arguments. This series of scenes present Aram as seduced into criminality, but the seduction is not entirely convincing, because there is nothing about Houseman that Aram finds appealing: He is an uneducated petty criminal, and "the audacity of his discourse revolted me" (495). Houseman is trying to persuade Aram to join him in robbing Clarke, a "friend of old" (501), of some stolen jewels. Meanwhile, Aram grows disgusted at Clarke's evil acts (including the rape of an innocent girl), and convinces himself through sophistic logic that the greater good of humanity would be better served if Clarke were dead and Aram were able to pursue his studies: Aram is "losing the very powers of virtue because I would not stray into crime!" (498).⁵⁵

Instead of working together, the narration, dialogue and plot of the story suggest different solutions about what ultimately drives behavior. Aram rationalizes what happened using such clichés as "fate had woven her mesh around me" (502), but the

narrative is not critical of these platitudes, and fails to suggest an alternative frame of reference to Aram's self-deceiving rationalizations; rather, it seems to accede to his idea of "fate."⁵⁶ For instance, the narrator informs us in chapter VII that "fate seemed bent on bringing together these two persons [Eugene and Madeline], already so attracted towards each other" (86), and Walter himself speculates in the final chapter on Aram's "fate" (529). Throughout the text, "fate," innate character, and small vicissitudes of circumstances are variously evoked to explain human action, especially the murder. In fact, these explanations are mutually exclusive; if Aram is innately good, his character cannot have been affected by the chance event of coming in contact with Houseman. And if fate governs all our actions, the more progressive claim that dire poverty makes people vicious seems out of place. Bulwer is caught between genres; the emphasis on fate seems appropriate to a tragedy for the stage, while the economic analysis of behavior is likely drawn from eighteenth century political writers like Godwin. The confusion in genres leads to a multiplicity of causal frameworks that cannot be resolved by any reader.

Although his portrait of Aram is at the center of his novel's intellectual project, with its ambitious attempts to plumb individual psychology, the Aram character is also the focal point of the book's problems. *Eugene Aram* as psychological novel is marred because its main character seems psychologically inconsistent, given traits that the murderer of Daniel Clarke could not possibly have possessed. Many critics noted that Bulwer felt free to ignore inconvenient facts about his protagonist. In prefacing the parody *Elizabeth Brownrigge* (like *Aram*, based on a real eighteenth century convict), the anonymous wit addressed his fellow author: "As you have omitted any mention of the wife of your Eugene, I have not thought it necessary to recall the reader's attention to the

husband and sixteen children of my Elizabeth. As you have given your hero more learning and virtue than he possessed, . . . I have presumed to raise the situation of my heroine” (97-98). Unlike Gaskell’s novel, Bulwer makes it unclear whether his protagonist is part of some larger group, or a unique individual. He implies throughout that there is some mystery explaining why Aram is so solitary and unsociable, even as he classes him with other thinkers of his time period, “those earnest and high-wrought enthusiasts who now are almost extinct upon earth” (41). Scenes such as Aram’s confrontation with Walter in Chapter I encourage us to see an unspoken truth as the master-key to all of Aram’s character, and also to all of his behavior, even as the text also suggests the murder has not changed him—he is still the man who “would tread aside to avoid the worm in his path” (43). We learn in the penultimate chapter that it is the murder that drained Aram of his interest in making any sort of public contribution—“the ambition died in remorse, and the vessel that should have borne me to the far land of science lay rotting piecemeal in a sea of blood” (506). Nevertheless, throughout the course of the novel Aram displaces the real source of his unhappiness, insisting that “it is a hard life we bookmen lead. . . . I wish I had worked at the plough, and known sleep, and loved mirth, and—and not been what I am” (61). This sentence elides the question of whether it is Aram’s long-ago crime or his calling as a “bookman” that sets him apart.

If this text is marked by contradiction and inconsistency, its reviews are as well: They make contradictory statements about the book’s faults and merits. This is clear from the words of one diarist, Henry Crabbe Robinson, a literary figure who kept notes on his reading, and started *Eugene Aram* in January 1832. He wrote in praise of the book while midway through it: “So deep an interest is cast over the character of the

protagonist [a]s to seize and fully occupy the attention” (401). Two weeks later, after finishing the book, his impression is more mixed. Although he has “not for a long time read so excellent a novel,” of the central dilemma, “I cannot say that the execution is perfect; a great deal more psychological philosophy might have been introduced and a great deal more of poetry in the conception of the character.” What is telling here is Robinson’s focus on interest of character, and his contradictory impulse to focus on *defects* of that character as the main source of problems in that otherwise “superior book.” The psychology of Eugene Aram, it seems, is paradoxically the best and the worst element of the novel—deeply interesting, and yet not as interesting as it should have been.

The *Literary Examiner*, in a fairly positive review, begins by emphasizing the critic’s misgivings about the topic: “We confess that we thought this subject unfortunately chosen. . . . It seemed to us, that invention must contract as the tale advanced to notorious facts. . . . We had not read for many pages, before we felt how idle it is to forecast fetters for genius. Mr. Bulwer has triumphed over all difficulties. The story is full of interest and of beauty, and, with consummate skill, the foreknowledge of the reader is actually made to heighten the effect. . . . The character of Eugene Aram, is a master-piece, produced by a thorough knowledge of the human heart” (51). He gives a lucid summary of Aram’s self-serving moral reasoning, explaining that “he is thrown into contact with a being, odious, pernicious, a pest to society; and he argues himself into a belief, that as he has constituted himself the judge, he may become the executioner of the wretch.” But he comes close to contradicting himself when he says that “the faults of the work under review seem to us to be in the insufficiency of the motives adduced for

Aram's crime, which, with some of the ingenuity so largely at the disposal of Mr. Bulwer, might easily have been strengthened" (52). This reviewer thus echoes Robinson in locating Aram's character as both a masterpiece of psychology, and a liability due to weak psychology. The *Edinburgh Review* makes much the same argument. Its anonymous critic praises the novel, but argues its subject would have been better suited to a tragedy, because "in a novel . . . custom has rendered certain qualities indispensable in its heroes; and the naked and coarse-grained villainy of the real Aram disqualifies him" (214). Thus he says "the only defect of any moment in the book" is "the moral anomaly which the character of Aram, as drawn by Mr. Bulwer involves" (214-5). This evaluation contrasts with his inclusion of Aram in a list of the author's "individual portraits" that will be "added to the gallery of our recollections [and] imprint themselves, by characteristic traits, more than words, upon our memories." And in an evaluation of Bulwer's oeuvre, he writes that "Mr. Bulwer's forte lies more in the conception of character, or in the delineation of individual scenes" rather than plot (215). This reviewer's reaction to the central character seems to be defined by a contradiction: Although character is Bulwer's greatest skill, and this character ranks among his most memorable creations, he is also a psychological impossibility who lacks the appropriate traits of the novel hero.

The *Spectator* reviewer comes closest to diagnosing the problem, locating the novel's defects in the author's own ambivalence. One revealing passage expresses his anxiety about the character of Bunting. Bunting is a comic character, possibly modeled after Sterne's Corporal Trim (as Maginn notes) who is seen throughout the novel propounding a humorously amoral life philosophy. He is opposed to the honest Walter

Lester (in much the same way that Houseman is a foil to Aram), and is seen advising him that “there be two ways o’ living; one to cheat,—one to be cheated. . . . ‘Stead of being idle and cheated, the boy ought to be busy, and cheat,—augh!’” (208). An insightful passage wonders what is behind Bulwer’s emphasis on this distasteful set of ideas.

The view is Tomlinsonian; and we cannot help but feel surprised, that a writer who evidently most rejoices in a chivalrous and poetical morality—who, in fact, loves to view human nature only in its moods of exaltation and self-devotion—can take the pleasure he does in contemplating the wrong side of the picture, or is able to excel so greatly in delineating mankind under its most degrading aspect. It may be alleged, that to do so is dramatic—that it is not BULWER who speaks, but Bunting: But this same view of life occurs in almost every novel by the same author, in some form or other; and we cannot help attributing it to the author. This implies that the same person has two creeds; which, perhaps, after all, is not so surprising as councils and clergymen may suppose. . . . We do not know whether the high-flying or the low-dragging schemes are the most erroneous (17).

Bulwer’s “two creeds” map neatly onto Bulwer’s two attitudes toward authorial autonomy: While Aram articulates Bulwer’s idealistic contempt for market values and reverence for personal ideals, Bunting (whose name is suspiciously similar to the author’s own) counsels an unscrupulous policy of adapting one’s actions to all opportunities for gain. Bunting’s philosophy is the very opposite of Aram’s professed beliefs, while plainly accounting for Aram’s opportunistic and self-serving crime. These two creeds are both symptom and cause of the novel’s two contrasting conceptions of Aram’s relation to the referential world.

Autonomy and Influence

Bulwer’s “two creeds” make it difficult for him to create a text with one ideologically consistent referential world. His authorial ambivalence about his subject matter, and about the values he wished to promote, are responsible for this textual inconsistency. His apparent uncertainty as to which elements of his text should be

strictly accurate, and which should be authorial inventions free of his real-world “material,” are symptomatic of a deep-seated anxiety about the idea of autonomy itself. Bulwer’s text returns over and over to the theme of autonomy, the ambivalently coded trait that is responsible for Aram’s “barrenness” and his superiority. This trait is charged with all the drama of his insecure position in society. The novel’s “autonomy” theme reflects Bulwer’s anxiety over his own perceived lack of autonomy as an author: He faced financial pressure to produce popular works, and, as a result, needed to court the reading public with “material” that was timely and topical. These financial concerns potentially damaged his texts as aesthetic objects; to give one obvious example, Bulwer could likely have written a better book if he had made a fiction loosely based on the Aram story, instead of an accurate account; but to do so would have meant changing the book’s title and depriving it of a robust selling point. While Gaskell is successful in convincing readers her choice of topic in *Mary Barton* was a personal one, Bulwer is judged far less successful in using factual source material. His artistic choices were judged not to be truly autonomous, but dependent on current trends and sales figures. Bulwer’s mixed feelings about autonomy and the autotelic aesthetic object are reflected in his textual uncertainty over which elements of his story should be independent of his original source material.

Many passages in *Aram* return explicitly to the main character’s passionate desire for autonomy. In the first volume of the book the scholar is asked by Lord ____, a courtier, to serve as his personal secretary. During a conversation in the earl’s library, Aram responds “could I exchange the lonely stars and the free air for the poor lights and feverish atmosphere of worldly life? Could I surrender my mood, with its thousand

eccentricities and humors—its cloud and shadow—to the eyes of strangers, or veil it from their gaze by the irksomeness of an eternal hypocrisy? No, my lord! I am too old to turn disciple to the world! . . . Nature and my own heart—will suffice for the rest of life”

(167). The earl responds

You have chosen nobly if not wisely; and though I cannot forgive you for depriving me of such a companion, I thank you for teaching me such a lesson. Henceforth I will believe that philosophy may exist in practice, and that a contempt for wealth and for honors is not a mere profession of discontent. This is the first time, in a various and experienced life, that I have found a man sincerely deaf to the temptations of the world,—and that man of such endowments! (167-8).

Aram’s principled autonomy is presented as striking awe into the heart of a well-read nobleman. Of course, a more prosaic reason Aram might be reluctant to take the job is that wider fame would bring his existence to the attention of those who remember him in Knaresborough. Nevertheless, his refusal makes him seem a paragon of philosophy in action, and Bulwer does not exploit the irony of having Aram inveigh against “eternal hypocrisy,” while himself hypocritically concealing the reason for his choice.

Aram’s lack of interest in public acclaim, and in publishing any of his ideas, contrasts with Bulwer’s desire and need to publish often. In the 1830s, Bulwer was constantly in need of income. Disapproving of his 1827 marriage to Rosina Wheeler, his mother cut off his allowance; thus by this time he was without an income, living in an expensive London home, and supporting a wife and two children. He was also devoted to what one scholar describes as a fashionable lifestyle of “expensive dinner parties, balls, masquerades, river parties to Richmond, evenings at Almacks, weekends in the country, trips to Goodwood and Ascot, soirées, and posh West End private clubs like the Carleton” (Campbell 8), with living expenses around 3000 pounds a year. The result was a need for constant productivity. Between 1827 and 1837, Campbell continues, “Bulwer

published thirteen novels, two poems, a pamphlet, four plays, a social history of England, a three-volume history of Athens,” in addition to writing various articles for journals and editing the *New Monthly Magazine* between 1831 and 1832. The public noticed the connection between his work and his lifestyle. An American journalist wrote in 1835 that “the author of *Pelham* is a younger son and depends on his writings for a livelihood. . . . He lives in the heart of the fashionable quarter of London, where rents are ruinously extravagant, entertains a great deal, and is expensive in all his habits, and for this pay Messrs. Clifford, Pelham, and Aram—(it would seem) most excellent good bankers” (*Rural Repository* 13). Bulwer would have been keenly aware that such mercantile activity was potentially compromising. Andrew Brown writes that “like many thoughtful young men in the 1830s, Bulwer was troubled by the materialist ethic scorned by Carlyle, in a memorable phrase, as ‘virtue by Profit and Loss’” (30). Although Bulwer’s choice to write on ideal and sublime subjects is often treated as an idiosyncratic authorial taste, it may well have been a response to his need to compose to the rhythms of “profit and loss,” in circumstances that were far from ideal.

Aram’s independent fortune and distaste for worldly life mark him as the opposite of his creator. “What is termed pleasure had no attraction for [Aram]. . . . Intemperance had never lured him to a momentary self-abandonment” (41). He speaks slightingly of city life, and can barely be tempted even to socialize with his neighbors. Aram’s autotelic learning contrasts with Bulwer’s use of historical “materials” and learning largely to turn a profit. The narrator explains that Aram was an example of a now-vanished type of eighteenth-century scholar who “proceed in exulting labor, and having accumulated all, they bestow naught; they were the arch-misers of the wealth of letters” (42). Bulwer’s

ambivalence about this autotelic activity is quite explicit: “And yet, even in this very barrenness, there seems something high; it was a rare and great spectacle,—men, living aloof from the roar and strife of the passions that raged below . . . deaf and blind to the allurements of the vanity which generally accompanies research; refusing the ignorant homage of their kind, making their sublime motive their only meed, adoring Wisdom for her sole sake” (42). While the metaphor of barrenness versus fertility suggests the Victorian respect for productivity and profit, the rest of this passage insists that Aram’s solipsism is noble. It implies a Romantic or even modernist belief that an activity not done for an end goal is more inherently meaningful. And many elements of the text strengthen the contrast between author and hero. Aram’s isolation is all the more remarkable because he could have been—as Bulwer actually was—a politician or public figure: “Much in his nature, had early circumstances given it a different bias, would have fitted him for worldly superiority and command” (43). The two men also share a research interest. Bulwer wishes to engage in “metaphysical speculation” about the human heart; Aram is engaged in “profound and habitual investigations of our metaphysical frame” (42). This vague phrase suggests he is studying the makeup of “our” world or universe, but could also refer to the human frame, and the subtler aspects of “our” psychology. His words echo Bulwer’s claim that “there seems something in the science which teaches us the knowledge of our race.” The character’s disinterested investigations seem pointlessly sterile, while at the same time contrasting favorably with Bulwer’s need to tailor his “speculations” to market needs.

The distancing of Aram from the productive activities of Bulwer as novelist also shows itself though the character’s disdain for the types of actions that typically make up

the world of novel plots. The “world” he rejects includes the components that make up the plots of most novels, including this one: Politics, career ambition, varied social life, romance and even friendship. In the first two thirds of the novel, Aram disavows any interest in the world of action and events. His life decisions have been based on avoiding opportunities “either to dazzle the world or to serve it” (43). He has never pursued fame because “the delight *monstrari digito*, the gratification of triumphant wisdom, the whispers of an elevated vanity, existed not for his self-dependent and solitary heart.” Of love, he soliloquizes that “I ought to weave my lot with none. . . . I will steel my soul, shut up the avenues of sense, brand with the scathing-iron these yet green and soft emotions of lingering youth” (65-6). He warns Walter—a more typical character who straightforwardly pursues his own goals—about the dangers of “the gaming of social existence,—the feverish and desperate chances of honor and wealth, upon which the men of cities set their hearts” (64).

These passages read like a coded critique, by the author, of his own mercantile activity. But it also seems to pass judgment on his plot, which relies on the “desperate chance” of murder for money. It is a murder “plot” that makes Aram forsake all interest in social, political and economic activity. By cutting him off from the human community, Aram’s crime has forced him from the world of social intercourse and action, and hence left him free to pursue autotelic activities that are satisfying and meaningful in their own right. It is as though only by removing himself from “plot” could he distance himself from his crime. In narrative, the natural end result of a murder is the detection of the murderer; the crime sets into motion the series of events that will lead to discovery. It is as if Aram feels he must halt the proceedings of plot by

withdrawing from public and personal life. Although his attempt does not succeed, this is because he is drawn back into narrative (seemingly against his will) by his love affair with Madeline. Throughout the novel he will remain associated with a notion of stoic autonomy.

Aram's withdrawal from plot is coupled, in the text, with an ever more minute knowledge of the world around him—a mastery of the referential world in which he resides that is greater than any other character's, or even the author's. This first becomes clear in the passage quoted above, which describes Aram's wide range of scientific pursuits including astronomy and geology. He is “the profound mathematician, the elaborate antiquarian, the abstruse philologist, uniting with his graver lore the more florid accomplishments of science, from the scholastic trifling of heraldry to the gentle learning of herbs and flowers” (44). It becomes even clearer in the scene in which Aram first dines at the Lesters' home. He ends up discoursing to the family on the plant life and folklore of Grassdale:

Vividly alive to the influences of nature, and minutely acquainted with its varieties, he invested every hill and glade . . . with the poetry of his descriptions . . . and from his research he gave even scenes the most familiar a charm and interest which had been strange to them till then. To this stream some romantic legend had once attached itself . . . that moor, so barren to an ordinary eye, was yet productive of some rare and curious herb, whose properties afforded scope for lively description. . . . No subject was so homely or so trite, but the knowledge that had neglected nothing was able to render it luminous and new (48-9).

Aram possesses the most valued skill of the novelist, the ability to describe scenes in a lively, vigorous way. He gives his readers new knowledge in a way that renders it fresh and interesting (in much the same way that the *Mary Barton* narrator would do). In

particular, he has the skill of defamiliarization—he can take banal material and invest it with “a charm and interest . . . strange” to his hearers (49).

It is curious that Bulwer summarizes, but does not quote, this supposedly fascinating monologue. While he is guilty of the oft-decried authorial sin of telling instead of showing, this is not the only odd feature of this authorial strategy, which serves to credit Aram with an all-encompassing storyworld knowledge that is denied to the author. It distances Bulwer and the narrator from his main character, not allowing his knowledge to become their knowledge. Bulwer may have feared boring his readers with a long stretch of dialogue, but in Aram’s speech, detailed fidelity to the contours of the referential world is not incompatible with holding the hearers’ interest. This passage suggests that the same is not true for the author; as economic agent, he has apparently had to choose between storyworld knowledge and plot momentum, but he denigrates this choice by assigning higher value to the “vividly alive,” poetic and romantic descriptive powers of his character. The same pattern recurs throughout the novel. In one scene Madeline succeeds in comforting a mysteriously abstracted Aram. “Dismissing at once from his language . . . all of its former gloom, except such as might shade, but not embitter, the natural tenderness of remembrance, Aram now related, with that vividness of diction, which, though we feel we can very inadequately convey its effect, characterized his conversation . . . those reminiscences which belong to childhood” (ii. 145-9). Aram’s “vividness of diction” gives life to his childhood memories, but the narrator disclaims the ability to reproduce this skill.

In this text, appreciation of a richly detailed environment—from the reader’s perspective, a “storyworld”—is opposed to the goal-directed activity we associate with

plot. Aram is the only character who can describe and fully appreciate the world around him because, in this novel's textual logic, his plotless "autonomy" leaves him free to appreciate the natural world (the rich "material" of the Grassdale landscape) on its own terms, without reference to the ways it might profit him. In one early scene, Aram chides Walter for his love of fishing, saying it is "a treacherous pursuit, it encourages man's worst propensities,—cruelty and deceit" (63). Walter responds that he should instead be "indulgent to a pastime which introduces us to [nature's] most quiet retreats"; Aram responds, "and cannot nature alone tempt you without need of such allurements? . . . Are not these enough of themselves to tempt us forth? If not, go to!—your excuse is hypocrisy." In this scene, Aram's mind clearly lingers on his guilt. Going to the brook to take part in a productive activity associates Walter, in Aram's mind, with the "cruelty and deceit" of the murder. He tellingly opposes pure aesthetic appreciation of a setting to the life-and-death struggle of goal-directed action.

Reviewers often criticize this work for its lack of autonomy; they suggest it is too commercial, too reliant on the apparatus of publicity. One critic writes, "we must express our indignation at the pretensions of the writer, and the conduct of the publisher, puffer, reviewer, and (if such an egregious ass does exist) the purchaser." After satirizing these reviewers' overdone praise—he seems specifically to be quoting from the *Literary Examiner*—he goes on to assert that the book is "an attempt to convert a swindler and assassin, a cool, calculating villain, into a high-minded, philosophical, and ill-treated recluse" (*Cab* 3). To this reviewer, the mendacious publicity apparatus that sustains the book is explicitly connected to historical dishonesty *in* the work, and he believes he can

debunk the reviews by citing historical truth. In both cases, unworthy material has been converted into something high-minded and admirable.⁵⁷

The most famous commentary on *Aram* skillfully captures the conflicts caused by Bulwer's pecuniary motives. Published in 1847, Thackeray's *George de Barnwell* takes up the story of an eighteenth century apprentice (in reality, named simply George Barnwell) who murdered his uncle for money. Published in *Punch*, *Barnwell* purports to be a series of "excerpts" from a full novel, and offers three scenes, one of Barnwell at work in his employer's shop, one of him impressing such contemporaneous figures as Alexander Pope with his elegant discourse, and one of him defending his conduct in prison. In the first excerpt, Thackeray depicts the apprentice musing turgidly on banal subjects to a pretty young customer: "Would you have currants, lady?" he asks her. "These once bloomed in the island gardens of the blue Ægean. They are uncommon fine ones, and the figure is low; they're fourpence-halfpenny a pound. Would ye mayhap make trial of our teas? We do not advertise, as some folks do: but sell as low as any other house." In response to a question about figs, he observes "Time was . . . I thought I never should be tired of figs. But my old uncle bade me take my fill, and now in sooth I am aweary of them. . . . Figs pall; but O! the beautiful never does! Figs rot; but O! the Truthful is eternal" (137). Thackeray's choice of the familiar Barnwell story was an inspired one, not just because it had already acquired "low" connotations by being fictionalized in such works as George Lillo's *The London Apprentice*, but also because of the young man's position as a shopkeeper. As an employee whose living depends on the continual sale of goods, he is in no position to be concerned only with ideal beauties, and his half-feigned lack of interest in his work appears a ridiculous pretension. He switches

absurdly mid-sentence from grand eulogiums (“these once bloomed in the island gardens of the blue Ægean”) to the language of advertising (“the figure is low”). De Barnwell is thus not simply a parallel with Aram, but a figure for Bulwer himself: Claiming to be concerned only with the Beautiful, and independent from commerce, he clearly lacks the luxury of being any such thing. Thackeray thus mocks both the author’s exaggerated claims for textual autonomy, and his paradoxical over-reliance on high sales, puffery, and commercially desirable “material.”

Conclusion

The contrasting reception to these two novels shows that coherent blended storyworld is essential to a successfully referential text. But a blend’s success depends on readers’ historically contingent horizon of expectations, as well as the author’s rhetorical skill in addressing them. While Gaskell’s combination of social-type characters and fictional events are a particularly recognizable type of storyworld, at the time of the book’s publication her techniques were fresh and innovative. While blended storyworlds harness the mind’s capacity to construct and understand conceptual blends, then, there is no predetermined form such blends must take. The creation of a consistent and readily understandable blend can allow for innovation that would otherwise confuse its intended audience. What seemed like a novelty to Gaskell’s early readers—the “romance” of ordinary people with drab lives—would become one of the most enduring conventions of Victorian realism. And the range of genres that have appeared since—magical realism, science fiction, dystopian fiction, surrealism—suggests that social realism is just one possible template for combining the actual and the fanciful.

CHAPTER II

CONVENTION AND REALISM IN TROLLOPE AND ELIOT

Upon the 1874 publication of Anthony Trollope's *Phineas Redux*, a critic for the *Saturday Review* noted the novel's many unconventional elements: The only question is "whether it can be called a novel at all. Does the question of the Dissolution of the English church, discussed at elections, by leaders of parties in the House . . . constitute material for a novel? Above all, can that be a novel where there is no plot, where everybody, with the exception of one insignificant couple, is on the shady side of thirty, and all of the love-making is carried on by a widower and two widows of mature years?" (186). After these facetious complaints, he allows that the novel will please readers after all: Trollope is "himself again," all the characters are familiar, and "perhaps we recognize a charm in this second appearance [of Phineas] more than in the first." The anonymous reviewer's reactions reverse what we might expect from a serious critic of realist fiction. Pleasure in repetition and predictability, discomfort with fresh and new textual elements drawn directly from life: These reactions devalue the novelty of novels in favor of what a contemporary critic might see as their least valuable element, their adherence to the familiar. Yet as we shall see, the *Saturday Reviewer's* preferences are not unusual. While Victorian critics and educated readers are appreciative of innovative works, they are just as likely to associate a text's pleasures and plausibility with the opposite quality: convention. And the works they praise, like *Phineas* and George Eliot's 1866 *Felix Holt, The Radical*, demonstrate deft use of the expected and the inventive. This unexpected appreciation for texts' conventional aspects—along with recent cognitive research on the role of familiar elements in making a text absorbing and

believable—suggests the value of developing a new critical stance on convention in the novel. Rather than regarding conventional elements as the result of lack of creativity or authors pandering to the market, we can see them as a vital tool in fiction authors' attempts to create believable storyworlds, one that helps them engage and entertain readers while challenging their preconceptions.

Victorian realism had a particularly vexed relationship with convention. The genre was best known for promoting acute observation of contemporary reality as opposed to romantic, poetic, remote or ideal conceptions of life. Katherine Kearns, in *Nineteenth Century British Realism*, writes that “the realist’s duty . . . will come up against Art as well, or, more particularly, up against all formalized and aestheticized images of things that, when actually seen in their particularities, will prove themselves to be neither formally nor ethically consistent,” concluding that “realism’s premise is that one must learn to speak an art that is not itself filtered through art” (4). Caroline Levine writes in *The Serious Pleasure of Suspense* that realist plots fought against “rigid convention and inflexible orthodoxy” (9), holding up “belief and tradition . . . against the surprising, unconventional otherness of the world” (2). The realist attitude to convention is usually taken to be represented by the quotation from *Coriolanus* that George Eliot uses as an epigraph in one chapter of *Felix Holt*: “*Custom calls me to’t: /What custom wills, in all things should we do’t ? /The dust on antique time would lie unswept, /And mountainous error be too highly heaped /For truth to overpeer*” (218). Realism challenged customary expectations that the proper subjects for fiction were pure, admirable characters and stirring deeds, that readers only wanted to hear about the lives of the wealthy and noble. It drew attention to seemingly mundane people and actions, suggesting there is much to

admire in ordinary, imperfect lives (including those of middle and working-class subjects.) At the same time, realism was quick to establish conventions of its own. It became the most prominent genre of the time, still most closely associated with nineteenth century English literature. Franco Moretti writes of nineteenth century fiction (and indeed, all of Western narrative) as dominated by the Bildungsroman, “the symbolic form that more than any other has portrayed and promoted modern socialization” (559). In addition to the Bildungsroman plot, stylistic conventions like the three-volume format and need for a marriage plot persisted for decades, while bestselling writers such as Dickens, Charlotte Brontë and Thackeray became hugely influential. By the 1860s, realism was firmly established as the most respected form for the novel, often opposed to such lesser genres as the sensation novel.

Writers could not really escape convention in their attempts to document life. As a result, theorists have seen realism’s simultaneous need to reject old conventions and create new ones of its own as a defining paradox of the genre. As George Levine writes, the writer who hopes to seem realistic “must self-contradictorily dismiss previous conventions of representation while, in effect, establishing new ones” (617). Harry Levin writes that “our highest recommendation for a work of fiction is that it be as unlike fiction as possible. Hence realistic fiction, which goes out of its way to avoid the appearance of the fictitious, is bound to involve a contradiction in terms” (25). Since artless art is a paradox, writers, it seems, can only create “unconventional” art by crafting an illusion that takes in their readers. Coward and Ellis write in *Language and Materialism* that by the 1830s “the realist convention is no longer visible as convention; it has become natural, identical with reality” (596). This paradox is explored at length by

George Levine in *The Realistic Imagination*. Quoting several passages (in novels by Dickens and Eliot, among others) that chide the reader for expecting sensational or romantic stories, he adds that “although such passages had become commonplace by the time of George Eliot, each writer, however sophisticated, writes as though the enterprise of the ordinary in fiction were new and difficult, and that in 1860 as well as 1804, the audience had to be warned and cajoled about it” (625). Realist novels that claim fidelity to true experience must do so by downplaying their indebtedness to previous generations of similar realist novels.

Recent theoretical accounts suggest that convention and real-world reference are inherently opposed, that submitting to convention automatically undermines the goals realist writers set for themselves, and that in order to persuade readers of their referentiality, texts must conceal all trace of convention. By contrast, reactions like that of the *Saturday Review* critic suggest that convention and referentiality can coexist easily (or, at least, in a state of tension readers could enjoy). The era’s most engaged and enthusiastic critics do not universally condemn conventions in the novels they read, but offer reactions ranging from disapproval to delight. And while contemporary accounts of realism suggest Victorian authors went to great lengths to conceal their indebtedness to previous works, those authors often seem to do just the opposite. Trollope’s *Phineas Redux* is a sequel to Trollope’s *Phineas Finn, the Irish Member*, published four years earlier, and an entry in a series of novels that present the same characters and settings repeatedly, offering readers a dependable and predictable literary experience along with some surprises. Suggesting in its very title that repetition is a conscious goal of the writer, the novel fulfills readers’ desire for mild social comedy and detailed descriptions

of life and manners among the upper crust. Trollope's recycling of similar plotlines about love, courtship and career advancement among the same group of people makes its familiar aspects all the more obvious.

The other novel I discuss in this chapter is similarly engaged with conventions and generic tropes. George Eliot's *Felix Holt, the Radical* is a portrait of political unrest in the wake of the First Reform Bill that not only returns to the early industrial setting of early Condition of England novels such as *Mary Barton*, it conspicuously takes up many elements of the early Victorian Condition of England novel. This novel (as well as *Phineas Redux*) echoes both *Mary Barton* and *Eugene Aram* in its focus on a murder accusation against a seemingly innocent person. Both of these novels also make explicit reference to *Eugene Aram*, underscoring their similar interests in the way crime may both reflect a society and trouble its beliefs about character.⁵⁸ *Felix Holt* returns to a setting and social milieu its readers strongly associated with Eliot: life among provincial people in the English midlands. Readers not only recognized many of these elements, but were happy to encounter them again ("we may still rejoice that she has again come back to those studies of English life, so humorous, so picturesque, and so philosophical" [Morley 252]) and praised her book for its similarities to her previous works. The novel is remarkable for its intentional similarity to an earlier generation of industrial novels. But for its original readers, its representation of the 1830s industrial referential world seemed fresh, inspired and based on close observation of life. Eliot's blending of convention with innovation in *Felix Holt* helped cement her reputation as one of the most original writers of her time.

The assumption that using conventions makes it difficult for a writer to create a believably referential text does not fit with most readers' everyday experience. As we have seen in the discussion of *Mary Barton*, Gaskell actually faced difficulty in writing about a topic for which there were few conventions, adding a rather formulaic romance plot and elements of the pastoral to make it more likely to succeed. While critics have focused on the realist author's struggle to "dismiss [the novel's] own hardened conventions" (George Levine 616), authors were equally invested in fitting their works into existing conventions that would make them pleasurable and believable to readers. For readers, a text's truthfulness and its conventionality are not opposed abstract qualities but part of an overall enjoyable reading experience. A reader of *Bleak House* might become engrossed by the novel's detailed evocation of the Chancery Court's immense bureaucracy, while recognizing the author's "tendency to a theatrical method," his "love of strong effect, and the habit of seizing peculiarities" that contribute to the representation (Brimley 285).

It should not be surprising that readers can accept conventional representations as referential. The styles that are used most reliably to refer to and discuss the real world are among the most conventional—legal documents, newspaper journalism, history and scientific research. In these discourses, systems of convention affect stylistic features as well as what facts count as relevant, plausible, and worthy of being reported. These styles are clearly "visible as convention," so much so that they are instantly recognizable and easily parodied. The primary purpose of such texts is to create a representation of real life that will be taken as accurate, and that can produce real-world effects (for instance, a legal argument prompting a jury to return a guilty verdict). While readers or

hearers may reject some aspects of a conventional text as inaccurate or dishonest, readers have no difficulty perceiving them as representations of a referential world author and reader share. Recognizing that convention is not the true opposite of reference can open the way for a more nuanced and complex account of the role of conventions in realistic literary texts.

Cognition and Convention

A striking conclusion of recent cognitive research is that there is no such thing as pure realism. The texts that make the strongest impression on readers' minds are those that resonate most strongly with our pre-existing networks of knowledge, beliefs and memories. Thus successful texts (even those that challenge us and prompt us to rethink our assumptions) must make use of schemas, stereotypes, and conventional expectations to make sense of the world. While many literary theorists have opposed convention to reality, a cognitivist model of the reading process suggests that there is no conflict between the two—in some sense, conventionality *is* realism. Cognitive science has seen literary and artistic activity not as a site of radical newness, but as an extension of the mind's ordinary practice of making new ideas out of familiar concepts and conventional practices. And because it sees the mind as integrating each new fact into a rich neural structure filled with familiar information, it can suggest how authors' use of conventional plots, characters, styles and storyworlds could result in a text readers perceive as memorable and realistic, rather than formulaic and implausible. In *An Introduction to Cognitive Cultural Studies*, Lisa Zunshine approvingly quotes Raymond Williams, who wrote that "man's version of the world he inhabits has a central biological function" and that "we 'see' in certain ways—that is, we interpret sensory information according to

certain rules—as a way of living. But these ways—these rules and interpretations—are, as a whole, neither fixed nor constant. We can learn new rules and interpretations, as a result of which we shall literally see in new ways” (quoted in Zunshine 6). In this cognitive mindset, there is no conflict between convention and the real, since our conventional ways of seeing are what allow the possibility of a perceived “real” at all, as well as the basis for all revised or “unconventional” ways of seeing the world. A cognitive view of all creativity as firmly rooted in specific human cultures challenges the romantic ideal of the artist transcending convention. And there is no paradox in a writer denouncing convention while simultaneously creating new ones, since “learning new rules and interpretations” (rather than escaping them altogether) is our species’ main avenue of cultural change.

Cognitive research, performed using short textoids and offering simplified conclusions about the reading process, cannot explain the complexities of rich literary texts like the novels of Dickens or Eliot. But it can suggest a new and more fruitful attitude to bring to a text. Scholarship from the past two decades offers possible explanatory frameworks for the ways fiction readers make sense of texts with familiar elements, and integrate new knowledge into their preexisting mental models. The recent psychological work that is most relevant focuses on mental models—the mental representations of storyworlds and situations readers construct as prompted by a text; and “reminders”—the memories of specific situations and events (whether experienced firsthand or through a written account) that the text prompts them to retrieve. While much of the work on “reminding” focuses on problem-solving and expository texts, a small body of recent experiments have focused specifically on readers of stories and

fictional narratives, questioning what makes for a story that readers will accept as truthful and applicable to the world around them. This research points to a broad overall consensus: Conventional elements are helpful, not harmful, in making narrative texts absorbing and persuasive to readers. To learn a new idea or accept it as truth, readers must be able to integrate the concept with their pre-existing mental models of the world. And to be read as absorbing and truthful, a work of fiction must call to mind memories from our stored bank of impressions, experiences, and schemas about the world—whether drawn from real life, or from previously read works of fiction.

A 2008 paper by Rick Busselle and Helena Bilandzic aims to explain how the mind integrates new information into its stored network of representations. Their work is intended to explain “why some aspects of unrealness do not disturb narrative experience and its subsequent influence”—such as expected genre conventions, as well as the fact of fictionality itself—“whereas others do” (271). In “Fiction and Perceived Realism,” Busselle and Bilandzic present evidence that a text with many familiar elements is more likely to be perceived as realistic. They first explain that a narrative’s believability is closely tied to its ability to make readers feel “absorbed.” Evaluations of realism come in two types: judgments about whether representations are faithful to the outside world, and whether they are internally consistent. “Violations of both types of realism result from an inconsistency between the mental models that represent the narrative, general knowledge structures, and incoming narrative information” (256). A narrative with too many internal contradictions would prevent a reader from building up a coherent mental model (as we saw in chapter 1 with *Eugene Aram*). Analogously, a text that clashes too

violently with readers' "general knowledge structures" and expectations for a particular type of text will be judged as confusing and implausible.

Making a mental representation of a narrative text is a process of continually adding and updating. The process succeeds when "incoming information can be incorporated into the story as it exists up to that point. That is, new information can be comprehended in light of that which is already known. It is unsuccessful when the reader or viewer has difficulty incorporating new information into the extant mental models" (258). To fit these models, new textual elements must match both real world beliefs and expectations for literary form—both are stored schematically. "Individuals construct mental models of a story from preexisting schemas and stereotypes . . . in addition to the schemas . . . that contain information that applies both to the real world and to a narrative we might encounter . . . schemas for story and genre are also important in making sense of narratives" (258). A part of the text that clashes with readers' expectations will draw them out of the narrative to consider the reasons for the anomaly, and likely to make negative judgments about the text. By contrast, a reading experience in which a reader is able to keep continuously integrating new information with existing mental models is likely to prompt an absorbed, "flow-like" state (261). Knowledge of genres, as well as real world experience, provides schemas that let readers know what to expect. The authors cite the example of TV detective programs: Fans of such shows are not bothered by the fact that "crimes are solved with impossible speed and efficiency" (270), but might be taken aback if a police officer broke down crying over a stranger who had been murdered. Genre conventions affect what will be accepted as normal, natural and plausible.

Evaluations based on preexisting generic knowledge are equally common in criticism of Victorian fiction. Readers of realist novels are often discomfited when textual elements do not fit their schemas and stereotypes about real life. For instance, in a review of *Felix Holt, the Radical*, G.S. Venables objects to the portrayal of Holt as a doctor's son who has found contentment living as a poor watchmaker. Venables says the character's life is not reflective of real workers' struggles, since "George Eliot passes over the sordid incidents which constitute the real sting of poverty. Felix Holt converses in the tone of a gentleman and philosopher with cultivated associates, and although he earns a bare livelihood as a journeyman watchmaker, his time seems to be always at his own disposal" (281).⁵⁹ In this passage, Venables compares the novel's model of a poor man's life with his own general world knowledge, which tells him that members of the working class do not have ample leisure or cultured friends. By contrast, a reviewer for the *Nation* in January 1874 objects to the behavior of Phineas Finn after he is exonerated of murder, on the grounds that it departs too radically from conventional fiction. "This man, who could never have got into the position he occupied without reckless boldness and cool nerve, appears at the end of his career as much affected by the groundless and disproved suspicion of crime as would be a timid young lady. . . . This inconsistency in the development of character is a fault never to be found in the works of masters" (175). This critic is responding to genre-based literary expectations about what constitutes a "masterful" study of character: When a protagonist is presented as acting appropriately manly and brave at the beginning of a novel, he should continue to do so in all circumstances. The reviewer's literary judgment was closely related to a stereotyped belief about the way real upper-class men behave—they should be bold and act

consistently, while ladies may be timid and vacillating. For this critic, Phineas Finn's "timid" behavior in the final chapters conflicted with the mental models he had already formed of the character, as well as his stereotypes for appropriate male behavior, and his "schemas for story and genre," which prompted him to expect and value consistency of character.⁶⁰ The result was a judgment that Trollope had produced an unrealistic character.

Both Venables and the *Nation* critic single out unconventional or jarring elements of the texts they are describing. But as we might expect, readers are equally likely to object to overly conventional or formulaic textual devices. This is because not all familiar concepts stored in memory are stored as true, or experienced as background assumptions that can help us make sense of the world. Instead of being conceived of as general world knowledge, some are mentally stored with what Leda Cosmides and John Tooby call "tags"—metarepresentations that define a piece of information's epistemological status. In "Consider the Source: The Evolution of Adaptations for Decoupling and Metarepresentation," Cosmides and Tooby argue that humans' unique capacity for creativity and cultural expression comes from our ability to tag stored data with extra pieces of information—"metarepresentations"—that specify where it was heard, whether or in what circumstances it is true, and so forth. This complex system lets us remember counterfactual or dubious information, while keeping it separate from our overall representation of the world.⁶¹ Information accepted as "true" does not require a tag, but can be straightforwardly remembered as a fact about the world. For example, the *Nation* critic held as part of his mental model of the world the belief that men are bold and women are timid. For him, this fact about human psychology hardly needed to be stated

(hence he does not elaborate on what a “timid young lady” would do). By contrast, a modern feminist scholar might be aware of this belief, but remember it as false and outdated—giving it a source tag such as “sexists believe” or “people used to believe.” Such a reader might feel particularly absorbed by scenes in which Phineas faces his “dread [of] the faces of his fellow creatures” (166) and admits that “I am womanly . . . I can’t alter my nature” (167). She might find these passages to be a realistic critique of rigid gender ideology and hegemonic masculinity.

Experimental research bears out the theoretical accounts offered by the “mental models” theorists. An experiment designed by Jeffrey L. Strange, described in “How Fictional Tales Wag Real-World Beliefs,” presented subjects with short stories designed to present sets of opposed arguments about why students drop out of school (either because of systematic problems, or the students’ own disposition). The readers who accessed the most specific memories from their past were more likely to alter their beliefs in the direction of the story. Remembering salient experiences and pieces of information is a routine part of forming judgments. “When judging the causes of school failure, for instance, our conclusions will be influenced by whether images of run-down schools or, alternately, of undisciplined students, rush first to mind. By resonating with past experience, a story recruits memories that spring to the fore during judgments” (279). This “remembering” could include details, events and ideas from fictions judged to be realistic.

Another piece of research suggesting stories are more effective if they match readers’ memories is Mazzocco, Green and Brock’s “The Effects of a Prior Story-Bank on Processing of a Related Narrative.” Experimenters presented subjects with an

emotionally involving narrative about a murder at a mall; they found the subjects who had been asked to read a collection of similar crime stories were more influenced by the target story, more often altering their beliefs about the causes of crimes. Being able to fit a story in with a collection of other stories made the subjects more likely to alter their real-world views. “The target narrative affected not just attitudes and beliefs implicated by the relevant story-banks themselves, but also attitudes and beliefs that were not implicated in the story-banks” (83). The “conventional” quality of certain texts—their parallels with remembered tales—made even the texts’ less familiar elements more persuasive.

By reminding readers of what we already know, believe and remember, stories take on the quality of reality. These basic experimental results refute the frequent critical assumption that the unfamiliar aspects of a text are its most involving and memorable elements. At the same time, they confirm the impression (shared by many real-life readers and authors) that familiar plots, situations and stylistic elements draw readers in, helping them respond to and remember what they read. When applied to literary texts, such theories raise more questions than they answer: What constitutes skillful use of a convention? How do authors cope with readers’ differing levels of familiarity with certain genres or discursive traditions? Why do certain tropes and techniques become conventional in the first place? Nevertheless, they provide an empirical basis for undoing the dichotomy between conventional and believable.

“Strong Representations”: *Felix Holt, the Radical*

In E.S. Dallas’s words, *Felix Holt* is “rich . . . in those swift, indescribable associations which well chosen words recall, allusions to past reading, the reflected

sparkle of past thinking, the fragrance of past feeling” (264). John Morley writes in the *Saturday Review* that the novel’s beginning lines “affect the reader like the first notes of the prelude to an old familiar melody. We find ourselves once more among the midland homestead. . . . Everybody recognizes the charm of the old touch in the picture of ‘the neat or handsome parsonage,’” and so forth (251). He praises the novelist for having “again come back to those studies of English life, so humorous, so picturesque, and so philosophical” (253).⁶² In addition to Eliot’s previous “studies of English life,” *Felix Holt* is clearly based on the conventions of the early Victorian social problem or Condition of England novel.⁶³ And Eliot clearly studied the genre in detail before beginning her novel. Her biographer notes that “in fictional terms, parallels to *Felix Holt* appear in Kingsley’s *Alton Locke*, Dickens’s *Hard Times*, Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, Disraeli’s *Sybil, or the Two Nations*, and Mrs. Trollope’s *Michael [Armstrong,] Factory Boy*, among others” (Karl 390).⁶⁴ Clearly, Eliot did not build up her fictional world from scratch. Instead, in this novel conventional elements drawn from the fiction, essays and political discourse of the early Victorian era work to create a convincing depiction of this referential world.

In writing *Felix Holt*, Eliot was able to rely on readers’ already complex mental models of different types of worlds that they have derived from earlier works of fiction—the “past reading” and “past feeling” Dallas alludes to. But she is able to avoid having readers reject her work as too derivative. What separates Eliot’s “old familiar melody” from the hackneyed strains of the novels she pilloried in “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists”? From a cognitive perspective, these questions might be rephrased as, how do some texts enable the brain to integrate new information and ways of seeing into its

existing circuitry and network of representations—to update its version of a referential world? Closer attention to the “well-chosen words” with which Eliot introduces her storyworld can reveal how she combined convention with innovation to create a believably referential work.

The seven-page introduction to *Felix Holt, the Radical* was one of the most praised sections of the book. A piece of virtuosic description that takes the reader on a virtual stagecoach ride across the English countryside, it vividly evokes the world of an English village in the 1830s to which readers will mentally transport themselves, and offers nostalgia for a time before the coming of religious, political and technological reforms. While it is largely ignored by critics today, it was much admired as a piece of fine writing upon the book’s publication. Henry James (then near the beginning of his career) observes that Eliot “has written no pages of this kind of discursive, comprehensive, sympathetic description more powerful or exquisite than the introductory chapter of the present work” (276). *Blackwood’s* calls it “only too faithful a photograph” (*Blackwood’s* 97), and G.S. Venables writes that this chapter “has never been excelled” as a description of English country life (279). But neither Victorian nor contemporary critics have noted the strangeness of including an “introduction” to a novel at all. This rhetorical gesture seems particularly extraneous given that almost all the information given about the cultural situation in the town of Treby Magna is repeated in Chapter III, which narrates its history and describes its inhabitants. (For instance, both sections reflect on the growth of industrialization and religious Dissent, and satirize the villagers’ rustic ignorance.⁶⁵) This prefatory material may seem unnecessary, but its appeal makes sense if we see that the introduction bolsters the novel’s impression of realism by giving readers clues as to

the proper “schemas and stereotypes” with which to interpret a controversial period of English history.

Eliot begins her introduction by claiming that “five-and-thirty years ago the glory had not yet departed from the old coach-roads,” and goes on to name a litany of remembered items that had since disappeared, including the “roadside inns” that served the coach roads, the “merry notes of the horn” announcing mail delivery, and the “meteoric” appearance of such distinctive vehicles as “the pea-green Tally-ho or the yellow Independent.” Eliot describes the world of forty years ago by commenting on its most marked differences from her own day. In the next paragraph she goes on to suggest that her readers’ ignorance makes these informative details necessary. “In those days there were pocket boroughs, a Birmingham unrepresented in Parliament and compelled to make strong representations out of it, unrepealed corn-laws, three-and-sixpenny letters, a brawny and many-breeding pauperism, and other departed evils; but there were some pleasant things too, which have also departed. . . . You have not the best of it in all things, O youngsters!” Eliot suggests that the 1830s had largely been forgotten, a rhetorical flourish designed to conceal the fact that it had been voluminously represented in fiction and familiar essays (such as de Quincey’s “The English Mail”), and would have been well remembered by many of her readers in their fifties or older.

Eliot’s narrator implies that she is supplying information for the benefit of ignorant readers. In fact, passages like the above offer only brief references to ideas and entities with which she expects readers to be familiar already: pocket boroughs, corn-laws, and three-and-sixpenny letters. Such phrases would be meaningless to readers who did not know the relevant controversies. Eliot’s allusive storyworld-building is designed to

remind readers not only of isolated incidents, but of the discursive tropes and ideological struggles surrounding each. In naming these entities, she uses language recognizable from nonfiction discourse: The idea that Birmingham citizens are “compelled to make strong representations out of” their disenfranchisement suggests the polemic wording that an editorial or political speech might use. In echoing this controversial language, Eliot calls to mind the “strong representations” that influence present ideas about the period. Specifically, her phrasing suggests the language her readers might have encountered in left-wing political tracts, or in reform-minded Condition of England novels. For instance, complaints about “the pauperism of many” and “rotten boroughs” appear in 1824 speeches by the radical politician Daniel O’Connell (468, 419). Reading these pages will remind readers not just of the existence of paupers, but the calls for reform that brought the issue to public attention. And the disclaimer that follows, “but there were some good things too,” suggests that Eliot will question this set of conventions for representing the period—she will reject “strong” and one-sided representations that paint a dark picture of the time before reform. Her novel will replace them with a different type of “strong representation,” one that reveals the complexity missing from earlier, more explicitly political accounts.

Eliot thus sets up her novel in contrast to texts that have portrayed the 1830s negatively—perhaps to left-wing political discourses that emphasize corruption and “pauperism,” or to novels like *Hard Times* that focus their narrative on social problems. To her young readers, imagined as looking forward to future technological advances, she writes that “Posterity may be shot, like a bullet through a tube, by atmospheric pressure from Winchester to Newcastle: that is a fine result to have among our hopes; but the slow

old-fashioned way of getting from one end of our country to the other is the better thing to have in the memory.” At the same time, she positions her more positive approach to the period as a more realistic and honest assessment drawn from personal experience and recollection—the travelers of the 1830s had a detailed “memory” of their own land, while the tube journey is “as barren as an exclamatory O!” The text suggests that nostalgia for the time of the stagecoach is a rare and unpopular attitude. In doing so, it elides the popularity of such language throughout the period she is describing. Thomas De Quincey’s Essay “The English Mail” looks back to a time when mail coaches were an innovation. He compares their inventor to Galileo, who “discover[ed] the satellites of Jupiter, those very next things extant to mail-coaches in the two capital pretensions of speed and keeping time,” language that Eliot echoes in her description of the coaches as “meteoric.” She also seems to mirror his memory of “being on the box of the Holyhead mail . . . when a tawdry thing from Birmingham, some ‘Tallyho’ or ‘Highflyer,’ all flaunting with green and gold, came up alongside of us” (13). Not only does Eliot closely copy this phrasing, her text similarly emphasizes the distinctive appearance and flashy independence of each coach, in implicit contrast to the identical and track-bound cars of a train.

William Hazlitt’s 1830 essay “The Letter-Bell” is similarly nostalgic for the mail coaches of his youth, praising them on the grounds that “the telegraphs that lately communicate the intelligence of the new revolution to all France within a few hours, are a wonderful contrivance; but they are less striking and appalling than the beacon-fires . . . which, lighted from hill top to hill top, announced the taking of Troy, and the return of Agamemnon” (215). Eliot echoes the logic as well as the language of this line when she

contrasts the expectation of speed with the memory of slow journeys. Similarly, In *The Railroad Journey*, Wolfgang Schivelbusch documents contemporary reactions to the age of rail that echo Eliot's text. He explains that

the train was experienced as a projectile, and traveling on it, as being shot through the landscape—thus losing control of one's senses. "In travelling on most of the railways . . .", says an anonymous author of the year 1844, "the face of nature, the beautiful prospects of hill and dale, are lost or distorted to our view. The alternation of high and low ground, the healthful breeze, and all those exhilarating associations connected with 'The Road,' are lost" (54).

These formulations emphasize the paradoxical contrast between increasing innovation and the decreasingly intense experiences that result from it.⁶⁶ Throughout the 1830s and 40s, the stagecoach's moderate speed and organic engagement with the landscape were nostalgically contrasted with the disorienting and depersonalizing effect of modern technology.

More generally, the nostalgic tropes operating here are also a set of conventions—perhaps an even more familiar one than reformist language, since a nostalgic or pastoral approach to English rural life is widespread throughout poetry, historical fiction, romance novels, and conservative political calls for a return to tradition. For instance, one of Wordsworth's most famous sonnets declared that modern people had "given our hearts away" and become "out of tune" with nature. And this nostalgic language was common in conservative political thought of the time. The *Annual Register* from 1831 describes the changes wrought by reform as "a great dislocation of old connections and former interests; an extensive removal of acknowledged talent to make way for ignorant and bold empirics, or for unprincipled knavery, which cared for nothing, and would pledge itself to everything" (299).⁶⁷ In this official version of history, "progress" is really loss. Readers, even young ones, would be familiar with an idealized or at least pleasant version

of early nineteenth century village life from Scott, Austen, Bulwer, and many other authors. It is only in conjunction with the progress-minded reformist discourse that Eliot's language evokes that this nostalgic attitude appears new or unexpected.⁶⁸

Although most accounts of realism stress its intention to present an unmediated view of truth—facts *are* truth—mediation is exactly what Eliot offers in this passage. In the long second paragraph of the Introduction, Eliot sets up the conceit of a “long journey in mid-spring or autumn, on the outside of a stage-coach,” the experience that will supposedly familiarize us with the rural English storyworld. Her claim that “the slow old-fashioned way of getting from one end of the country to the other is the better thing to have in the memory” focuses on these two modes of transport as they appear in representation—either in imagination, or in memory—rather than as they actually are. The coach ride is found to be valuable not while it is taking place, but afterward, by comparing it with the innovations that replaced it. And tellingly, it is suggested that the bullet train rider will be ignorant not just of the older coach-road England, but of England in her own time. “The tube-journey can never lend much to picture and narrative. . . . Whereas the happy outside passenger seated on the box from the dawn to the gloaming gathered enough stories of English life, enough of English labours in town and country, enough aspects of earth and sky, to make episodes for a modern Odyssey.” This passage suggests that change itself, when taken too far (or too fast), becomes unnarratable—viewers will not be able to access the mental frames of reference necessary to mentally represent what they see, either as artfully composed “picture” or intelligible “narrative.” Rapid change forces subjects to interpret their day-to-day experiences in an unmediated

fashion; by preventing the viewer from integrating each moment of scenery with what she had seen before, it would make modern life impossible to represent in a realist mode.

Eliot presents the difficulty of making sense of history as one of choosing between opposed sets of representational conventions. In representing the face of the typical English hamlet, Eliot closely resembles Bulwer in her ambivalence and uncertainty. Is the normal English town clean and prosperous, or dirty and filled with sordid crime? When Eliot's traveler first encounters a town from above, it is hard to tell. "The labourers' cottages [were] dotted along the lanes, or clustered into a small hamlet, their little dingy windows telling, like thick-filmed eyes, of nothing but the darkness within. The passenger on the coach-box, bowled along above such a hamlet, saw chiefly the roofs of it: probably it turned its back on the road, and seemed to lie away from everything but its own patch of earth and sky." Like Bulwer, but much more intentionally, she is suspended between two incompatible generic models for representing English village life: the pastoral, which idealizes rural simplicity, and the industrial, which emphasizes realistic depictions of dirt, vice and poverty. She continues with an uneasy acknowledgment that if the town could be seen, "it was most likely dirty; but the dirt was Protestant dirt, and the big, bold, gin-breathing tramps were Protestant tramps." It is also worth noting that these ironic descriptions do not depict the novel's Treby Magna, which, when the novel opens, is already home to an enthusiastic Dissenting population, split along ideological lines, and gearing up for a hotly contested election. In fact, it becomes clear that Eliot's synchronic view of England via coach journey is also a diachronic picture of England, presenting changes in the life of the nation. As the country gets poorer and more industrial, it becomes more modern, more like the world of

the reader. Our spatial journey north is thus metonymically a temporal one as well—England is represented as dirty and ignorant in some unnamed past time (perhaps in the eighteenth century), grows clean, prosperous and literate, and finally becomes poorer and uglier as mills take over the landscape.

After the ironic portrait of a dirty hamlet, she continues “there were trim, cheerful villages too; there was the pleasant tinkle of the blacksmith’s anvil, the patient cart-horses waiting at his door; the basket-maker peeling his willow wands in the sunshine,” and other merrily industrious figures (7).⁶⁹ The people are “clean and comely,” and “little Britons” are heading off to school. In his review, Morley quotes these lines, going on to add that “everybody recognizes the charm of the old touch” in such lines. Morley’s implication that 1830s were a different world is all the more striking because many of the entities that are cited in the passage he quotes were still in existence: Few parsonages or gray churches would have been torn down in the intervening time. This suggests how strongly these elements of English life were associated with a particular set of conventions.⁷⁰

Eliot here makes a claim that makes clear the need for prior knowledge to fully make sense of what one sees. “The passenger on the box could see that this was the district of protuberant optimists, sure that old England was the best of all possible countries . . . the district of lean little market-towns without manufacturers, of fat livings, an aristocratic clergy, and low poor-rates.” Since the traveler cannot actually “see” opinions, poor-rates or fat livings, this passage emphasizes the need for pre-existing knowledge the world to “read” what one sees. The traveler needs to already be familiar with the part of the country he is traveling through in order to connect appearances to ways of living.

Similarly, the reader needs familiarity with Eliot's pre-existing referential world models to connect her metonymic evocations of rural life into a coherent storyworld. The manufacturing towns are the "scene of riots and trades-union meetings." "Busy scenes of shuttle and wheel, roaring furnace, shaft and pulley, seemed to make but crowded nests in the midst of large-spaced, slow-moving life." As the journey continues, "the land would begin to be blackened with coal-pits, the rattle of handlooms to be heard in hamlets and villages. . . . Here [were] the pale eager faces of handloom-weavers, men and women haggard from sitting up late at night to finish the week's work. . . . Everywhere the cottages and the small children were dirty. . . . The gables of Dissenting chapels now made a visible sign of religion."

For this passage to be effective, readers must already be familiar with a discourse linking religious dissent, industrial labor, political agitation, and other forms of progress including increasing literacy, under the heading "modernization"; Eliot does not explain the connections among dissent, dirtiness, "ale-houses," the harmful effects of mill and mine work, and other negative features of modernity. Nor does she explain what makes such entities as trades-union meetings so opposed to more typical "large-spaced" English life. We might compare this passage to ones in *North and South* that evocatively describe the differences in manners between slow-moving, old-fashioned Helstone and brusque, smoggy Milton. We are told that the townspeople believe "to make a lad into a good tradesman he must be caught young, and acclimated to the life of the mill" (63), that "after a quiet life in a country parsonage for more than twenty years, there was something dazzling to Mr. Hale in the energy which conquered immense difficulties with ease; the power of the machinery of Milton, the power of the men of Milton, impressed him with a

sense of grandeur” (64), that Margaret is shocked by the Milton girls’ “rough independent ways” (65), and that

The side of the town on which Crampton lay was especially a thoroughfare for the factory people. In the back streets around them there were many mills, out of which poured streams of men and women two or three times a day. Until Margaret had learnt the times of their ingress and egress, she was very unfortunate in constantly falling in with them. They came rushing along, with bold, fearless faces, and loud laughs and jests, particularly aimed at all those who appeared to be above them in rank or station (66).

These passages presume a reader who is unfamiliar with northern ways (like Margaret), and assume that differences in manners, culture and lifestyle must be explained.

The original readers of *Felix Holt, the Radical* likely held conflicting mental representations of the England of a generation past. And George Eliot makes use of these conflicting representations by gesturing toward both, creating the impression of a direct and nuanced portrait of the era. For mid-Victorians, this earlier period was associated with conflicting conservative and liberal discursive traditions that portrayed it either as a site of unspoiled simplicity and authenticity, or as a corrupt, dirty and unjust period badly in need of reform. One need only look at the range of popular pundits and political figures—from the reformist John Stuart Mill to the reactionary Thomas Carlyle—to see the range of popular ideas about progress that were in circulation at the time. Most readers would have found it difficult to choose only one of these mental models for representation, instead holding elements of each in uneasy equilibrium. Ellen Spolsky writes that since humans’ mental systems need to be flexible, interpretive problems are likely to prompt creative solutions: “Gaps encourage creative filling” (Spolsky 90). The irreconcilability of the pastoral and industrial representations of reform creates one such gap. Since the problem “doesn’t ‘go without saying,’ and it can’t be interpreted or

reacted to simply by calling up a memory of how the issue was managed in the past” (92), it invites complex solutions of the type Eliot is offering here. In a phrase Spolsky borrows from philosopher Andy Clark, it is “representationally hungry” (93). Reader reactions testify to this hunger for meaningful interpretation: The *Blackwood’s* critic refers to “a considerable section of the great audience who had hung so eagerly on the teachings of this new interpreter of their common life” (94). In this novel she offers a partial solution for how to construct a mental model of this representational world. By combining two conventional modes of discourse that are usually kept far apart, she constructs a nuanced model of her readers’ “common” referential world. Seen from this perspective, it is not the passage’s unmediated accuracy that impressed its initial readers, but its deep engagement with conventions that remained current—but in tension—within contemporary culture.

Relying on a reader’s knowledge of convention means an author must depend on unpredictable and often wildly diverging reader reactions. Her critics’ evaluations of the character of Harold Transome provide one example. According to *The Contemporary Review*, Transome is an unconvincing stock character: He has “the stage swagger of the conventional aristocrat” (53). By contrast, R.H. Hutton writes in the *Spectator* that “Harold Transome, the worldly Radical candidate for Loamshire, seems to us on the whole the most original character in the book,—or at least the most original now for our present author. . . . Harold Transome, with his keen eye for business, his prompt and cavalier choice of measures for carrying out his own ends, his kindly contempt for views which differ from his own, his half-unconsciousness, half-indifference with respect to the

pain he causes in brushing aside the incompatible wishes of others, his sincere wish to give his proud, able, and sensitive mother every comfort and pleasure . . . his pride of descent, and Radical impatience with immemorial Tory prejudices, his slightly epicure habits derived from Asiatic life, and his general ‘fullness of bread,’ is a figure which no one but George Eliot could well have painted” (260).

These differences of opinion are telling because they reveal that (as we saw in Chapter 1) readers are not able to judge a text’s realism and fidelity to nature simply by reading and observing. Reference is not a neutral feature of a text that can be gauged by holding it up to the real world. Their judgments will vary based on which conventions they are tired of at a given point in time, which “stock” characters call to mind beloved works instead of hated ones, which characters and scenes resonate with their relevant real-world experience. But moreover, there is probably some underlying similarity between these readers’ seemingly opposed responses. While the *Spectator* critic sees Transome as a nuanced, believable character and not as a stage aristocrat, his perception of Transome and the roles he might play in the story is shaped by his familiarity with the literary convention of the wicked, scheming lord. (Like such disparate characters as Laclos’s Marquis de Valmont and Richardson’s Lovelace, Transome masks his true self to gain power—in this case, in Parliament.) The character can readily be incorporated with a preexisting schema, thus reducing the critic’s difficulty in building up a mental image of him and his social circle. This eases the way for belief in what would otherwise be a confusing and conflicted character: an unidealistic and rather closed-minded man who sets up shop as a radical. While the *Review* writer found the similarity of Transome to other literary aristocrats distracting, pulling him out of the story, the *Spectator* writer

likely used the available schema unconsciously to aid him in reading Transome as a closely observed, realistic character.

In *Felix Holt*, Eliot returned to ground that was familiar to her readers. They were eager to encounter a new fictional treatment of the industrial 1830s—a controversial period that lingered as an unsolved problem in the popular imagination. Eliot built up an image of its complexity through textual practices that took advantage of the way the period was mediated by 1860s readers’ memories, mental structures and beliefs—evoking complex impressions about the era. Although Victorian critics rarely remark on its similarities to other texts, Eliot skillfully picks and chooses familiar textual elements to craft a representation that will read as referential.

Analogy and Allusion in the Novel

Readers’ stored banks of memories about England in the 1830s are essential to *Felix Holt*’s emotional resonance. This conclusion fits with cognitive theorists’ accounts of “reminding” as central to fictional absorption. In reminding, a textual element prompts a reader to access a memory or belief she already possessed. Eric Dietrich articulates its importance in his article “Analogy and Conceptual Change, or You Can’t Step Into the Same Mind Twice,” explaining that the process of “analogical reminding” is one in which the mind recognizes structural similarities between a new situation and a remembered one. Creative analogies, a source of new insight and inferences, work by comparing two representations (in this case, the retrieved and retrieving item), and mapping their abstract relationships onto each other. “Mapping is essentially a process of finding functional counterparts between concepts” (207). Conceptual mappings are based on structural similarities between two situations, not on attributes of the relevant

objects. “Analogical reminders are frequently creative and therefore are implicated in theories of creativity.” They are creative not just because the subject has thought up a new comparison, but because comparing two items may reshape her mental model of a familiar concept. “Structural mapping theory also postulates conceptual change. After the analogy between the two analogues has been made, information can be imported from the retrieved item to the retrieving item” (271). Reminders are not necessarily of just isolated incidents, but of abstract mental models and schemas, which are ripe for revising and updating once accessed.⁷¹

The examples Deitrich gives involve everyday experiences of relatively short duration, such as a skier’s observing that her ungloved hand releases excess heat just like a panting dog’s tongue. But his theory of analogies could also apply easily to fictional texts that deliberately use conventional elements of plot and situation to trigger reminding of earlier works of literature. The marriage plot in *Felix Holt, the Radical* supplies an example. Critics have noted the plot similarities between *Felix Holt*, *Mary Barton* and other novels that feature a woman choosing between two suitors of opposing qualities. Thus Eliot is accessing a familiar convention when she shows her heroine, Esther Lyon in *Felix Holt*, faced with a choice between the polished, suave aristocrat Harold Transome and the blunt but honest working man Felix. For readers who are familiar with literary texts like *Mary Barton* and *Jane Eyre*, reading about Esther’s struggle is likely to prompt literary reminders. The memories would be particularly rich because of the detailed similarities between *Felix Holt* and the earlier texts. In each case, the heroine wins happiness by choosing the less polished but more sincere suitor. (Felix is Rochester-like in his “dangerous and perhaps unprincipled . . . bare throat and great Gothic head” and

“somewhat massive person” [367].) In each case, the hero’s superficial crudity signifies his deeper innate worthiness.

These reminders make sense of the reading experience by marking out some of the unlimited possibilities of real life as likely and significant. For instance, such literary memories might create an expectation on the reader’s part that Esther must choose the suitor who is poor but honest, if she is ever to be “exalted into something new” (as the narrator suggests she will, (197). Such an expectation provides readers with the appropriate code to interpret Esther’s choice: In choosing a husband, a Victorian woman chose her identity. In an article on the marriage plots in *Mary Barton* and *Felix Holt*, Ruth Yeazill notes that “in the fiction of courtship, the choice ‘which gives a unity to life’ retrospectively confirms the coherence of past history as well. A conventional heroine loves only once; from the perspective of that single and final choice, past alternatives prove to have been mere illusions” (143). This conventional expectation also works to obscure questions that novels do not consider. Very few Victorian novels feature a woman choosing between marriage and some more independent path, such as a career or an unmarried partnership. Although such unconventional lives did exist—Eliot’s own relationship with George Henry Lewes is one example—depicting such choices in a novel would have seemed bizarre and implausible to a Victorian reader, at least until the New Woman fiction of the late nineteenth century, which drew controversy by depicting just such less sanctioned choices.

The meaning-making potential of standard tropes like the choice between two suitors does not mean conventions are static or unchanging. A text that offers a new twist on a familiar schema may prompt readers to revise their understanding of a conceptual

category. For instance, in *Phineas Finn, the Irish Member*, Trollope presents the character of Violet Effingham, a young noblewoman being pursued by both Phineas and Lord Chiltern (as well as two older men selected by her family), but reluctant to accept either of them. She has keenly observed both men's flaws, and she fears being at the mercy of someone else's weakness, observing that that "I don't know that I have any special mission for saving young men" (133). Violet finally concludes that she must marry: "Though she could talk about remaining unmarried, she knew that that was practically impossible. All those around her . . . would make such a life impossible to her. . . . Could she content herself to look forward to a joint life with Lady Baldock and Augusta Boreham?" (491). Trollope's text reveals Violet's choice among suitors as a lack of choice, something imposed upon her through social stigmas against women living independently. It foregrounds the convention (both in literature and life) that a woman should only wish to leave home when she has been chosen by the right man. It thus meditates on why this life choice remains unconventional, articulating the often invisible social pressures that keep even privileged and strong-willed women from considering it. In presenting Violet's dilemma, Trollope flirts with a form of realism that his readers might have found bizarre or shocking. In fact, readers had just such a reaction to Lily Dale's refusal to marry in *The Small House at Allington*. In a review, Margaret Oliphant wrote that "it is a wilful abandonment of all her natural responsibilities when such a girl writes Old Maid after her name. She has no business to do it.... Lily will not like it when she has tried it a little longer. She will find the small house dull, and will miss her natural career; and if she should take to social science or philosophy, whose fault will it be but Mr Trollope's?" (303). Depictions of characters like Violet and Lily might have

contributed to destabilizing a formerly rigid set of conventions, a change that did occur later in the century. For readers who were open to the feminist implications in Trollope's text, this revising of a familiar trope might have prompted them to rethink its use in other novels—concluding that in fiction, and in life, convention imposes unnecessary constraints on women.

Conventions that were once accepted are always vulnerable to being revised or rejected. This is because each human mind is constantly reevaluating its own strategies for storing information; Cosmides and Tooby write that interacting with the world “depends on the existence of machinery that ceaselessly locates, monitors, updates, and represents the conditional and mutable boundaries within which each set of representations remains useful” (105). The reading mind is not just interested in familiar schemas, but also “ceaselessly” on the lookout for plausible new information that might challenge what we already know. This would suggest that for readers of fictional texts, there is an ideal proportion of conventionality to novelty (or rather, a range of “ideal” proportions that vary according to genre and historical period) that will allow us to read swiftly and construct a mental model of the text fairly effortlessly while still feeling challenged.⁷² While readers might differ in their ability or desire to work through challenging material, some degree of similarity with our preexisting schemas, stereotypes and semantic memory is necessary for successful referentiality. Creating a text that is entirely unfamiliar or one that is entirely predictable are equally poor strategies for producing absorbing works.

The Exotic and the Familiar

Although cognitive researchers' conclusions may fit uneasily with more recent theories that denounce convention in literature, they align neatly with the conclusions of an earlier theorist of realism, Harry Levin. In *The Gates of Horn*, Levin discusses realism's conflicted relationship with convention, and concludes that the impression of unconventionality is built on a deeper conventionality that writer and reader must share. "The form of the novel, or rather, its apparent formlessness, bases an implicit intimacy between the novelist and his reader on certain attitudes and reactions to life which they must both recognize and, in some measure, accept" (27). The reader's desire for new and unconventional forms is limited, since a novel "must satisfy our mingled interest in the exotic and the familiar" (26). And novels can only present the impression of the new by first alluding to those older referential world models which they encourage us to reject. If a novel attempts to surprise its readers with challenging new or unexamined ideas about society, it does so by prompting us to think of and then reject or revise old "hypotheses." That is why, for example, Bildungsromans introduce young characters burdened with romantic misconceptions, and then involve both reader and character in a process of gradual disillusionment.⁷³ Levin's argument corresponds closely with the cognitive psychologists' claim that all knowledge is provisional (as in Cosmides and Tooby), that the mind is always updating its mental map of the world, redrawing the borders of categories: "All acquisition of knowledge can be described as the continual revision of hypotheses" (31).⁷⁴

Levin's belief that disillusioning works always follow after and critique more "romantic" works (as *Don Quixote* parodied chivalric romances) corresponds to the conclusion of cognitive science that disbelieving or falsifying an idea about the world

takes more mental effort—or more metarepresentation—than simply accepting. From this perspective, it makes sense that realist texts are, in some senses, highly conventional. They can only “afford” to be disillusioning or innovative in a few limited respects; otherwise they will overtax readers’ cognitive abilities, making it hard for them to create a coherent storyworld model. And unless they call up a clear mental image of the ideas and assumptions they want readers to critique, they will not prompt readers either to update those ideas or to construct a believable storyworld model.

Busselle and Bilandzic write that “genre schemas are central to story world models and their accompanying logic. Knowledge about genres helps the viewer find the appropriate story world logic” (269). Readers’ complex reactions to Victorian realist novels conspire to confirm the cognitive researchers’ claims, and refute the idea that abandoning convention in favor of direct observation will produce a “realistic” text. Writings feel believable not because of their freedom from past ideas, impressions and modes of representation, but because of their careful use of them. In *Felix Holt*, George Eliot juxtaposes conventional modes of representation usually kept separate to craft a nuanced portrait of an era. In *Phineas Redux*, Anthony Trollope goes even farther in strategic and self-conscious use of convention, ultimately using it to reflect on the role of convention itself—not just in works of fiction, but in public and private life.

“How to Speak the Truth”: *Phineas Redux*

In *Phineas Redux*’s third volume, we are told of a witness for the prosecution in a murder trial that “he was essentially a truth-speaking man, if only he knew how to speak the truth” (3.101). The unreliable witness’s hesitation is remarkable because the subject of his testimony is something on which he should be the ultimate authority: an event he

saw with his own eyes, specifically, whether a man he saw running on a dark street did or did not resemble Phineas Finn, a man he has known as a fellow Member of Parliament for years. In his time on the stand, Lord Fawn resorts to elaborate denials and circumlocutions in his efforts to avoid making a positive statement one way or the other. His difficulty is emblematic of a novel that presents all knowledge and belief as mediated by convention. *Phineas Redux* returns insistently to questions of epistemology, asking whether any institution or set of procedures can provide adequate grounds for determining the truth. The interest in epistemology is underlined when, for example, the narrator says “the secrets of the world are very marvelous, but they are not themselves half so marvelous as the way in which they become known to the world” (2.155). Throughout this novel of political and romantic power struggles, Trollope juxtaposes different areas of human endeavor, including Parliamentary politics, love and courtship, law, journalism, foxhunting, and even literary fiction; in doing so, he emphasizes how each is guided by arbitrary (and incompatible) standards for what constitutes convincing proof. The novel’s analysis of epistemological conventions becomes particularly striking when Trollope turns the focus on the novel itself, revealing literary standards of judgment to be just as arbitrary as any other.

The generic complexity of *Phineas Redux* mirrors the complexity of the various modes of seeing that are dramatized in the action of the plot. A novel with elements of the sensation novel, Condition of England novel, roman à clef, and political memoir, it is also readable as a late addition to the Newgate novel genre; after the main character’s arrest, one character asserts that “all the world will be running after him just because he has been in Newgate” (2.281).⁷⁵ It is an entry in a long series of novels that came to be

known as the Palliser series, as well as the second to focus on the same character. Phineas is first introduced in 1868's *Phineas Finn, the Irish Member*. He is a young, handsome doctor's son from Mayo who wins a seat in Parliament by a lucky chance, gradually rises to a lucrative cabinet position, and falls again after a matter of conscience prompts him to resign from the House. *Phineas Redux* catches up with him two or three years later; in the intervening time his young Irish wife has conveniently died and he is eager to return to the stage of London politics. The text begins by telling us that "the circumstances of the general election of 18— will be remembered by all those who take an interest in the political matters of the country" (1). Trollope refers here to the political events of 1868 (with its controversy over the disestablishment of the Irish church, and Disraeli's eleven months as Prime Minister); his obscuring of the date challenges us to match the fictionalized circumstances of his story with particular real events. The novel's political plot revolves around the Tories' attempts to remain in power, despite the liberals' greater "numerical strength," by introducing a bill to disestablish the Church of England (1). (In reality, there was no such bill, although the Irish church was disestablished in 1869.⁷⁶) In previous years, disestablishmentarianism has been regarded as a far-left idea that is unlikely to come to fruition for many years. Thus when Prime Minister Daubeny introduces the bill, it throws both parties into confusion: Tories are expected to put party over conscience by backing it, while Liberals offer convoluted reasons for opposing it. Gresham, the leader of the liberals, offers a justification that amounts to "a simple avowal that on this occasion men were to be regarded, and not measures" (2.45). Meanwhile, Phineas becomes the target of unsavory gossip due to his friendship with a woman who has separated from her husband, Lady Laura Kennedy. His

repeated run-ins with his political enemy, fellow MP Bonteen, compound his problems. The novel includes a number of plots involving secondary characters, including the aged Duke of Omnium (who dies partway through), a man who has accomplished nothing but is often acknowledged to have played his social part to the hilt. Another subplot involves two rival suitors of the same young lady, Adelaide Palliser. Both are idle, relatively ignorant and addicted to fox-hunting, but the favored suitor, Maule, is considered undoubtedly a gentleman, while Spooner is an awkward and unworthy figure of comic relief. “Gerard Maule so wore his clothes, and so carried his limbs, and so pronounced his words that he was to be regarded as one entitled to make love to any lady; whereas poor Mr. Spooner was not justified in proposing to marry any woman much more gifted than his own housemaid” (1.217-8). These subplots stress the importance of meaningless but socially entrenched codes of deportment.

The Trollopian narrator’s attitude toward these arbitrary codes is complex. At times he seems to be engaged in critique of social standards, showing that they are valued merely as empty signifiers which can substitute for a life of value, as in the Duke’s case. But Trollope ultimately suggests that it would be impossible to do without them. And he mitigates his critique by showing that all professions and areas of endeavor are implicated in this mindset. After setting up this attitude toward society in its first two volumes, the novel focuses most of its third volume on an event that tests the abilities of any institution to arrive at truth: Phineas is falsely accused of murdering Bonteen. The murder takes place on a dark side street, as Bonteen is walking home from his club after having exchanged harsh words with Phineas. While no one saw the murder, the killer used a stick of the same type as Phineas was carrying (a retractable “lifesaver,”

popular for self-defense at the time). A fellow club member, Lord Fawn, tells detectives he saw a man who resembled Phineas fleeing the location of the murder. On the basis of this circumstantial evidence, Phineas is committed to trial as Volume III opens. The case quickly becomes a news sensation, and prompts heated discussions about evidence; while many of Phineas' former friends find the legal evidence convincing, others insist they know his character too well to believe in his guilt. The issue is complicated by the existence of another suspect, Reverend Emilius. A Romanian of Jewish origin, Emilius fits the culture's stereotype of a criminal much better than does the handsome, masculine M.P. Although Emilius is freed due to lack of evidence, Phineas' defenders insist that "of course the Jew did it" (2.251).

Trollope's novel is hardly a whodunit, telling readers shortly after the murder that "as regards this great offence, Phineas Finn was as white as snow" (2.256). The narrator functions as an epistemological foundation of truth, supplying readers with answers to questions that characters find vexing. But this only draws attention to the characters' lack of access to any such authoritative source of truth. The novel's suspense centers instead around what kind of evidence would suffice to prove a man's innocence or guilt. Phineas insists that his verdict should be based on the raw fact of his innocence, rather than the forensic evidence and legal technicalities usually called on to establish it. "There should be no advantage taken of little forms, no objection taken to this and that as though delay would avail us anything. . . though no one would speak a word for me, still I am innocent" (78-9). His lawyer, Chaffanbrass, points out that such technical details are all that the magistrates, judges and jury can really observe. "[The magistrate] went by the evidence. . . the colour of the coat you wore and that of the coat worn by the man whom

Lord Fawn saw in the street; the doctor's evidence as to the blows by which the man was killed; and the nature of the weapon which you carried. He put these things together, and they were enough to entitle the public to demand that a jury should decide" (3.77-8). The narrative raises questions here about whether it was unjust to arrest Phineas at all—while the accusation seems absurd to readers, circumstantial evidence against him is strong enough to have him committed for trial.⁷⁷

Phineas' trial takes up much of the third volume. The case for the defense rests on titled character witnesses and the lawyers' critiques of circumstantial evidence (in particular, Lord Fawn's vague assertion that he had seen a tall man who looked like Finn). While it appears likely the defense lawyers will introduce enough doubt to free Phineas, two surprise discoveries make his acquittal certain. His longtime admirer Madame Max Goesler has journeyed to Prague to find evidence that Emilius had a duplicate key to his lodgings made, and thus could have left the house on the night of the murder. This plot point reproduces a trope familiar from *Heart of Midlothian*, *Mary Barton*, and many other Victorian fictions: A character's long journey to prove a loved one's innocence (often followed by dramatically bursting into the courtroom with evidence in hand). As she travels back to England with her proof, a final clue turns up: A leather bludgeon is found by chance in a walled garden adjacent to the murder scene. The weapon is found to be European-made; police as well as the now-riveted newspaper readers of England are convinced of Emilius' guilt. On the final day of the trial, a Bohemian blacksmith named Peter Braska testifies about the duplicate key. The bludgeon is displayed, along with expert witnesses in leatherwork and scientific chemistry to prove its origins. As the jury learns of Madame Max's exploits, genres

collide chaotically. “Grandly romantic tales were told of her wit, her wealth, and her beauty” (3.124). The public can judge these events using the standards of the realist novel, detective fiction (or detective narratives in the newspaper), courtroom or romance, and they call upon each of these to interpret the trial. Since all of these interpretive lenses suggest Phineas’ innocence, “It was felt that no jury could convict him” (126), and he is quickly freed.

The novel’s bittersweet denouement focuses on Phineas’ attempts to overcome his newfound timidity and distrust of society. He finally returns to Parliament and social life, but turns down a prestigious cabinet position he had once coveted. “What does it matter who sits in Parliament? The fight goes on just the same. The same falsehoods are acted. The same mock truths are spoken” (3.172). While the links between the false imprisonment and the “false” politicking of Parliament are left unstated, it is clear that Phineas views the forms and conventions of party loyalty and political advancement as parallel to those in the justice system. The fact that so many of his acquaintances once “believe[d him] to have been guilty of an abominable crime” makes Phineas skeptical about belief and knowledge itself (3.223). There is, he sees, no necessary connection between the real world and the mental constructs with which it is represented. Consequently, he is skeptical about the principles behind his chosen career. Just as lawyers do not speak truth, but only offer arguments they believe will be accepted as facts by judges and juries, politicians are not true representatives of the people, but support policies they think politically expedient. Political speeches are “mock truths” because, even if they are true, they are not spoken *because* they are true. Daubeny may have given valid arguments in support of the church bill, but his true reasons for

supporting it were based on conventions of the House: He needed to offer a popular bill. The presence of convention in all areas of public life renders it impossible that anyone, even Phineas, should perceive and represent truth.⁷⁸

Evidence and Identity

While Phineas escapes the worst consequences of the novel's epistemological uncertainty, one character's life is decisively ruined by the trial: the unreliable witness Lord Fawn. Early on in the evidence-gathering process he tells the police that he saw a tall man who looked something like Finn, wearing a gray coat, fleeing from what turned out to be the scene of the murder. When it is time to testify at the trial, the clever defense lawyer Chaffanbrass forces him to admit that he did not have a clear look at the man on that dark night. He believed the figure was Finn only because he had been told Finn had been near that street. This scrupulous and careful MP is punished for his inability to distinguish between the legally valid knowledge of the sort he is being asked to provide (whether the man in the gray coat physically resembled Phineas) and socially mediated knowledge he uses to determine the truth (whether Phineas was nearby). In response to Chaffanbrass's questioning, he repeatedly reveals his ignorance of legal procedure, and comes to fear the "horrors of his cross-examination" (3.97). Fawn is at a disadvantage in the courtroom: In Parliament he knows the conventions that determine which truths are accepted, here he does not.⁷⁹ The result is a humiliating loss of authority for a man who is used to having his words take as appropriately referential. Using the wrong conventions results in incoherent, unbelievable testimony.

The complicated discussions surrounding the murderer's gray coat exemplify Fawn's predicament. On the witness stand, he is asked to pass judgment on a coat that could

have been worn by Emilius on the night of the murder. Although he had told the police when first questioned that he saw a tall man who looked like Phineas, in the meantime Madame Max has discovered that Emilius could have worn a gray coat belonging to his landlord. This coat is shown to Fawn, who has evidently decided that he had overstated his certainty about what he saw. Trying to correct his error, he goes to ludicrous extremes of feigned ignorance, telling Chaffanbrass he “could not at all identify the prisoner; could not say whether the man he had seen was as tall as the prisoner” (3.97). Fawn’s careful phrasing makes it difficult for Chaffanbrass to extract an admission that he was “minutely and accurately acquainted with the personal appearance of the gentleman,” because he is reluctant even to admit knowing Phineas by sight: “I never was intimate with him.” When asked about Phineas’s height, “Lord Fawn altogether refused to give an opinion on such a subject, but acknowledged that he should not be surprised if he were told that Mr. Finn was over six feet high.” ““In fact, you consider him a tall man? There he is, you can look at him. Is he a tall man?” Lord Fawn did look, but wouldn’t give an answer” (3.99). The scene is completed by an attorney’s clerk trying on Emilius’s landlord’s gray coat, and Fawn being asked whether this man looks like the one he saw. Although he had previously declared in a “conference” in the attorney’s chamber that the figure “was like the figure of the man” (105), he now refuses to give an opinion. Facing the truth that knowledge in the courtroom must be mediated by an unfamiliar institutional standard, Fawn retreats to the absurd solution of professing to know nothing at all.

Fawn’s mistakes are not the result of indifference to his colleague’s fate. We are told by the narrator that the witness is a man “thoroughly under the influence of conscience”

and sincerely affected by concern for Finn's fate. "He was essentially a truth-speaking man, if only he knew how to speak the truth. . . . But he was a bad witness, and by his slowness . . . had already taught the jury to think that he was anxious to convict the prisoner" (3.101). Chaffanbrass points out that he had told the magistrate in Bow Street that he had a "very strong opinion" that the man was Finn, offering a *Times* news report to refresh his memory. Fawn will not look at it, and responds "it seems to me that I thought it must have been Mr. Finn because I had been told that Mr. Finn could have been there by running round" (102). After more bickering, "'I think so because of the quarrel, and because of the gray coat.' 'For no other reasons?'" 'No;—for no other reasons.' 'Your only ground for suggesting identity is the grey coat?'" 'And the quarrel.' 'My lord, in giving evidence as to identity, I fear that you do not understand the meaning of the word'" (3.103).⁸⁰ Fawn's "knowledge" of who he saw is of the same kind as Phineas's friends' (more accurate) knowledge that he is innocent.

Fawn's errors on the witness stand have dramatic repercussions. "To his thinking he was the great martyr of the trial. His sufferings must endure for his life,—might probably embitter his life to the very end" (3.138). He is besmirched in the public eyes, "and yet with what persistency of conscience had he struggled to be true and honest." Sure enough, some weeks after the trial, a character observes, "Poor Lord Fawn! They say that it has made quite an old man of him" (3.233). And the last word we hear of him is that "Lord Fawn had retired, absolutely broken down by repeated examinations respecting the man in the grey coat" (3.277). He is reported to have gone into seclusion abroad. While the entire trial is premised on confusion between different styles of institutionally mediated knowledge about the defendant (titled character witnesses have

equal bearing on the stand as police officers presenting forensic evidence), Fawn is the scapegoat for this blurring of boundaries. Like Marlow in *Lord Jim*, he discovers the epistemological uncertainty lurking in a seemingly straightforward event, and cannot regain his comfortable certainty that his own perceptions are true ones.

Law and Literature

The novel's analysis of epistemological conventions becomes particularly striking when Trollope turns the focus on the novel itself, revealing literary standards of judgment to be just as arbitrary as any other. Two days before his trial, while wrestling with the problem of how to make his innocence clear to others, Phineas recites to himself a line that Eugene Aram had used in his defense speech. "And then he remembered an example in Latin from some rule of grammar and repeated it to himself over and over again.—'No one at an instant,— of a sudden,—becomes most base'" (3.19). Phineas is convinced of this classical aphorism's truth. Although he cannot remember its original source, that only grants it more authority—it is invested with the invariable truth of a "rule of grammar," rather than one writer's attempt to simplify complex human nature. As Cosmides and Tooby would say, the truism has lost its limiting source tag and is "free to circulate" throughout Phineas' general knowledge. As his train of thought continues, "it seemed to him that there was such a want of knowledge of human nature in the supposition that it was possible that he should have committed such a crime" (3.19). Like the *Nation* critic who found Phineas' behavior unbelievable, Phineas himself believes the literary canon provides an accurate guide to interpreting the world around us. Since police and magistrates cannot use classical aphorisms to determine which evidence

to reject, *Phineas Redux* suggests that the “universal” truths held out by literature are actually local, limited, and mediated.

Phineas tells his lawyer that when the real criminal is found, “he . . . will be found to have been skulking in the streets; he will have thrown away his weapon; he will have been secret in his movements; he will have hidden his face, and have been a murderer in more than the deed. . . . Has my life been like that?” (3.79). The criminal’s actions should fit into the recognizable model of a “plot.” And indeed, the judge’s summing-up confirms that “a plot had been made . . . and had been executed with extreme audacity” (3.152).⁸¹ The widely held belief that a crime story should form a compelling “plot” explains why the public believes the circumstantial evidence against Emilius more readily than that against Finn; in addition to plotting more extensively against his enemy, he fits more closely the public’s idea of the criminal who would construct such a scheme.⁸²

A fascinating scene with a novelist as witness underscores the connection between novelistic discourse and the “natural” signs Phineas desires to be judged by. Mr. Bouncer is a novelist summoned to testify about events he witnessed at the club The Universe on the night of Finn and Bonteen’s quarrel. But Chaffanbrass chooses to cross-examine him on a different subject. After confirming that Bouncer is a novelist, he asks, “you have to find plots[?] . . . Where do you find them from? You take them from the French mostly;—don’t you? . . . Isn’t that the way our English writers get their plots?” The beleaguered author will not “undertake to say that they’re not French,” but is asked to confirm that “the plot of a novel should, I imagine, be constructed in accordance with human nature?” Bouncer agrees, and is then subjected to a series of questions on

fictional murders (a subject on which he is well qualified, having “done many murders in his time”). Chaffanbrass’s questions prompt Bouncer to admit that the story suggested by the prosecution would not make for compelling fiction. “Did you ever know a French novelist have a premeditated murder committed by a man who could not possibly have conceived the murder ten minutes before he committed it;—with whom the cause of the murder anteceded the murder no more than ten minutes?” (3.92-3). Bouncer confirms that such would be a defective plot. Chaffanbrass then discusses the murders in *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*, none of which were “devised suddenly” (93). Finally, he moves on to English novels: “And Eugene Aram, when he murdered a man in Bulwer’s novel, turned the matter over in his mind before he did it?” (94). The novelist again agrees that Aram contemplated it “a long time.” Chaffanbrass triumphantly asks, “those great masters of human nature, those men who knew the human heart, did not venture to describe a secret murder as coming from a man’s brain without premeditation? You would not dare so to violate probability in a novel, as to produce a murderer to the public who should contrive a secret hidden murder,—contrive it and execute it, all within a quarter of an hour?” (3.94). Fictional novel plots serve in this conversation as a source of authority on “probable” human behavior, even though such plots are derived not from direct observation of life, but from imitation of other novels (specifically, those novels that possess the most cultural cachet). Chaffanbrass’s remarks implicitly suggest that it is really aesthetic success and generic standards for a well-constructed plot that determine what seems “probable,” rather than fidelity to real events.⁸³

If the murder plot most troublingly serves as a stage for the novel’s epistemological questions, in the end it resolves them by producing proof that satisfies all institutions and

methods of investigation: legally valid physical evidence, titled character witnesses, Phineas' own performance of resolute masculinity at his trial, and a compelling alternate plot that implicates another man. The fact that Emilius is an "other" of the wrong race and nationality helps create a consensus in Phineas' favor. The true murderer is not "one of us," and thus his apparent guilt does not raise any troubling issues about how to reconcile appearance with reality. Phineas' acquittal, then, is only a provisional solution to the problems of truth-seeking and evidence that the novel has raised. The highly irregular trial has highlighted the fractured and arbitrary nature of truth-seeking institutions, and the uncertainties about Phineas's character can only be repaired by overdetermined proofs of innocence. The novel emphasizes this problem with its anticlimactic narrative structure. Phineas' decisive legal victory is not the real conclusion, but a prelude to several chapters dealing with the angst Phineas suffers after his release. He is haunted by the knowledge that his innocence was not self-evident.

Conclusion

Victorian fiction is often critiqued as naively conventional—a genre that mistakes its textual practices for an unmediated presentation of the outside world. While Victorian authors do make enthusiastic use of convention, this use is anything but naïve. The works of Eliot, Trollope, Dickens and others make sophisticated use of some conventions, while purposely rejecting others. Skillful use of convention allows them to create storyworlds that are both believable and vividly memorable. But as we saw with *Phineas Redux*, they do not only choose conventions, but use them in self-aware, clever and ironic ways.

Recently, critics have sought to find in Victorian fiction the same type of indeterminacy, instability and skepticism that is valued in modernist literature. In *Victorian Modernism*, Jessica R. Feldman praises “art which is complex, always under construction yet . . . satisfying in its very lack of simplicity and closure” (2). But as my analysis shows, these authors’ self-aware use of convention does not constitute some sort of proto-modernism. Rather, these texts engage in subversive and self-referential textual practices that are distinctly Victorian. Instead of seeking to shock the reader by rejecting the most salient conventions of their genre, they use them as frameworks for their texts—staging conventions of realism to question the conventions of realism. While modernist novels like *To the Lighthouse* reject the marriage plot, in the *Phineas* novels, Trollope critiques the same set of conventions more subtly: He presents Violet Effingham as a would-be rebel who eventually conforms to expectations, worn down by subtle pressures and prejudices that close off all other alternatives but marriage. And instead of abandoning conventional narratives of courtship and career advancement, he uses them to structure his plots. His character Phineas falls in love with and proposes to three women before marrying his hometown sweetheart at the end of *Phineas Finn*. In his career, Phineas rises, falls, then rises and falls again before emerging as a successful (if unspectacular) MP at the end of *Redux*. The repetitive and picaresque progress of his life serves to suggest the arbitrariness of the closure that novels provide.⁸⁴

This distinctly Victorian form of critique is reminiscent of Caroline Levine’s claim that the seemingly formulaic aspects of Victorian fiction actually served to foster a critical and self-questioning stance in the reader: “The experience of suspense was not a means of social regulation, but a rigorous political and epistemological training, a way to

foster energetic skepticism and uncertainty rather than closure and complacency” (2). Just as “scientists had to strike a balance between indulging hypotheses and constraining them, between liberating the mind and checking its unruly speculations against the evidence offered up by the alterity of the world,” novelists sought to strike a balance between the new and the familiar in their texts. Recognizing that no fictional representation is wholly unmediated or free from convention, novelists use conventional scenarios to hold readers’ expectations up to scrutiny, offering the very real possibility that they will be subverted.

CHAPTER III
DESCRIPTION, COGNITIVE MAPPING AND SCHEMATIC SPATIAL
ANALOGIES IN BENNETT AND LAWRENCE

The first chapter of Arnold Bennett's *The Old Wives' Tale* opens by informing the reader that Constance and Sophia Baines, two teenage sisters in 1860s England, "paid no heed to the manifold interest of their situation, of which, indeed, they had never been conscious. They were, for example, established almost precisely on the fifty-third parallel of latitude" (3). The narration expands at length on this "manifold interest," devoting five dense pages of description to such increasingly specific locations as the "natural, simple" county of Staffordshire; the Potteries district, a cluster of five towns that forms the county's center of industry; the town of Bursley, "mother" of the towns by virtue of its "superiority in age"; Saint Luke's Square, "the centre of Bursley's retail trade" (6); and finally, the Baineses' home, "a composite building of three storeys" in which the family lives and operates a drapery business, the town's "supreme" retail institution. The interests of this patch of English real estate may be manifold, but Bennett emphasizes their subtlety, telling us that Staffordshire is a "natural, simple county" of "modest, unnoticed rivers," in which "excess is deprecated." In its moderation, the text suggests, this landscape is representative of the nation as a whole. The county "has everything that England has. . . . It is England in little, lost in the midst of England" and possessing "representative features and traits" (3-4). Nevertheless, the text seems ambivalent about the landscape's capacity to represent something beyond itself. In one passage, the narrator whimsically notes that the district "lies on the face of the county . . .

like a dark Pleiades in a green and empty sky,” and that “Hanbridge has the shape of a horse and its rider, Bursley of half a donkey, Knype of a pair of trousers, Longshaw of an octopus, and little Turnhill of a beetle” (5). In contrast to the overdetermined designation of the countryside as a perfect miniature of the nation, these willfully fanciful similes suggest that the kind of description Bennett is engaging in is potentially no more meaningful than spotting shapes in clouds. In detailing the physical features of a space, the text implies, an author does not necessarily tell us anything about the lives lived there.

This narrator’s seeming unease about the meaning-making potential of detailed spatial description—suspended between powerful signification (“England in little”), and arbitrary notation of physical shapes—echoes a longstanding tradition in literary criticism. While detailed descriptions of landscapes, homes and objects are nearly ubiquitous in realist narrative, theorists have repeatedly denigrated it as a textual genre that is extraneous to narrative. In “Narrate or Describe,” Georg Lukács ranks description of scenes and settings as inferior to narration of actions and events, writing that passages in which “every possible detail . . . is described precisely” often serve as “mere filler in the novel” (110), as well as “mere tableau” (112), “only a ‘setting,’” and “merely background” (115). In categorizing descriptions as notations of “crass accident” which contrast with the “inherently” meaningful (116), Lukács articulates what has long been conventional wisdom in literary criticism. In contrast to active, structured and meaningful narrative, description is potentially static, formless and meaningless. Genette describes it as “*ancilla narrationis*, the ever-necessary, ever-submissive, never-emancipated slave” (quoted in Fowler 26). Because it refers directly to the outside world (or appears to do so), description is “a sort of radically different textual cyst” (Hamon 5)

that cannot be assimilated into the orderly narrative text. And for Barthes, pure descriptions are those that enhance verisimilitude at the expense of meaning: “The very absence of the signified, to the advantage of the referent alone, becomes the very signifier of realism” (148). While no novelist can avoid descriptive detail entirely, the “irrelevant detail” is figured as a site of excess, authorial self-indulgence or pure reference.

Critical response to Bennett’s work, including *The Old Wives’ Tale*, has typified this ambivalent attitude toward detailed description. Bennett was praised throughout his career for his meticulous evocation of a variety of settings and milieus. But the same attention to the “manifold interest” of his characters’ surroundings often drew harsh judgments from critics, who asserted that his works offer fact without interpretation and description without meaning—in Lukác’s terms, “mere tableau” at the expense of story, psychology and artistic unity. The most famous evaluation of Bennett is Virginia Woolf’s essay “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown,” which classifies him as a writer who has “looked very powerfully . . . even at the decoration and upholstery of the carriage; but never at [Mrs. Brown], never at life, never at human nature” (454). He was also criticized by many lesser-known writers for producing prose that “describes . . . rather than expresses” (Maas 313), and for failing to “weld his details into a convincing whole” (Canaan 209) or “interpret his facts” (Sharman 351).⁸⁵

Because Bennett’s texts so conspicuously include descriptive details that readers judge to be excessive or irrelevant, his work provides an ideal place to question whether so-called “extraneous” detail serves a purpose, and what that purpose might be. In this chapter, I seek to provide an account for the role that detailed spatial description plays in narrative.⁸⁶ I dispute the claim that descriptions like Bennett’s only serve to provide a

sense of reference, *vraisemblance* or local color, arguing that such passages are an integral part of novels' meaning. But I also take issue with more recent narratological accounts, such as those by David Herman, Philippe Hamon and Ruth Ronen, that stress the identity between description and narration. Herman, for instance, argues that "features that have been centrally associated with the prototype DESCRIPTION may have to be included among the core properties of narrative," and that "narrative entails a process of cognitive mapping that assigns referents not merely a temporal but a spatiotemporal position in the storyworld" (297). Herman and others are right to defend description from charges of irrelevance and meaninglessness. But their accounts fail to explain why description stands out from narrative as a separate genre, as well as why it seems extraneous or even "skippable" to so many readers (including Bennett's critics). Furthermore, contemporary theorists often assume that the function of descriptive detail is to prompt readers to create a detailed cognitive map of the setting in which fictional events unfold. A growing body of empirical evidence contradicts this assumption, suggesting instead that subjects' mental representations of spaces they read about are often vague, incomplete and inaccurate.

Descriptions like *The Old Wives' Tale's* opening chapter do not prompt readers to construct mental maps of the spatial details of homes, towns and landscapes they represent. Why are such passages so common in nineteenth and twentieth century fiction? In this chapter, I argue that readers make sense of spatial description not by constructing a comprehensive mental map, but by seeking coded information they can use to construct what I call schematic spatial analogies. Creating such analogies involves linking the specific details depicted in the text to abstract, value-laden categories. These

abstract categories are socially or ideologically coded qualities that contribute to the text's overall schematic organization. For instance, when Bennett describes the Baineses' home county as typically English, he places it in implicit contrast to more exotic or foreign locales—a dichotomy that will recur throughout the novel, as when Sophia travels to France and responds with “horror” to the “cruel, obscene spectacle” of a public execution (338–9). The dichotomy between English modesty and continental spectacle and excess lends this scene meaning. Interpreting settings in novels involves understanding what Richard Bjornson calls “existing, culture-bound systems of symbols” (57). Mastery of these systems allows subjects to classify the spaces they read about as rich or poor, modern or old-fashioned, metropolitan or provincial, domestic or exotic, familiar or other. While descriptive passages may be very detailed, these analogical representations involve relatively few qualities, suggesting that they correspond to what Franco Moretti calls a “semantic sketch,” or what Richard Bjornson terms an “interpretive grid.” Because they are relatively simple, such sketches persist in memory, contributing to readers' impressions of a text long after individual details have faded away.

While spatial description does contribute to verisimilitude and allow readers to track character location on a minimal level, its main function is to prompt readers to form schematic spatial analogies embedded in the social and ideological codes that structure a text.⁸⁷ This explains the near-universality of spatial description, as well as the seemingly paradoxical fact that it is poorly remembered, and does not prompt readers to form detailed mental maps. Constructing such a map is not one of novel readers' primary goals, so specific information about spatial locations and layouts is usually forgotten

when readers have extracted the social and ideological meanings a description conveys. And descriptions will seem “excessive” or extraneous when readers cannot link them to some textually significant abstract category, regardless of the passages’ actual length.

While description is one of the most explicitly referential aspects of the novel text, then, its referentiality is hardly straightforward or naive. Rather, just as we “read” our own surroundings not as an arbitrary expanse of features, but as shaped and made legible by information about social class, appropriate behavior, political allegiance and more, so we read novel representations of referential worlds and storyworld places in the same way: making sense of them with our own culturally constructed frames and schemas, and sometimes updating those knowledge structures with new information.

In this chapter, I focus on two works that use detailed spatial description in a way that transgressed readers’ expectations: Bennett’s *The Old Wives’ Tale* and D.H. Lawrence’s *The Rainbow*. While these works are dissimilar in many respects, both undo the relatively straightforward connection between meaning and space typical of nineteenth century realism. In doing so, they make it difficult for readers to construct semantic sketches of the settings they read about. In the sections below, I use the idea of schematic spatial analogies to show what is unique and innovative about the way description functions in each text. Although critics could rarely articulate what they found troubling about each text’s descriptive passages, I argue that readers’ inability to construct semantic sketches played a large part in their reactions to these two novels. These authors’ innovative use of spatial description helps explain the often negative or conflicted reactions contemporary readers had to their works.

Description and Criticism

Distrust of description dates back centuries. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, critics often prescribe rules for proper poetic composition, lamenting poets' tendency to break those rules through their self-indulgent fascination with the physical world. Boileau's 1674 *Art Poétique* depicts with disdain the poet who "pursues his subject till it's over-wrought/ If he describes a House he shews the Face/And after walks you round from place to place" (Quoted in Hamon 9). Boileau envisions himself as a reader "tir'd with his tedious Pomp" who "skip'd over twenty Pages to be gone." His critique of descriptive excess foreshadows Lukács's, casting the *détail inutile* as a "barren superfluity" (9). In the eighteenth century, historian and *encyclopédiste* Jean François Marmontel writes of the indiscriminate describer, who, "if he doesn't get bored himself . . . can be assured of boring his readers before long."⁸⁸ These critiques assume descriptive poets are motivated by a superficial desire to depict the splendor of fine houses and grounds.

Detailed description's rise in literary status is associated with the rise of the novel itself. As Ian Watt recounts, the new genre's emergence concurred with new philosophical beliefs that privileged the empirical pursuit of truth. Faith in sensory apprehension of reality replaced the traditional view that man's task was "to rally against the meaningless flux of sensation and achieve a knowledge of the universals which alone constituted the ultimate and immediate reality" (368). An aesthetic of particularity took hold in the novel, a genre in which character, time and place are "presented through a more largely referential use of language than is common in other literary forms" (378). The "solidity of setting" Watt chronicles became even more expansive with the appearance of nineteenth century realism. Nevertheless, distaste for meaningless flux

persisted. Many nineteenth century authors felt the need to defend their practice of description from charges of meaninglessness. Flaubert insisted that “there isn’t in my book even one isolated, gratuitous description; they all serve the characters and have an immediate or distant influence on the action” (quoted in Ronen 281). Zola similarly writes of “never succumbing to the need for mere description alone, but mingled with it there is always a harmonizing or human purpose” (quoted in Ronen 282-3). And Tolstoy refutes his critics, writing that “I was guided by the need of collecting ideas which, linked together, would be the expression of myself, though each individual idea expressed separately in words, loses its meaning” (quoted in Price 29). The acceptance of detail is based on its connection to characters, action, ideas, or the overall “harmony” of a work.

Despite dramatic shifts in critical approaches, it remains common for theorists to assume that, as one historian puts it, “descriptions need not have a point. . . . Narratives about human action have a point” (Stern 561). In the twentieth century, new literary emphasis on unmediated depictions of the psyche made description even more problematic. Phillippe Beaujour explains that “description has a tendency to turn into an imitation of unique, specific objects located in the *hic et nunc*, although it is generated by clusters of cultural clichés. On both scores, it is anathema to modernism” (52). The antipathy remained after the advent of structuralism because “description still smacked of a subservience to the world, to the ideology of representation. Description is the very symbol of literature’s protracted inability to stop pretending it says something of the world, in the world, to the world” (45). For much the same reason as it was condemned by Boileau—its apparent embrace of referential rather than aesthetic goals—description remained an object of suspicion long into the twentieth century.

Why do detailed descriptions persist throughout nineteenth and twentieth century literature despite the danger that they would bore readers or detract from a novel's plot and themes? One explanation, memorably formulated by Roland Barthes, is that irrelevant details are placed in the novel to create a sense of believability and verisimilitude. This theory does little to explain how some authors are able to create a sense of reality with little physical detail (as in Homer's *Odyssey*, often praised for making "men and things stand out in a realm where everything is visible" (Auerbach 2), or why some works of fiction are more detailed than others. And it implies that details in novels like those of Flaubert are chosen almost at random. In recent years, critics have sought to create a more nuanced account, defending description's status as a meaningful and integral part of narrative. Martin Price rejects the notion of the irrelevant detail, because "details do not offer themselves as clearly relevant or irrelevant," upon first reading or at any point (35). Ruth Ronen concludes that "narrative fulfills a representative function no less often than descriptions impose narrative order" (284). Harold Moshier asserts that a full-scale "separation between narration and description is impossible," and seeks to classify passages along a spectrum from more to less descriptive ("Towards a Poetics of 'Descriptized' Narration," 426). Narratologists question the existence of "narrative" and "descriptive," suggesting instead that the descriptive function is found to various degrees throughout the text of a novel. Meir Steinberg argues in *Expositional Modes and Temporal Ordering* that description and narration exist on a continuum, if they can be distinguished at all, writing that "the process of reading necessarily subsumes a process of spatial reconstruction. And action and description are not so much discrete segments as functions of discourse" (73).

Narration is inseparable from description, he suggests, because it prompts the reader to form a mental representation of the space in which the narrated actions take place

The idea that readers mentally reconstruct the space described in a text is explored at length in David Herman's *Story Logic*. Seeking to correct narratology's traditional focus on temporally ordered plots at the expense of settings, he argues that spatial reference is "not an optional or peripheral feature of stories, but rather a core property that helps constitute narrative domains" (296), and that narratives are "not ordered sets of events *per se* but more precisely the ordered distribution of event constituents in time and space" (297). In ordinary speech, as well as written texts, language encodes spatial relations as powerfully as it does the causal ordering of events. His analysis of Flann O'Brien's experimental novel *The Third Policeman* is focused on showing how "narratives enable (or in some cases inhibit) 'cognitive mapping' . . . the process by which things and events are modeled as being located somewhere in the world (265). Herman argues that in O'Brien's storyworld, space is subject to surreal mutations that prevent readers from making a coherent map, even as they struggle to do so. And such mapping is important, he argues, because "in proportion with their resistance to spatial cognition, human beings' experience becomes increasingly less tellable—and less livable" (296).

The theory that readers construct mental maps of textual settings—that they "construct in imagination a sort of theater stage or 'dollhouse' with landmarks and rooms filled with expected objects," in one researcher's words (Bower and Morrow 1990, 45)—is a tempting one. It provides a rationale for the intricate spatial descriptions novels provide, while giving credit to the flexibility and creativity of the reading process. But as I will show, a significant body of empirical research contradicts this assumption, showing

that readers' mental maps of fictional settings are usually sparse, minimal and inaccurate. In Rolf A. Zwaan and Herre van Oostendorp's "Do Readers Construct Spatial Representations in Naturalistic Story Comprehension," the authors present evidence from many studies that "under normal reading conditions, readers may not be very much engaged in the construction of precise situational representations at all" (127), concluding on the basis of their own research that "the construction of spatial representations does not seem to be a crucial aspect of naturalistic story comprehension" (140). (The authors term ordinary reading as "naturalistic" to distinguish it from the goal-directed reading that experiments sometimes demand.) If readers do not form a mental map of the Bovarys' or Baineses' house, why do authors describe these territories in such detail? Below, I will give some background on the history of cognitive mapping before attempting to answer this question.

Cognitive Mapping

A cognitive (or mental) map is a flexible representation of a certain terrain, stored not as an image but as a more abstract set of features: destinations, paths and the like. The notion that people use such mental schemas to understand and navigate their surroundings was first proposed by Edward Tolman in a 1948 article; since then, accounts of mental mapping activity typically emphasize that the maps are not complete or accurate, but are oriented toward a subject's goals (like planning routes or keeping track of other people's locations). A mental map is a strategically simplified and distorted mental representation of a space; a subject may mentally represent the route between her home and the town square, but misrepresent the distance and fail to remember many details along the route. And theorists have stressed that maps are not

neutral or value-free collections of information, but intrinsically reliant on assigning meaning to space. In *The Image of the City* (1960), Kevin Lynch studies the way urbanites make sense of their surroundings. He emphasizes that to “map” physical features is to superimpose meaning onto them. For instance, “the image of the Manhattan skyline may stand for vitality, power, decadence, mystery, congestion, greatness, or what you will” (8–9); for the viewer, such value judgments will unavoidably color her sense of space.

The process of creating a mental map is active, not passive. “The environment suggests distinctions and relations, and the observer . . . selects, organizes, and endows with meaning what he sees” (6). To be understood, a layout must be “organized into a coherent pattern” (3). Elements of a city that make it “imageable”—easy to organize and endow with meaning—include figure-background clarity, simplicity of form, continuity, clear interconnection and dominance (of one part over others). While these qualities may be real features of a space, they also possess an obvious metaphorical resonance—a cathedral is “dominant” over surrounding houses both literally and metaphorically, or one’s home may serve as the normative center to which other locations appear as background. Subjects’ need to find significant relationships between elements of their surroundings suggests the ease with which we map abstract meanings onto concrete spatial features.⁸⁹ As theorist Richard Bjornson puts it in a discussion of Tolman and Lynch, “the cognitive mapping concept explained how people extract structure and identity from the world in which they live. . . . A human cognitive map provides an interpretive grid which enables people to attach meaning and value to what they

perceive” (54). By subdividing the continuous expanse of space into discrete locations related to each other in specific ways, subjects are already assigning interpretations.

Cognitive maps are not just enriched with added meaning, but subject to systematic distortions and errors. People’s mental representations of spaces are so subjective and inconsistent that one researcher suggests they should be thought of not as maps, but as “cognitive collages” (Tversky 15).⁹⁰ For instance, we remember real-world locations by placing them in categories according to region; “people’s location judgments of world cities seem to depend on their knowledge of the superordinate category to which those cities belong” (Newcombe and Chiang 896). This reliance on categories makes it harder for people to learn and remember objective details like the distance between cities. In an experiment, participants judged cities within northern Europe to be closer to each other—and farther from cities in southern and eastern Europe—than they actually are. Nevertheless, people reflexively rely on abstract categories when learning spatial information. When presented with imaginary maps, experimental subjects “formed subjective spatial categories even without seeing well-defined boundaries in the space” (895). Judgments of certain spaces as inherently important or central have a similarly distorting effect. Barbara Tversky points out that distance estimates are inconsistent: People will judge an ordinary building to be closer to a landmark than a landmark is to that building (3). Tellingly, this principle extends analogically to other “landmark” comparisons: People will also judge a son to be more similar to a father than the father is to the son (Tversky and Gati). Subjects’ understanding of space reflects the same reliance on categories and value judgments that we use in abstract reasoning.

How do the representations of space we construct while reading texts compare to those we use to navigate our real-world surroundings? In recent years, a body of work in cognitive psychology has explored this question. Researchers interested in text comprehension and spatial situation models have investigated how readers form spatial representations of a given text. Their work focuses on the idea of the cognitive map as a relatively comprehensive, accurate and useful tool for thinking. As a result, these researchers have paid much less attention to the spatial representation as subjective and value-laden, or as a vehicle for metaphors. Nevertheless, their empirical results suggest readers rarely use spatial descriptions to form a dollhouse-like map of a setting. While readers can form relatively accurate representations of a space, they rarely do more than the minimum required to track characters' general location. Reader representations of space leave out most of the detail even in short experimental texts. Psychological researchers do not often speculate on what other function detailed spatial description might serve beyond facilitating cognitive maps. Nevertheless, I will go on to suggest that for readers, creating a usable cognitive map is a secondary goal to that of assigning meanings and values to the places described.

Psychological research on spatial situation models frequently comments on the minimal and inaccurate quality of subjects' memories. A 1993 study by Morrow *et al.* found that "readers failed to construct highly detailed spatial situation models" (152). When research subjects have been given reading material containing detailed spatial description and tested on their memory, "overall performance was poor" (262). Christopher Hakala concludes that "the finding that readers do not typically keep track of spatial information is consistent with much of the research on the development of spatial

situation models,” and that “readers do not reactivate spatially relevant material when processing narrative text unless they are explicitly instructed to do so” (274). Similarly, Sundermeier, van den Broek and Zwaan write, “of the many dimensions that readers may track during reading, spatial information is most likely to be encoded at relatively low levels” (468). Detailed description does not perform the function that narratologists have attributed to it, and that cognitive researchers have expected to find.

A typical study on spatial situation models is one by Christopher M. Hakala, asking “do readers naturally or typically focus on spatial information?” (263).⁹¹ Hakala’s experiment involved presenting participants with short narratives about people in ordinary environments such as a supermarket, then asking questions designed to test their memory of layout. “Although readers did have the ability to focus on and encode the spatial information, they did not appear to do so unless explicit experimental instructions are presented” (267). Further, “contrary to predictions, information embedded within texts designed to increase reader focus did not appear to increase participants’ sensitivity to spatial details” (271). Hakala concludes that “these results fit well into a developing body of literature suggesting that spatial information plays a relatively limited role in the construction of the situation model and does not appear to always be important while the reader is integrating narrative text” (275). A potentially more fruitful interpretation of Hakala’s findings is that the bland stories used in his experiments (for instance, about an uneventful shopping trip) gave readers no reason to involve spatial layout in their situation model. The stories included no conflict or themes, and thus gave readers no incentive to map physical features onto a value-laden mental schema.

One might not find it surprising that minimal descriptions would prompt minimal maps. However, experimental results show that adding vivid detail to a description does not increase the likelihood that it will be mapped. William Levin and Celia M. Klein write in “Tracking of Spatial Information in Narratives” that “the amount of spatial detail that is included in a narrative might influence the probability of encoding; readers might encode spatial information carefully only if it was easy to do” (334). In other words, detailed descriptions might be even *less* likely to inspire mapping. A 1985 study by Perrig and Kintsch that aimed to discover whether survey or route descriptions are most helpful found that “overall performance was poor, probably because the descriptions were long and detailed, calling into question whether readers actually formed spatial mental models” (262). Zwaan and van Oostendorp also suggest that more detail may actually result in less mapping. “The effects of visual imagery on the encoding of verbal materials are largest when context is at a minimum, for example, in the case of individual words. By contrast, the effects of imagery are less pronounced when words are presented in context, for example, in sentences, paragraphs, or longer stretches of text” (126).

Surprisingly, this research also suggests that the way spatial information is presented in novels is not conducive to mental mapping. In novels, “a sentence describing the location of a building may be followed by a description of its inhabitants or of the history of the building.” Zwaan et al. (1993) reported that “the amount of nonspatial information between spatial information influences the quality of the spatial representation that readers will construct. The more distributed a description, the poorer the spatial representation constructed by the reader” (127). Continuous, condensed descriptions are rare in fiction. The authors suggest that “literary authors may not intend to convey a

distinct spatial representation. Instead, they merely want their readers to form a general impression of the local color of the story.” While their research is convincing, this conclusion is vague, failing to explain what “local color” is or what purpose it serves. The fact that detailed descriptions do nothing to increase detail of spatial situation models makes it likely that they perform some other role.

A 1993 study by Rolf A. Zwaan and Herre van Oostendorp tests readers’ memory of the spatial layout described in a text they read, an excerpt from the opening chapter of a detective novel. This study is unusual in cognitive research in using passages from a published work of fiction (1969’s *The Man Who Vanished into Thin Air* by Swedish authors Maj Sjöwall and Per Wahlöö) instead of short “textoids” composed for the experiment. The researchers selected a mystery because “spatial representations are quite important in this genre” (130), and they chose a passage in which a detective inspects the scene of a murder. Nevertheless, these subjects performed no better on tests of spatial memory than those in similar experiments. The group who were instructed to read for spatial understanding spent longer reading the passages, and performed better on the tests, than those simply told to read “normally.” This leads the researchers to conclude that normal readers “are not strongly engaged in constructing spatial situation models.” Even readers who did form a fairly strong spatial model seemed not to call it to memory while reading later passages, to which the information might be relevant. “Even when a ‘normal’ reader has formed a relatively strong spatial situation model, there may not be important consequences on the subsequent processing of spatial information in a text” (139-40). Overall, they conclude that while readers can construct such representations, this process is too laborious to be part of normal reading.

Although no scientific study has focused on complete works of literature, an informal experiment performed by Marie-Laure Ryan revealingly showed systematic errors in students' attempts to "map" a text's setting. As documented in "Cognitive Maps and the Construction of Narrative Space," Ryan performed her test on a class of undergraduates who had read Gabriel García Márquez' *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*. This novel features a mystery-like plot about the protagonist's murder, but as in Zwaan and Van Oostendorp's findings, the layout's "strategic function" (217) did not prompt readers to learn it in detail. Although Ryan had conceived of her informal study as a search for maps, she concludes that readers' "individual visualizations are too ephemeral to be assembled into a global representation" (234). Students frequently omitted key locations from the text, or drew them in the wrong place.⁹² Their mistakes did not suggest they had failed to read the novel carefully; rather, they often added or changed certain details in a way that reinforced the text's main themes. Ryan's results show that readers remember (or even create) spatial details that possess metaphorical resonance with the text's value structure.

The action in *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* takes place largely in the central square of an unnamed Latin American town. Students easily remembered homes and businesses of central characters located on the square, a pattern "revealing of their authors' conceptualizations of the plot" (225). A common error was their "tendency to bring strategically important characters or locations from the periphery toward the center" (226). Metaphorically attaching meaning to place, they assumed that what is narratively "central" must be spatially so as well. One reader drew an especially inventive map, inventing such lurid features as a brothel on the square next door to the church. Ryan

writes that in this detail, “the thematics of the novel are not entirely forgotten. . . . The drawing suggests the ambiguous opposition that dominates the life of the townspeople.” The student creates a spatial schema in which two opposing values are rendered literal, providing an easily understood spatial metaphor. These students’ maps reveal their beliefs about which elements of the text were “central,” or which values are in opposition; they suggest to what extent representations of textual space depend on a text’s systems of meaning.

Schematic Spatial Analogies

The idea that fiction readers assemble complete, accurate mental maps as background to following the plot does not fit the evidence. However, there is another possible function for description of space in narrative. Rather than prompting mapping, spatial description prompts readers to construct an analogical framework for the abstract ideas that make a text meaningful. I define schematic spatial analogies as mental constructs that connect aspects of a space, and abstract qualities that are relevant in a particular context. These analogies give meaning to space by drawing attention to certain aspects of a spatial configuration; they are “schematic” because they isolate only a small number of qualities of a space as meaningful, while disregarding its rich analogue qualities. (A reader need not be able to picture Staffordshire to know that it stands for “England in little.”) As with the analogies discussed in Chapter II, these mental structures enable creativity by allowing inferences to carry over from one domain to another. Schematic spatial analogies are used in everyday thinking to make sense of our surroundings, but can also be prompted by an image, verbal description or written text.

In fiction, spatial description suggests possible schematic analogies, and experienced readers reconstruct them.

The abstractions used in spatial analogies correspond to what Barthes has termed a text's *semes*—"connotative signifieds" that make sense of human behavior, such as Wealth, Genius and Childishness—as well as its symbolic code, the "vast symbolic structure" of antitheses between concepts like life and death (*S/Z* 17). These elements of a text contrast with what Barthes terms the proairetic and hermeneutic codes, those that give names to characters' actions and make it possible for "an enigma [to] be distinguished, suggested, formulated, held in suspense, and finally disclosed" (19). Unlike these codes, which are unidirectional, the symbolic code is "the place for multivalence and reversibility." While spatial description plays a minimal role in helping readers track character behavior and plot, it is well suited for conveying these less plot-based and more reversible elements of a text. Recent research into the analogical thinking we perform in everyday life has revealed that space, as one of the most basic elements of human experience, often functions as a scaffolding for all sorts of abstract thought. This research also provides some clues to how such metaphorical thinking might work. Because readers need only minimal understanding of a space to use it in analogical thinking, even places readers cannot envision well could be used in their meaning-making process. And an analogical function for spatial description would make sense of readers' tendency to forget most details, while remembering—or inventing—details that enhance their sense of a work's meaning.

Spatial structures are used to reason, remember and communicate about non-spatial aspects of life. In "Space as a Basis for Abstract Thought," Meredith Gattis summarizes

work on the use of space as a platform for abstract thinking about an array of topics: “As a domain, space is well learned across many species, and it often involves the integration of information across multiple modalities and multiple dimensions. These characteristics make it an appropriate and appealing platform for building new structures essential for higher cognitive processes” (1). Spatial metaphors make abstract ideas more easy to think through by representing some element of a topic’s “conceptual structure” (5). For instance, “spatial schemas are often used to represent an opposition between two entities or categories” (4). Ryan’s example of a student placing a brothel across from a church is an example of such a use. Such schemas are also useful in reasoning about ordered relations between elements, such as when we must determine some entity’s position on a hierarchy based on possession of some trait. For instance, when presented with a logical problem in which A is larger than B and B is larger than C, subjects figure out whether A is larger than C by imagining the entities arrayed along a line, with the larger objects being “farther along.” Space can be used as a metaphorical underpinning for ordering within a dimension, directionality within a dimension, and relations between dimensions (5); most powerfully, a “global spatial system” can also be “used to structure an abstract domain” (8), as in our use of spatial metaphors to discuss various aspects of time.⁹³ The existence of these cognitive habits suggests that the space described in a text can serve as a rich, nuanced and complex metaphorical analogue for the ideas the text conveys.⁹⁴

It may not seem surprising that spatial experience forms the basis of many conceptual metaphors used in reasoning. But researchers have delved further into human analogical reasoning, trying to assemble a working model of how this process functions. In “A Process Model of Human Transitive Inference,” John E. Hummel and Keith J.

Holyoak describe an attempt to replicate the basics of human spatial reasoning, showing how human “routines for processing transitive relations in the domain of visual perception” are “recruited in aid of reasoning about transitive relations in non-visual domains” (280). The researchers sought to create “an algorithmic account of how people may solve” comparison problems (288). Hummel and Holyoak’s paper only addresses logical problem-solving, rather than the more subjective forms of reasoning involved in interpreting literature. However, it does provide a blueprint for the schematic spatial analogies that might underlie such reasoning. Their solution is a computer program that can replicate the cognitive process of attaching visual details to abstract concepts—that is, a simplified model of the way “non-visual representations and processes communicate with the machinery of visuospatial processing for transitive reasoning” (281).

The researchers surmised that the mind creates a structural analogy by attaching “modifiable mapping connections” to two different domains—in this case, space and any other subject matter (287). The computer program they developed, LISA (*Learning and Inference with Schemas and Analogies*), accomplishes this task by attaching “large positive weights” to the mapping connections of “corresponding structure units,” and “strong negative weights” to units that do not correspond. The program can thus “map arbitrary objects to spatial locations based on their pair-wise relations” (288), without regard for superficial similarity or dissimilarity. Hummel and Holyoak stress the schematic nature of the spatial input in this computer program. “The internal array that MAM (*Mental Array Module*) uses to represent quantities, magnitudes, and locations is not any sort of literal ‘image’ of objects in specific locations,” but specifies only “the values or magnitudes that need to be compared. A literal image, by contrast, would

specify . . . all manner of irrelevant information” (302). LISA was successful at replicating human analogical thinking, thus suggesting that human spatial representations used in analogical reasoning are likewise “‘uncluttered’ by irrelevant details.” While this research focuses only on one narrow area of human reasoning, it suggests the process through which space might come to take on abstract meaning. The subject creates a mental representation of space that preserves only the qualities necessary for a certain reasoning task—for instance, a relevant set of traits or relationships. If fiction readers’ main goal when reading spatial description is to construct LISA-like analogies, this would explain why their recollection of what they read is so sparse. The abstract representation of values LISA enacts is far from either the rich visual image readers are assumed to create, or the dollhouse-like map cognitive researchers sometimes expect to find.

If readers use schematic spatial analogies to reason and make sense of everyday life, does the same style of thinking govern our understanding of novels? Franco Moretti’s *Atlas of the European Novel* shows how schematic representations underlie the ideologically overdetermined depictions of place in fictional texts. His chapter “The Novel, the Nation-State” discusses the borders between nations and regions, focusing on the ways novel texts characterize adjacent spaces as familiar or ‘other’—and demonstrating that texts and their readers are minutely sensitive to this distinction. Jane Austen’s novels depict a world in which “the central part of England” stands in for the nation as a whole (15), while the ‘Celtic Fringe’ and the industrial north appear dangerously foreign, connoting the Gothic (as in Catherine Morland’s belief that lurid crime cannot flourish “in the central part of England” [15]). Austen’s works also portray

a split between the insular world of country estates, where her narratives conclude, and the urban marriage market: “Two Englands, where different narrative and axiological functions are literally ‘attached’ to different spaces” (20). Different genres direct readers’ attention to different schematic oppositions. In the historical novel, the border between two countries or regions (like England and Scotland in *Waverly*) represents the contrast between modernity and an earlier stage of social development. Novels in this genre “take two opposite fields, and make them collide” (37). And Bildungsroman plots craft a dichotomy between the city and the provinces: “The great city is truly another world, if compared to the rest of the country—but the narrative will bind it once and for all to the provinces, constructing it as the natural goal of all young men of talent” (64). Despite the great detail novelists like Dickens and Balzac lavish on descriptions of both city and country, the ultimate function of such detail is not merely accuracy or *vraisemblance*, but to render legible this historically determined ideological opposition. More speculatively, Moretti suggests that meaning is mapped onto space because “in an unknown space, we need an immediate ‘semantic sketch’ of our surroundings . . . *and only metaphors know how to do it*” (47, italics in original). The ubiquity of the tropes he discusses suggests that readers are easily able to extract from descriptions the information that allows them to comprehend these “semantic sketches.” And research like Hummel and Holyoak’s suggests readers are cognitively predisposed to make sense of them.

If space is a value-free expanse of latitudes and longitudes (in which our location at one parallel or another is a matter of chance), or an arbitrary assemblage of shapes (in which any place can resemble a beetle or a pair of trousers), it is human systems of value that give place its “manifold interest.” Spatial descriptions thus take part in the same

ideological systems that give novels meaning. In “Cognitive Mapping and the Understanding of Literature,” Richard Bjornson suggests some of the ways that people establish these mapping connections. “Religion, ideology, and popular culture, for example, provide pre-structured modules that are integrated into the cognitive maps which all individuals construct in their attempts to make sense of the world around them” (54). He points out that schemata are not merely useful tools for thought, but “introduce into the cognitive map two attributes for which there is no precedent in the object world: categorization and the hierarchization of categories” (55). Schematic spatial analogies make space legible.

In nineteenth century realist novels, spatial description—no matter how seemingly eccentric—conveyed coded concepts and oppositions in a way competent readers could easily make sense of. By contrast, in the following sections I discuss two novels that puzzled many readers by using spatial description in ways that transgressed their expectations. Both *The Old Wives’ Tale* and *The Rainbow* depict many details of home and landscape, and convey a strong sense of region. But these texts reject the logic of the “semantic sketch” by failing to attach meanings to places as their realist predecessors did. Bennett’s novel introduces too many potential signifieds for each depicted space, making his text’s spatial analogies too unstable for readers to track. Lawrence’s novel, by focusing on the single idea of “union with the infinite,” introduced too *few* meanings, producing an impression of monotony and tedium. Although only Lawrence has entered the canon of classic modernism, both of these authors challenged readers by rejecting realist meaning-making, calling on readers to reflect metacognitively on their own processes of spatial reasoning.

Being and Being Situated in *The Old Wives' Tale*

Bennett's descriptive passages are at the heart of his contemporaries' conflicted reaction to his work. While many critics praised *The Old Wives' Tale* for its realistic evocation of the Potteries, others viewed his novel as anomalous—lacking the point of view or meaningful plot that a novel should provide, instead presenting readers with undigested pure “reality.” For instance, Gilbert Cannan in the *Manchester Guardian* argues that “though Mr. Bennett has extraordinary powers of observation, some wit, a gift of irony, and a certain sense of character, he has not the power to weld his details into a convincing whole. Each detail is true enough and roundly projected, but there is a lack of cohesion, of correlation” (209). William Maas writes that he “describes . . . rather than expresses” (313), and that he “does not interpret his facts.” An unsigned review in the *Times Literary Supplement* suggests that Bennett has imparted no point of view to his subject: “The book is leagues distant from the erotic; it is neither pessimistic, nor mystical, nor fantastic. It is often the happy task of fiction or poetry to isolate such facets of life” (210). In this book, all facets “weave themselves aptly and inconspicuously into these quiet, ordinary people's lives in much the same way as that concatenation of crime, disaster, and futility, a morning newspaper, add[s] to the domestic peace and seclusion of a solitary breakfast” (211). Like a newspaper, the novel reproduces a mass of heterogeneous material while failing to draw explicit connections or grasp any larger message. Similarly, a reviewer for the *Chicago Dial* calls *The Old Wives' Tale* “Just life, real and unadorned . . . life viewed with microscopic vision, described with absolute fidelity, distorted by no trace of caricature” (229).⁹⁵ This belief that Bennett's works reflect life without shedding light on it persists into the present day. James Hepburn, the

editor of the *Critical Heritage*, notes that Bennett has lacked interpreters due to “a certain transparent quality of his work that seemed to make analysis supererogatory” (425).

Virginia Woolf’s famous critique in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” also associates Bennett’s fondness for detailed description with his supposed inability to access deeper meanings. She writes that a properly conveyed character has “the power to make you think not merely of it itself, but of all sorts of things through its eyes—of religion, of love, of war, of peace, of family life, of balls in country towns, of sunsets, moonrises, the immortality of the soul” (449). In contrast, Bennett’s evocation of any entity is purely referential, giving only a view of “it itself.” She suggests it is his fascination with physical details—especially spatial ones—that make him miss what is truly significant: Confronted with the poignant old lady Woolf saw on a train, Bennett would look “even at the decoration and upholstery of the carriage; but never at her, never at life, never at human nature” (452).⁹⁶ Works with such superficial interests cannot attain artistic unity. “Sometimes I wonder if we are right to call them books at all. For they leave one with so strange a feeling of incompleteness and dissatisfaction. In order to complete them it seems necessary to do something—to join a society, or, more desperately, to write a cheque” (450). This remark seems aimed mostly at the thesis-driven political fictions of Wells and Galsworthy, but by including Bennett, she implies his works also lack the comprehensive element that would unite them into a “book.”

Published in 1908, *The Old Wives’ Tale* was the longest and among the most respected in Bennett’s prolific career. It was his second novel to take place in his native Potteries district, after 1903’s *Anna of the Five Towns*. The novel has its supposed genesis in its attempt to empathetically reconstruct the inner life of someone who appears

unattractive or ridiculous to the casual observer.⁹⁷ In his introduction for the 1911 edition of the book, he recounts being in a restaurant one night and observing a “fat, shapeless, ugly, and grotesque” woman patron, her eccentric behavior suggesting she had lived alone for years. Seeing the other diners laugh behind her back, Bennett reflected that “this woman was once young, slim, perhaps beautiful; certainly free from these ridiculous mannerisms. . . . Her case is a tragedy” (vi). *Wives* seeks to represent such a tragedy by detailing two women’s passage from youth to age. The novel is a family saga, charting the fortunes of the Baines family from about 1860 to 1905. As the story opens, Constance and Sophia are teenagers, living under the dominion of their mother, a formidable Victorian matron, and their father John Baines, an impotent figurehead who has been confined to bed since a stroke some twelve years ago. The family runs a respected draper’s shop and is at the top of the town’s social hierarchy. Bennett expands on the theme of Bursley as “England in little” by focusing on the oppressive effects of Victorian propriety in the two girls’ lives. The plot begins when Sophia, a beautiful and rebellious teenager, flouts convention: first by leaving home to become a teacher, then more gravely by eloping with a dashing commercial traveler who visits the shop.

The first half of the novel follows the fate of Constance Baines after Sophia’s disappearance. She marries the shop apprentice, Samuel Povey, and becomes the mistress of the family home. The placidity of the couple’s life is broken by the birth of their only son, Cyril, and then, fourteen years later, by the news that Samuel’s cousin Daniel Povey has killed his wife in a fit of rage. As in *Eugene Aram* and *Felix Holt*, a brutal crime by an apparently gentle citizen raises questions about the true nature of a community. After Daniel’s arrest, Samuel becomes obsessed with the crime, insisting his

cousin is innocent and doggedly campaigning for his release. Daniel is executed, and Samuel shortly dies of an illness brought on by stress. Constance is left to live out her last decades alone, mostly disregarded by her beloved son Cyril. A talented youth, he leaves for London on an art scholarship, but “achieve[s] no fame, no success” (583).

The more eventful second half of the novel concerns Sophia’s travels. Soon after eloping, she comes to regret marrying the foolish and unprincipled Gerald Scales. After a few years of rootless wandering through Europe, Gerald has run through his inheritance and abandons her. Despite her youthful rejection of Bursley respectability, Sophia’s provincial thrift and good sense serve her well; she uses a few hundred tucked-away francs to establish herself as a landlady, first of a boarding-house, then of a respected pension for English guests. By the 1890s, she is a solitary late-middle-aged woman, obsessively devoted to her business. Finally, a chance series of events brings Constance news of her sister, and the two correspond. Sophia decides to sell her pension and return to Bursley, where the two women spend old age together in the family home. Despite their wealth, they lead increasingly stagnant and irrelevant lives (as their parents had done decades before). The novel ends with the deaths of Sophia, then Constance. The latter’s fatal illness is brought on by walking through the snow to cast a vote against the federation of the Five Towns, a move which would efface Bursley’s identity. Shortly thereafter, we learn that the death of Bursley is inevitable: A cynical old family friend observes that “It’s a pity her didn’t live long enough to hear as Federation is going on after all!” (611). (This series of events reflects history; the six real-life Potteries towns were consolidated under the name of Stoke-on-Trent in 1910, and Bursley’s real-life counterpart, Burslem, thereafter declined as a commercial center.) Constance and Sophia

are victims not just of the biological life cycle, but the historical changes that render their views and identities obsolete.

In part because of this novel's vast scope and interest in such universal phenomena as the life cycle, most readers have followed Bennett's contemporaries in assuming his works lack cohesive meaning. One exception is Robert Squillace. In *Modernism, Modernity and Arnold Bennett*, Squillace convincingly argues for the significance of Bennett's details by mapping them on to a thematic interest in Victorian ideology, particularly its emphasis on repression and secrecy. In *Wives*, Bennett charts "the progress of English character from self-isolation to self-advertisement, from the denial of desire to its cultivation" (44). Bennett's characters live through shifts in meanings that had once seemed immutable parts of their identities—shifts that Bennett portrays as traumatic, yet inevitable. While his analysis shows that Bennett's details are far from meaningless, they relate to meaning in a fundamentally unstable way, designed to demonstrate how every character's reading of the world around her—including places and settings—is partial and incomplete.

Woolf, perhaps, was unable to imagine Bennett's array of details into a character because she expected them to work by the traditional English realist method—by directly manifesting some stable character trait, as in the case of the Victorian novelists she credited with creating more vivid beings than their Edwardian successors. She therefore missed another sort of coherence, another way of looking at Mrs. Brown in her corner. External details in Bennett's finest novels do not directly reveal the inner workings of a particular character; they create different perspectival contexts in which that character produces very different impressions. Character and context react upon each other to such an extent that one is indefinable save in terms of the other" (25).

Although Squillace focuses here on character, this analysis powerfully suggests why readers found Bennett's descriptive passages so odd. The traditional realist technique of

“stable” referents is abandoned in favor of a more unstable and epistemologically troubling approach.⁹⁸

The Baines’ house, presented as emblematic of life in Bursley—and by extension, the district, county and nation—for over fifty years, provides an example of this unstable use of spatial description. Although the house is depicted in minute detail, these details do not add up to a unified semantic sketch: The meanings ascribed to them change radically depending on the focalizer’s perspective. This semiotic instability renders all the more ironic the fact that for most of the Baineses, the house represents stability itself. The text establishes this in the first chapter. As the two girls prepare for bed, the narrator tells us that they have slept in this room all their lives, and so “its features seemed to them as natural and unalterable as the features of a cave to a cave-dweller” (32). Because the house is the only one they have ever known, they have failed to incorporate it into any schema of values, instead viewing it as an immovable background condition. Bennett’s simile of a cave suggests that to the girls, the house is like a natural structure in that it cannot be “read” according to codes of social class, taste and individual personality (in this case, because they lack the social experience to perform this kind of reading). The house can only convey meaning to these inhabitants as the epitome of the familiar and normal, in implicit contrast to the exotic lands they have read about. Thus we are told a few chapters later that “Paris meant absolutely nothing to [Sophia] but pure, impossible, unattainable romance” (119).

A different “semantic sketch” of the house’s features arises with Sophia’s nascent rebellion. As she comes to reject the notion of a future spent helping in the shop, the house comes to represent the forces that conspire to keep her dependent and submissive.

One early scene in the house's basement kitchen shows how this underground region represents the gap between adult authority and adolescent female powerlessness. In this scene Sophia will outrage her mother's propriety by announcing her desire to become a teacher, a proposal that Mrs. Baines greets with the disapproving rejoinder that "It wouldn't be quite suitable" (36). As Sophia enters the kitchen, we are told that the room's high windows "had been out of the girls' reach until long after they had begun to go to school" (36). The physical feature of window placement serves to suggest the memories of Sophia as child that remain uppermost in both her and her mother's memory, fixing her identity as that of her parent's daughter. (It also conveys the independent status that remains "out of reach" to her.) That in this space Sophia will always be a child is confirmed when Mrs. Baines responds to her request with the scornful remark "The fact is, we've spoilt you, and instead of getting better as you grow up, you're getting worse. Now let me hear no more of this, please" (42). The kitchen's underground location also accentuates the power imbalance between those who are free to plan their own lives—adult males like the man whose "feet twinkled past the window" (41) as the two argue—and those, like Sophia, who cannot. Sophia will ultimately respond to this lack of freedom by leaving the house, and the country, for good. But in later chapters, other meanings will be mapped on to the same space, creating a confusing clash of interpretive frameworks.

While this association of home with oppressive family power dynamics could easily be used by readers to form a schematic spatial analogy (in which height signifies authority, and so on), Bennett prevents such an interpretation from taking hold by showing the different meanings the space will take on for other characters. The meaning

of a space depends not only on the goals and perspective of the spectator, but on its relation to the other spaces with which she contrasts it. This is demonstrated in a dramatic chapter focalized by Samuel Povey, some twenty years after his marriage to Constance. Late one night he is awakened by his cousin Daniel Povey, who summons him to his house across the square. Samuel will learn that the apparently respectable business owner has murdered his wife in a fit of rage as she lay in a drunken stupor. The resulting scene of squalor and violence horrifies Samuel, prompting him to imagine the two homes as opposites in a schematic duality between moral filth and purity. The conceptual opposition between the two spaces is all the more striking because of their superficial similarity: Both men operate businesses out of their homes, and Daniel's "modern building" and "well-managed" bakery signify his high social standing. Daniel Povey's revelations are disturbing precisely because they suggest that a clean, respectable exterior does not reliably signify a virtuous life.

The revelation of increasingly shocking secrets is associated in the text—and in Samuel's mind—with entry into increasingly private areas of Daniel's home. As soon as the two men enter the building, Daniel bluntly states that "my wife drinks"; his remark "And if that was the worst!" suggests the even more taboo possibility that Mrs. Povey has committed adultery (222). He explains that he came home after a day at the corn market to find that his son, sick with fever, had injured himself while his wife lay "dead drunk" in the parlor below. These revelations impress Samuel with a sense that he is witnessing a "brutal rending of the cloak of decency" (222). Upon being asked what he did next, "Daniel strode impulsively across the shop—the counterflap was up—and opened a door at the back. Samuel followed. Never before had he penetrated so far into his cousin's

secrets” (223). Samuel must cross this spatial threshold before he can comprehend the narrative of violence that Daniel has to tell. Entering the private rooms reveals “a dingy, dirty, untidy passage, . . . the very antechamber of discomfort,” and a bedroom “in a shameful condition of neglect, and lighted only by a nearly expired candle.” By the standards of Bursley, this space reflects Mrs. Daniel’s poor housekeeping. “Was it possible that a house-mistress could so lose her self-respect? Samuel thought of his own abode, meticulously and impeccably ‘kept,’ and a hard bitterness against Mrs. Daniel surged up in his soul” (224). Viewing this space prepares Samuel to sympathize with the murderer, revealing the murder victim as a woman with no self-respect or domestic virtue.

In response to Samuel’s continued questioning, Daniel directs him to the parlor, “a room as dishevelled and filthy as the bedroom” (225), where he will see the woman’s body—also dishevelled and filthy—throttled to death in a fit of rage. Daniel confesses his crime, saying “I doubt I’ve killed her! I took and shook her. I got her by the neck. And before I knew where I was, I’d done it. She’ll never drink brandy again” (226). Notably, on viewing the body, Samuel thinks of Daniel’s wife in terms that conflate her careless housekeeping with poor personal hygiene: “A wife and mother! The lady of a house! The centre of order!....She was vile” (225). Seeing this body merely confirms what Samuel has already learned from seeing the family’s living space—this woman’s abdication of the housewifely responsibility to keep disorder at bay. Samuel’s disgust at uncleanliness vividly suggests sexual transgression as well: The woman’s emaciated form is “horribly offensive,” “vile,” and a “[foul] obscenity,” revealing her as “the dishonour of her sex, her situation, and her years” (225). Although Samuel is shocked at

what he sees, he has no difficulty fitting it into an interpretive grid: The cleanliness of a home reflects on a wife's moral purity, in every possible sense.

Samuel's conflation of spatial features and moral status is also figured by one of the chapter's most striking passages: his glimpsing bakery workers preparing the next day's bread. As the two men walk from the shop into the hallway, Samuel sees a back door leading outside. "At the extremity of the yard he discerned a building, vaguely lit, and naked figures strangely moving in it" (223). He is told that this is the bakehouse. "Never, during the brief remainder of his life, did Samuel eat a mouthful of common bread without recalling that midnight apparition. He had lived for half a century, and thoughtlessly eaten bread as though loaves grew ready-made on trees" (223). Although the bakehouse workers are unconnected to the murder, Samuel writes their activity into the night's emotional charge of secrets brutally revealed. The hidden and unknown quality of the nocturnal baking, as well as the men's suggestive state of nakedness, connects it in his mind with the hidden nocturnal scene in the house. Just as the bakery is physically attached to a home, the sinister nighttime labor required to produce an apparently "well-managed" shop (222) is linked to the hidden social labor that produces apparent respectability. (Daniel has kept the secret of his wife's drunkenness for thirty years by "marshall[ing] all his immense pride" [225].) Seeing Daniel Povey's house lays bare the "secrets" of economic and domestic life, revealing truths that are usually concealed by Victorian reticence, pride and shame.⁹⁹

Alarmed by the idea that an ordinary home could hide a shameful life, Samuel seeks to restore his peace of mind by mentally contrasting the two spaces, casting this impure home as the opposite of his own. "He thought of *his* wife and child, innocently asleep in

the cleanly pureness of *his* home” (226). Clearly anxious that “his” wife and child are no more authentically pure than Mrs. Daniel, he interprets meticulous housekeeping as proof that he is free from this threat. Squillace remarks on the “essential identity” between the two patriarchs (58), noting that “the forces that destroy Daniel’s household maintain a secret presence in the ‘cleanly pureness’ of Samuel’s own home” (60). For instance, in the previous chapter, his son Cyril has been discovered stealing from the till, leading the narrator to remark that “his heart, conceived to be still pure, had become a crawling, horrible mass of corruption” (211). This language suggests Samuel’s exaggerated fear of domestic vice, which he will defend against by viewing his home as a sanctuary of purity. The details of the murder scene thus gain their significance for Samuel by fitting into an opposition that contrasts industry and purity with abject filth, crime and sexual degradation. But while this schema is both powerful and easily understood, Bennett presents it only through Samuel Povey’s perspective, never letting it become part of a narratorial or authorial interpretation of the house’s meaning. (References to the house as a site of virtue occur only in sections focalized by Samuel.) Rather than correcting the characters’ contrasting perspectives with a more authoritative semantic sketch, Bennett denies readers any basis from which to choose between these incompatible frames of reference.

Even near the novel’s end, Bennett introduces new schematic spatial analogies to complicate our interpretation of the Baines home. A scene late in the novel presents the interior monologue of the middle-aged Sophia Scales, newly returned to Bursley after years of exile. She reads the spaces of house and square by fitting them into a contrast between provincial and metropolitan, modern and obsolete. Walking around the square,

she observes “the moral change, the sad declension from the ancient proud spirit of the Square” (502). The details she notes—untenanted shops, dirty windows, shabbiness—are demoralizing because they contradict her memory of the Square as an imposing and unique place. “Bursley, of course, was in the provinces; Bursley must, in the nature of things, be typically provincial. But in her mind it had always been differentiated from the common *province*; it had always had an air, a distinction, and especially Saint Luke’s Square! That illusion was now gone” (503). By contrast, she reflects that “Constance did not appear to realize the awful conditions of dirt, decay, and provinciality in which she was living. Even Constance’s house was extremely inconvenient, dark and no doubt unhealthy. Cellar-kitchen, no hall, abominable stairs, and as to hygiene, simply medieval. She could not understand why Constance remained in the house” (504). Earlier passages rarely mention these shortcomings, features which the narration apparently considers normal for their time. The description of the kitchen in the first chapter suggests not obsolescence, but a comfortable balance between tradition and innovation: Of the long kitchen window, the narrator tells us that “Half its panes were of the ‘knot’ kind, through which no object could be distinguished; the other half were of a later date, and stood for the march of civilization” (36). To an urbane viewer, this basement room now suggests that the “march of civilization” has stopped decades ago. While Constance clearly views the same details her sister does, she is not able to make the same intuitive connection between dirty windows and “provinciality.”

The instability of the conceptual frameworks governing detail interpretation is emphasized in Bennett’s portrayal of Sophia’s thoughts as she reflects on her changing perceptions. She has always judged the French harshly, mentally critiquing the

pretentiously decorated house on Rue Bréda she took over from a Parisian woman because “in Saint Luke’s Square ‘goodness’ meant honest workmanship, permanence, the absence of pretense” (371). As she thinks again of the Parisians, “now they flitted before her endowed with a wondrous charm; so polite in their lying . . . so neat and prim. And the French shops, so exquisitely arranged! Even a butcher’s shop in Paris was a pleasure to the eye, whereas the butcher’s shop in Wedgwood Street, . . . what a bloody shambles! She longed for Paris” (506). In two weeks, her interpretive framework for comparing the two countries has shifted from an apparently moral one based on honesty, reliability and careful workmanship, to an aesthetic one in which the French’s artfully arranged clothing and shop windows reveal their greater sophistication. The detail of the exquisitely arranged butcher’s display, previously unmentioned in the text, looms up with new importance in Sophia’s mind as an example of contrast between metropolis and “*la province*.” Sophia notes with surprise her own ability to read details dramatically differently from week to week—concluding that “either Paris or Bursley must be unreal,” a revelation that undermines the realist aesthetic of attaching stable meanings to detail. Bennett shows that the use of conceptual frameworks used to identify and interpret meaningful details can shift rapidly, even in the course of one person’s life. A reader can only make sense of this shifting series of semantic sketches by reading the novel as a self-reflexive commentary on the human practice of interpretation itself.

Throughout the novel, Bennett demystifies the intuitive link between a place and its ineffable “true” identity. Shortly after Samuel’s death, Constance attends an auction in which her house will be sold, her landlord having died. The narrator quotes a piece of

legalese on the flyer, announcing the sale of “all that extensive and commodious shop and messuage with the offices and appurtenances thereto belonging situate and being No. 3 St. Luke’s Square in the parish of Bursley in the County of Stafford” (266). The narrator comments that “happily in the five towns there were no metaphysicians; otherwise the firm might have been expected to explain, in the ‘further particulars and conditions’ which the posters promised, how even a messuage could ‘be’ the thing in which it was situate.” In the narrator’s reading, the poster questions whether the physical features of the space—its offices and appurtenances—constitute the essence of this home, or are merely located there. He portrays the Bursley residents as naive realists who do not question the relationship between identity and contingent physical realities. For them, a certain structure’s identity (in this case, as the home of the Baineses, and thus a stronghold of middle-class respectability) is inseparable from its physical position “situate” on St. Luke’s Square. Indeed, decades later the townspeople rally to defend precisely this conflation of “being” and being situate—we are informed that “Bursley was lukewarm on the topics of education, slums, water, electricity. But it meant to fight for that mysterious thing, its identity. Was the name of Bursley to be lost to the world? To ask the question was to give the answer” (601). The line is ironic, since the mere possibility that Bursley could be legislated out of existence *does* answer the question, showing the arbitrariness and instability of assigning an “identity” to a particular spatial configuration.

Bennett’s textual strategy destabilizes the interpretive habits of readers accustomed to realist use of descriptive detail. Rather than reading descriptions for clues to some system of values endorsed by the narrator, we must remain alert to characters’ own

shifting schemes of values, holding in our minds many competing signifieds for such oft-described textual signifiers as Number 3 St. Luke's Square. The difficulty of doing so—as well as the understated unconventionality of Bennett's narrative technique—accounts for why so many readers found his use of descriptive detail meaningless, failing to “express,” “interpret” or create a unified artistic statement.

“Oneness with the Infinite” in *The Rainbow*

While Bennett was criticized for the apparent insignificance of his descriptive passages, Lawrence bewildered many readers for the opposite reason. His descriptions seem overcharged with meaning, placing every object described into an all-encompassing schema: the symbolic opposition the novel sets up between an ideal state of transcendent unity, and the modern experience of separateness. In *The Rainbow*, a state of profound oneness—what the text will call “union with the infinite”—serves as a transcendent signified compared to which all contingent meanings are comparatively unimportant. *The Rainbow* thus differs dramatically from conventional realist novels, which introduce a multiplicity of connotative signifieds, relating to qualities of people's minds, personality, behavior, social identity, class and age, as well as the qualities of a milieu, throughout the text. Lawrence's details are comparably repetitive, pointing to either a mystical transcendence of experience, or its absence. Seemingly realistic details of landscape, homes and architecture have an epistemological force diametrically opposite to that of realism, contributing to the obsessive and mystical effect of Lawrence's text.

Although Lawrence is not primarily known for his descriptive realism, throughout his career he was engaged in creating detailed depictions of place. Early in his career, he was identified by critics as a realistic regionalist writer similar to Bennett in his detached,

“scientific” narratorial style. Of an early work, Harold Massingham wrote in the *Daily Chronicle* that “Mr. Arnold Bennett, as all the world knows, is the modern specialist in accurate and minute portraiture, . . . pursuing the mental and spiritual motions of his creatures with a scientific detachment. . . . And it is plain that Mr. Lawrence, though less of an artist, is in some measure indebted to Mr. Bennett’s method. Curiously enough, they employ a similar background, and are vivified by the same genius of locality. But where Mr. Bennett observes, Mr. Lawrence analyzes” (63). Lawrence’s early work (set in Nottinghamshire, some fifty miles to the east of Bennett’s Staffordshire) provided “vivid pictures of a country life that is new to us,” and marked him as “one of those rare writers who intends only to tell the truth as he sees it, and nothing but the truth” (Savage 43). And Virginia Woolf criticizes a later work, 1920’s *The Lost Girl*: “if you want a truthful description of a draper’s shop, evident knowledge of his stock . . . here you have it.” Yet meaning is lacking, and the reader is left “[reading] Mr. Lawrence as one reads Mr. Bennett—for the facts, and for the story” (142). J.M. Murray writes that the book’s fictional setting “is as real, and real in the same way, as Mr. Bennett’s *Five Towns*” (148). (Edward Garnett also compares *The Lost Girl* with Bennett’s *Five Towns* fiction.) John Macy points out in a review of *Women in Love* that “keeping shop, keeping school and other commonplace activities in street, kitchen, and coal mine” are not neglected; “These diurnal details he studies with a fidelity not surpassed by Mr. Bennett or any other of his contemporaries” (159).¹⁰⁰ These similarities to Bennett have gone unnoticed by contemporary critics. But in the novels bracketing his most famously avant-garde works about the Brangwens—and even in the midst of his modernist experimentation—Lawrence seems surprisingly invested in traditional detailed description.

The repeated comparisons of Lawrence to Bennett are ostensibly premised on the conventional quality of each author's "diurnal details." In both cases, though, reviewers' dwelling on their descriptions may reflect their sense of something peculiar about these passages: In both Lawrence and Bennett, descriptions stand out as somehow difficult or opaque, rather than transparently conveying meaning. Massingham's paradoxical insistence that the two authors' methods are the same, yet different (they share the same method, even though Bennett "observes" and Lawrence "analyzes") suggests both authors are similarly engaged in pushing the limits of how description can create meaning. In fact, the two authors' sensibilities are not as far apart as one might assume. When the publisher of *The Rainbow* was prosecuted for obscenity, Bennett was the only one of his fellow writers to defend the work in public, referring in passing to "Mr. Lawrence's beautiful novel, *The Rainbow*" in his December 15, 1915 *Daily News* column (Draper 18). The two men shared a literary agent, J.B. Pinker, to whom Lawrence had written in November 1915 that "I should like to know what Henry James and Bennett say of the book" (87). And Bennett wrote to Edward Garnett with an apparently sympathetic critique of the book. Although this letter is now lost, Lawrence's response hints at its contents; he complained to Garnett that Bennett was an "old imitator" who could not understand the book's unique construction, adding, "still, I think he is generous" (88). Bennett's subtly unconventional approach to plot and character, as well as description, may have made him feel affinities with his contemporary's more blatant experimentation.

The reviews of *The Rainbow* are almost a mirror image to those of *The Old Wives' Tale*. While Bennett's text was hailed as varied, interesting and lifelike, it lacked any meaning or theory. By contrast, Lawrence's novel seemed theory-driven to the point of

tedium. Robert Lynd wrote in the *Daily News* that it is “the book of a theory, not a book of either life or art” (92). Lawrence’s powers are wasted because he “has so little curiosity about life except in disproportionately-seen patches.” While Bennett has a perfect sense of life’s mixture of sadness and happiness—“It is life viewed with microscopic vision, described with absolute fidelity, distorted by no trace of caricature” (229)—Lawrence loses sight of life’s true proportion. The overblown significance Lawrence attaches to elements of his storyworld inspired reviewers to complain that “even the ennui with which one reads many of its passages is a very passion of boredom; it is like the horrid ennui caused by the fixed ideas in delirium,” with its “crazy iterations and numbing violence” (H.M. Swanwick, *Manchester Guardian*, 98). Lawrence’s ideas are “fixed,” attaching themselves to every referent instead of flexibly coming and going throughout the novel. The reader thus longs for a world “infinitely varied and bracingly sane.” Reviewers frequently claim that the book’s lack of variety bored them. J.C. Squire calls it “a dull and monotonous book. . . . So tedious that a perusal of it might send Casanova himself into a monastery” (106). James Douglas, too, compares it to a “dull monotonous tune” (93). John Galsworthy writes in a letter that “its perfervid futuristic style revolts me. Its reiterations bore me to death” (108). In an essay discussing the balance novelistic detail must strike between relevance and plausibility, Martin Price writes that “To live in a state of unrelieved and intense relevance is something like paranoia, a condition of lucid and overdeterminate design. Such a vision imposes its design at every point, obsessively and repetitiously” (31). For many readers, *The Rainbow* fit this diagnosis precisely, flattening the variety of real life with a compulsive design.

The role Lawrence's descriptions play in creating this monotonous effect has rarely been discussed. While Lawrence's "tendency to . . . repetition of certain words" (Carswell 101) is a key feature of his style, the unconventionality of Lawrentian description goes deeper—springing not merely from repeated words or phrases, but from its failure to prompt readers to assemble schematic spatial analogies as realist texts do. In an oft-quoted 1914 letter to Edward Garnett, Lawrence discusses his own lack of interest in description (as well as other standard realist tropes like "the old stable ego"). He writes that his new book will be "quite analytical—quite unlike *Sons and Lovers*, not a bit visualized," and that "I have no longer the joy in creating vivid scenes, that I had in *Sons and Lovers*. I don't care much more about accumulating objects in the powerful light of emotion, and making a scene of them" (85). Since the *The Rainbow* does include many descriptions with visual details, Lawrence is clearly making a subtler point about his use of "objects" and vivid visual details. He will not present scenes focalized through the ever-shifting emotions of characters, which give ever-changing meanings to spaces depicted, and ties them to a system of social values endorsed by the text. (As, for instance, *Sarrasine* makes objects powerfully significant by tying them to such social values as "Wealth," "Excess," "Internationality" and "Femininity.") Lawrence does not use his objects and backgrounds to create "scenes" because the possible meanings for any object or space remain relatively static throughout the text, rather than shifting to accommodate new meanings or plot elements.¹⁰¹ Despite the profusion of described entities in a Lawrence novel, they all point to a small number of referents.

If Lawrence's descriptions perplexed readers expecting a realist work of fiction, symbolism provides a much more relevant point of comparison for *The Rainbow*'s

descriptive detail. Symbolism, as practiced by such poets such as Coleridge and Yeats, is diametrically opposite to the “semantic sketch” that is so ubiquitous in realist fiction. While a semantic sketch attaches a different abstract meaning to different elements of a space, the symbol is an attempt to efface the variety and difference typical of human experience, and to unite all aspects of life, from the divine to the quotidian. Lawrence’s pursuit of such transcendent unity has often been noted; F.R. Leavis writes of his “intense apprehension of the unity of life” (113). And Frank Kermode explains that for Lawrence, if love and law could be “perfectly reconciled, they would produce what he called the Holy Ghost, the Comforter. Thus a novel might resemble a Lawrencian marriage, and the resemblance is not fortuitous, since they are both types of the living universe” (23). A man and woman’s “perfect union is a frictionless union of motion and rest, time and eternity” (38), a challenge to the “dissociation between flesh and spirit since the Renaissance” (39). And as Eugene Goodheart notes, Lawrence is uninterested in the psychological novel because “the modern psychological novel is the culminating expression of the separation of the self from the world” (24). In an in-depth study of Coleridge, J. Robert Barth provides a definition of symbolism that is illuminating for the way in which it sheds light on Lawrence’s seemingly anomalous use of metaphor. He writes that the symbol is an “inward unity” that expresses the profound identity of God and the world of seemingly separate physical details. And he quotes Coleridge as arguing “A poet’s *Heart* and Intellect should be combined, intimately combined and *unified*, with the great appearances in Nature—and not merely held in solution and loose mixture with them, in the shape of formal Similitudes” (32). As I have suggested, “formal similitudes” are at the heart of how traditional realist description creates meaning.

Symbolic meaning-making is antithetical to realism because of the substantive identity the text sets up between “appearances in nature” and their ultimate meaning. A symbol is not an analogical mapping between abstract qualities of two entities, but rather a claim that two entities share the same essence.

Traditional realism sustains the reader’s interest, and creates new meaning, by portraying the world in all its discrete particularity. In the symbolist mindset, creating art is an act of faith in the “consubstantiality, this oneness of all things” (37). This assumption threatens to strip objects of the individuality which would allow the author to use them in new and surprising analogies. Semantic sketches allow authors to create easily comprehensible oppositions between different values, qualities, or levels on a hierarchy (brothel and church, metropolitan Paris and provincial Bursley). By contrast, the symbol “reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite, or discordant qualities” (quoted in Barth 42). Like Lawrence’s flood or rainbow, symbols are not created to allow a new abstract mapping, but to reveal more fully what readers at some level already know: “On performance, [the symbol] discloses a more complete understanding of the model” (quoted in Barth 43). And while the use of and belief in symbol is an “act of faith” (38), the realist use of the significant detail does not require faith, since its analogical mappings make no claim to be permanent, or to represent some ultimate reality. It is this capacity for novel schematic analogies that allows readers of realist description to perceive a world “infinitely varied and bracingly sane.” By insisting on unity instead of formal similarity, Lawrence creates the experience of monotony, tedium and even insanity that some readers report.

Lawrence's use of formal realism in texts that reject realist epistemology results in a deeply paradoxical reading experience. Leo Bersani writes that in *Women in Love*, the many details of setting, clothing and so on are incongruous because "the fact which most interests Lawrence about human beings is the extent to which they are being carried along by either currents of life energy or currents of death energy" (164). His investment in this binary opposition means that he tries "to obliterate the very field on which the anecdotes of personality are possible" (164). And Bersani notes that Lawrence's reliance on simple schemes of values "can make a Lawrentian narrative seem both quite mad and quite monotonous. The variety of social encounters are constantly being dismissed by unrelentingly repetitious references to those currents of life and death energies which underlie both social history and the nuances of individual psychology" (160). While Lawrence does create complexity and variation in his narratives, he does so not by introducing a variety of social and cultural meanings, but by constructing minutely varied versions of the primary ideas behind his works, asking the reader to "make crucial but almost imperceptible distinctions" (176).¹⁰² Mark Wollaeger similarly writes of *Women in Love* as a text in which apparent difference ultimately gives way to a deeper sameness: The novel's "underplot" is a "space of de-differentiation or allotropic transformation in which the idiosyncrasies that define conscious individuality dissolve into the immediacies of primal desire and being" (601).¹⁰³ *The Rainbow*, originally part of the same novel as *Women in Love*, has a similarly "de-differentiated" system of meaning, in which characters succeed or fail at finding transcendent unity in a dissociated modern world. Each image does not provide a new decoding challenge, but is linked to the same

semantic sketch. Lawrence allows a conventional complexity in his depictions of space, even as he denies these spaces nuanced social meanings.

The Rainbow opens with a vision of timeless plenitude. “The Brangwens had lived for generations on the Marsh Farm, in the meadows where the Erewash twisted sluggishly through alder trees. Two miles away, a church-tower stood on a hill, the houses of the little country town climbing assiduously up to it. Whenever one of the Brangwens in the fields lifted his head from his work, he saw the church-tower at Ilkeston in the empty sky. So that as he turned again to the horizontal land, he was aware of something standing above him and beyond him in the distance” (9). The Brangwens’ lives exemplify the organic wholeness that will be destroyed with the coming of industrialism. “Living on rich land, on their own land, near to a growing town, they had forgotten what it was to be in straitened circumstances. . . . Always, at the Marsh, there was ample. . . . Heaven and earth was teeming around them, and how should this cease?” (9). The narration paints an image of timeless continuity, in which the “horizontal” world of work and everyday life is in harmony with the transcendent values represented by the church tower. Lawrence presents an expanse of space filled with appropriate forms of cultural and biological life—there is a continuity between the church on high, the houses in town, the farmer in his field, and such natural features as the Erewash. This passage suggests the timelessness of a world in which everything is determined by biological rhythms. The Brangwens “felt the rush of the sap in the spring, they knew the wave which cannot halt, but every year, throws forward the seed to begetting, and, falling back, leaves the young-born upon the earth. They knew the intercourse between heaven and earth. . . . Their life and interrelations were such; . . . they took the udder of the cows, the

cows yielded milk and pulse against the hands of the men, the pulse of the blood beat into the pulse of the hands of the men” (10). The narrator’s repetition of phrases like “the pulse of the blood” implies that human and animal (like heaven and earth) are not really separate. In Kermode’s words, the passage presents “a plenitude like that at the beginning of Job, at one with the oneness of the flesh and the world” (42).

Lawrence’s novel follows realist convention in starting with an expositional overview of the family’s home and circumstances, but its Biblical rhythms and repetitions make it stand out. The pages contain repeated invocations of “heaven and earth,” and multiple examples of biological reproduction (the begetting seed, plowing, young corn, cows’ udders). Like the descriptive passage overall, Lawrence’s use of a church-spire as a metaphor for transcendent values — “something standing above him and beyond him”—is conventional. But his use of this spatial metaphor is unusual because the focus is *not* on different values represented by different spaces: There is no description of any other town landmark representing contrasting values, like the opposition between church and brothel that Marie-Laure Ryan cites. Each feature the Brangwen men see reinforces the same experience of connection. The Brangwens are “dazed from looking into the source of generation, unable to turn around” and “faced inward to the teeming life of creation, which poured unresolved into their veins” (11). Lawrence makes his overdetermined schema clear by using multiple metaphors for the same inexpressible experience of wholeness—the church, the sun and the abstract “pulsing heat of creation” are all used to represent the blood-intimacy of pre-industrial life. Both the “growing town” and the prosperous Brangwen farm seem to share in the

plenty that signifies this union of “heaven and earth,” transcendent and mundane—a union which itself is figured as transcendent.

Within the novel’s first few pages, incongruous industrial elements are introduced into the landscape. “About 1840, a canal was constructed across the meadows of the Marsh Farm, connecting the newly opened collieries of the Erewash Valley. A high embankment travelled along the fields to carry the canal, which passed close to the homestead, and, reaching the road, went over in a heavy bridge. So the Marsh was shut off from Ilkeston, and enclosed in the small valley bed, which ended in a busy hill and the village spire of Cossethay” (11). A colliery and a railway soon follow. In this passage, progress takes a dramatically physical form, cutting off the farm from the community and interrupting the circuit between church and surrounding land. In Lawrence’s peculiar narrative logic, the women’s desire for modernity precedes the invasion of the canal and the railway, and these innovations do not immediately change their day-to-day life. The Marsh is left “cut off” from the town, “on the old, quiet side of the canal embankment,” and “on the safe side of civilization” (14). The canal is a harbinger of “civilization” that threatens to change the Brangwens’ agrarian way of life.

However, in these pages industrial innovations do not represent some opposing value so much as the absence of the established pre-modern unity of experience. Because we do not “see” mines, railway, colliery town or canal in any detail in these passages, they function in the text mostly as an interruption in the land, rather than suggesting an alternative way of life (as the depiction of industrial Milton-Northern does in *North and South*, for example). These features are only glimpsed at a distance: “Down the road to the right . . . was a colliery spinning away in the near distance . . . and beyond all, the dim

smoking hill of the town” (6). A later passage suggests how the coming of the train alters the Brangwens’ mentality, disrupting their age-old contentment. “This raw bank of earth shutting them off disconcerted them. As they worked in the fields, from beyond the now familiar embankment came the rhythmic run of the winding engines, startling at first, but afterwards a narcotic to the brain. Then the shrill whistle of the trains re-echoed through the heart, with fearsome pleasure, announcing the far-off come near and imminent” (14). Rather than experiencing time as a continuity given structure by the rhythms of biology (the annual life cycle “throws the young born upon the earth” each spring), the Brangwens become accustomed to repeated mechanical shocks. And the narcotic mental effect of the train engine seems to be a negative version of the “inert” quality of their minds after a day of agricultural labor, “as their blood flowed heavy with the accumulation from the living day” (10)—an artificial and mechanical copy of the stillness of mind they had experienced as farmers at one with the land.

Rather than moving on from spatial exposition to story, as a more conventional novel would, this narrative makes several false starts. Alfred Brangwen, the second son in the first generation of Brangwen offspring to be introduced to the reader, is the subject of a failed Bildungsroman plot similar to that of Cyril in *The Old Wives’ Tale*. As a student, he has no skill at anything but drawing, so he works hard and eventually becomes “a draughtsman in a lace-factory in Nottingham.” He is competent at his job, “but at drawing, his hand swung naturally in big, bold lines, rather lax, so that it was cruel for him to pedgill away at the lace designing, working from the tiny squares of his paper, counting and plotting and niggling. He did it stubbornly, with anguish, crushing the bowels within him. . . . And he came back into life set and rigid, a rare-spoken, almost

surly man” (15). He later marries up in social class, and becomes a serial philanderer. A third son, Frank, likewise fails to unite the timeless values of the marsh with the progress-minded impetus of modernity. He takes over the family’s butchery business, but “a growing callousness to it, and a sort of contempt made him neglectful of it” (16). He turns to drink. These narrative false starts serve to suggest that canal, railroad and colliery have destroyed the “blood-intimacy” once inherent in the land, while failing to produce a new way of being. The Brangwens do not succeed in the new industrial economy heralded by the coming of the canal. And they seek out repetitive “narcotic” pleasures that replicate the alienating effect of the railway noise, making time pass more quickly by imposing mechanical divisions on it, rather than the meaningful structure depicted in the earlier paragraphs.

Different spatial features do seem to sometimes represent different symbolic signifieds in this text. For instance, in the first chapter, the Lawrentian narrator associates views from different parts of the house with either the old primal unity, or the new life of the intellect. Thus we are told that the Brangwen woman’s “house faced out from the farm-buildings and field, looked out to the road and the village with church and Hall and the world beyond. She stood to see the far-off world of cities and governments and the active scope of man, the magic land to her” (3). For this unnamed Brangwen woman, modern spaces do not merely represent alienation, but new social goods. “Looking out, as she must, from the front of her house towards the activity of man in the world at large, whilst her husband looked out to the back at sky and harvest and beast and land, she strained her eyes to see what man had done at fighting outwards to knowledge” (11). Passages like these ambivalently suggest the positive value of modern individuality

and intellectualism. But the text will ultimately suggest that true individuality is a return to primal unity, a state that transcends the old unity by combining it with greater individuality, rather than bringing something entirely new into being. A later passage that makes this clear is one that shows Ursula, as a student, examining a cell through a microscope. As she ponders the meaning of the creature's existence, she concludes that the cell's purpose is "to be itself. . . . It was not limited mechanical energy. . . . It was a consummation, a being infinite. Self was a oneness with the infinite. To be oneself was a supreme gleaming triumph of infinity" (409). Lawrence thus expands on his vision of profound unity as transcendent signified, not by adding other signifieds, but by complicating the notion of what would constitute true unity. While the novel presents the early farm life as deeply natural and fulfilling, as Leavis notes, "it is not the drift of *The Rainbow* to exalt this order of things . . . as finally adequate, the supreme fulfillment of life; the theme is rather the transcending of it. . . . But the impulse to this development, as well as the vigour for it, comes from the life that is to be transcended" (121–2). Throughout the novel, the characters' various attempts to achieve "oneness with the infinite" do not introduce any new signifieds that are narratively important.

The Lawrentian text does not so much introduce new signifieds as repeatedly suggest new signifiers for the same one, often rejecting them as inadequate to convey "oneness." In one famous chapter, Anna and Will Brangwen visit Lincoln Cathedral, which emerges as a possible model for transcendent life, but is subjected to convincing critique by Anna. To Will Brangwen, the cathedral at first appears as a place where "the beginning and the end were one." (187–8). Anna's skeptical humanism rejects this interpretation, resolving that "the open sky was no blue vault, no dark dome hung with many twinkling lamps, but

a space where stars were wheeling in freedom, with freedom above them always higher. . . . The altar was barren . . .” (188). As a sort of man-made replacement for the genuine timeless unity represented in the first paragraphs of the novel, the cathedral is found wanting (at least, to the late Victorian rationalist). Lawrence’s charged description of the cathedral presents the beauties of traditional religion as a seductive but ultimately false solution to the problem of how to achieve “oneness with the infinite.” The cathedral complicates the dichotomy between transcendence and separation, while maintaining the central importance of these terms.

The Rainbow does seem to establish a symbolic opposition between two sets of values—the organic unity of nature, and the mechanistic separation of industrial life. But the text repeatedly and explicitly resists the urge to create new senses and symbols. Tellingly, the pit and industrial machinery do not so much represent an alternative value to that of “oneness with the infinite” as they stand for an absence or negation of meaning. As Kermode writes, the “formless, squalid mass” of the pit displays the “disintegrated lifelessness of soul” of those who believe in its reality (189). After visiting her uncle Tom, the manager of a Yorkshire colliery, Ursula feels disillusioned: “No more would she subscribe to the great colliery, to the great machine which has taken us all captives. In her soul, she was against it, she disowned even its power. It had only to be forsaken to be inane, meaningless, and she knew it was meaningless. But it needed a great, passionate effort of will on her part, seeing the colliery, still to maintain her knowledge that it was meaningless” (324). Repeatedly, modern institutions are shown through Ursula’s eyes to be null or fundamentally nonexistent. Women’s suffrage for her was “never a reality” (377), college is “barren” (404), and her lover, Anton Skrebensky, with

his enthusiasm for social good, “could not rise again from the dead. . . . So there came over Skrebensky a sort of nullity, which more and more terrified Ursula” (304-5). Ursula and the narrator seem to be in agreement about the “nullity” of these innovations.

The text resists the formation of connotative signifieds like those a realist novel might create, by insisting that such signifieds—education, women’s rights, the nation, industry—are abstract and thus nonexistent. In a realist text, industrial spaces might stand for alternative values to those of agrarian England (as they do in *North and South*, for instance, in which Margaret Helstone must learn to appreciate Milton-Northern’s values of hard work and social mobility). Lawrence dismisses opposing values as mere empty rhetoric. Ursula critiques Anton’s nationalism, telling him that “we aren’t the nation. . . . For all that, you aren’t the nation” (289). And the narrator tells us that “[Anton] thought that, because the community represents millions of people, therefore it must be millions of times more important than any individual, forgetting that the community is an abstraction from the many, and is not the many themselves” (305). As I have argued above, the creation of schematic spatial analogies depends on mapping specific features on to abstract qualities, such as purity and filth, metropolitan and provincial, exotic and familiar. By insisting that abstractions do not exist—that the only real signified is the sensuously embodied experience of “oneness with the infinite”—*The Rainbow* rejects realist meaning-making.

The Rainbow’s descriptions are not just obsessively repetitive at the level of language. Rather, through their intentionally monotonous symbol-making they contradict realist epistemology, insisting on a structure of signification that emphasizes the sameness rather than difference of the physical world. In rejecting the “infinitely varied”

meanings of the world of objects, and the “formal similitudes” of realist analogy, Lawrence challenges one of the most ubiquitous conventions of the novel. Lawrence’s symbolist descriptions (along with the novel’s other innovative textual features) attempt to convey a level of experience that is much deeper than that found in most novels, using language to express elements of being that are fundamentally beyond words. In doing so, they strike many readers as opaque and monotonous. Lawrence’s intentionally unvaried use of senses and symbols helps explain why so many readers found the novel unreadably dull. And the confusion experienced by Lawrence’s early readers serves to suggest the essential role that description plays in helping readers make sense of a text.

Conclusion

Detailed spatial description is neither a meaningless adjunct of narration nor a seamlessly integrated part of it. Rather, by prompting the reader to create semantic sketches linked to a text’s thematic meanings, it functions as a distinct and powerfully meaning-making textual genre. Description may be a particularly effective discourse style through which to introduce a text’s structuring ideas precisely because of its loose connection to plot. Freed from the expectation that they will narrate actions, the symbolic and semantic elements of a text Barthes designated as “reversible” are at liberty to serve other functions. Although descriptions do not advance plot, they are an effective place to introduce the major ideas that give a plot meaning and relevance. Along with the fact that space makes a cognitively convenient basis for the sorts of abstract thematic ideas that fiction conveys, this usefulness may be why so many novels open with descriptions of landscapes, towns or houses—a previously unexplained aspect of fiction that is often attributed to the need for “local color” or exposition.

Description's role in conveying socially coded information would also explain the paradoxical fact that they are often among the most praised and remembered sections of a novel—as with the introduction to *Felix Holt*, lauded by Henry James as “powerful and exquisite”—yet also the most likely to be skipped by less experienced readers. In *Why We Read Fiction*, Lisa Zunshine relates her experience of rereading Turgenev's novels and “looking in vain for all those endless ‘nature’ passages that bored me so desperately in my adolescence (I had finally learned to skip all of them). Turns out that those endless passages are brief, few and far between, and, more often than not, shot through with pathetic fallacy and personification” (26). Readers with less knowledge of a given historical period, social milieu or genre often lack the knowledge to convert the descriptions they read into insights about character, society, or a text's values.

Experienced readers of conventional realist fiction expect described space to be connected to analogical meanings. When constructing schematic spatial analogies fails as a reading strategy, readers will find descriptions frustrating and pointless unless they can find an alternate strategy for assigning meaning. In the case of Bennett's overly unstable text, possibly the most fruitful tactic is to seek second-order significance, reading the text for messages about the process of knowledge formation itself as it plays out in characters' lives. Robert Squillace productively does just this in his analysis of Bennett's novel. When the analogical meanings tied to place are too similar, as in *The Rainbow*, readers may lose interest: Each image does not provide a new decoding challenge, but is linked to the same semantic sketch. In reading this text, subjects must find interest and variety in discerning the minute differences between almost identical instantiations of a single idea. A reader who cannot grasp the differences between

closely related concepts, or is not interested in doing so, will find the text tedious. Both these reading strategies call for sophisticated metacognitive skills. Readers with more varied and extensive reading experience will more likely be able to become consciously aware of their typical interpretive strategies, and alter them if necessary. The difficulty readers have had with these texts suggests that realist description makes relatively straightforward use of people's capacity for spatial analogical reasoning. Authors in a variety of genres can take advantage of this expectation, creating innovative descriptions that challenge readers' meaning-making capacity in new ways.

If spatial descriptions do not prompt readers to construct elaborate mental maps of fictional settings, they nonetheless are an essential part of fictional texts. While empirical evidence shows that creating a mental map of a described space is a burdensome and time-consuming task, readers effortlessly map abstract ideas on to the spatial features in a text—even if they are rarely aware that they are doing it. Thus theorists such as David Herman are right to note that spatial description is an essential part of narrative texts, prompting complex interpretive moves from readers. But while Herman's theory predicts that readers will track and remember spatial information in detail, it is more likely that readers forget the individual details of homes, towns and landscapes to better track a limited array of connotative signifieds. The idea of schematic spatial analogies provides a flexible and nuanced tool for analyzing the literary effects and function of descriptive passage. As the above analyses suggest, a text's use of description can powerfully affect readers' experience of a text. While readers make minimal use of spatial cognitive maps, they make use of space to facilitate another kind of mapping: The layering of meaning onto detail. Far from being a site of "pure" reference, detailed spatial description shows

how successful reference is inseparable from the values, schemas and pre-existing beliefs we use to make sense of the world.

CONCLUSION

In a 1918 review of Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*, novelist and critic May Sinclair writes that "reality is thick and deep, too thick and deep, and at the same time too fluid to be cut with any convenient carving knife. The novelist who would be close to reality must confine himself to this knowledge at hand.... What really happens is a state of mind, the interest or the ecstasy with which we close with life" (352–3). Sinclair's claims reflect an aesthetic doctrine increasingly prevalent in the 1910s and 1920s. Rather than concerning itself with the condition of England (or the district, town, square or house), the novel should confine itself to the conditions within a character's mind. While the authors of 1840s social problem fiction were concerned with expanding the novel's grasp on the referential world, 1920s innovators like Joyce, Woolf and Richardson preferred to relinquish this grasp in favor of explorations of human consciousness and its endlessly flickering array of impressions. By rejecting the "convenient carving knives" of realist representation, these novelists seemingly abandoned the abstract social and political categories that could connect fictional lives to the referential world.

I have argued that reference is central to all fictional narrative. But modernist rhetoric often suggests otherwise, claiming that efforts to shed light on the world's problems are unsophisticated or inartistic—in Arthur Symons's words, attempts "to build in brick and mortar inside the covers of a book" (5). Symons denounces "the old bondage of rhetoric, the old bondage of exteriority" along with the pointless realist

practice of “catalogu[ing] the trees of the forest” (8). Theorists of the time particularly scorned fiction with a purpose or message: August Strindberg argues that trying to intervene in social problems would reduce the artwork to “a Bible in pictures for the benefit of the illiterate; with the dramatist as a lay preacher hawking contemporary ideas in a popular form.” These authors distrust both the raw fact (unfiltered by individual consciousness), and a view of life that is mediated by conventional names for social types, ways of life and emotional states. The numerous artistic manifestoes of the time suggest that contemporary artists had succeeded in banishing brick-and-mortar reference in favor of exquisitely detailed renderings of characters’ inner lives. Thus Richardson has succeeded in “throw[ing] off the philosophic cant of the nineteenth century” and coming “close to reality” by “[confining herself] to knowledge close at hand,” along with other novelists who have “plunged in” to the unfiltered workings of the mind (Sinclair 252). While modernist authors set their fictions in recognizable times and places like 1920s London, their aesthetic claims (as well as their lack of overt engagement with politics) suggests they have abandoned the attempt to grapple with the issues in a way that would make such reference meaningful.

But modernist fiction did not abandon real-world reference; rather, it rejected the connotative signifieds that were commonly used as convenient labels for social types, classes, relationships and other elements of the sociopolitical world, in favor of a new abstract signified: the modern psyche, envisioned as a uniquely contemporary phenomenon that transcended class and other sociological distinctions. One of the ways modernist literature tethers its fictions to the real world is precisely through its interest in psychology—by using contemporary human nature as one of its key referents. Woolf’s

claim that “in or around December 1910, human character changed” is only the most famous of many formulations suggesting that the contemporary mind was the artist’s proper subject. Although Walter Pater’s Conclusion to *The Renaissance* describes all human experience as inherently impressionistic and fleeting, he also identifies this type of perception as particularly modern: “To regard all things and principles of things as inconsistent modes of fashion has more and more become the tendency of modern thought” (186). Edwin Muir follows Nietzsche in describing the “fever of modern thought which burns in our veins” as an “honourable sickness” (354). In setting themselves the task of representing the fragmented modern mind, these novelists set out to capture what they consider the most important phenomenon of the real world around them.

Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* provides an example of the modern mind as referent in high modernist fiction. Woolf’s novel presents characters from various classes and social circumstances, but rejects the type of “sociological” referential character that was ubiquitous in Victorian realism. In *Mary Barton*, Elizabeth Gaskell deliberately uses language lifted from nonfiction discourse to define her characters’ types, referring to “the usual out-of-doors dress of that particular class of maidens,” a typical “specimen of a Manchester man,” and to the “characteristic[s] of the rural inhabitants” [2–3]. By contrast, Woolf defamiliarizes common topics of nonfiction discourse, emphasizing the gulf between her characters’ authentic inner lives and the sociological traits that other genres would use to define them. Septimus Smith is a shell-shocked World War I veteran, but the novel avoids using familiar terminology to inform us of this, instead letting us infer his background from such passages as Rezia’s musing that “it was

cowardly for a man to say he would kill himself, but Septimus had fought; he was brave; he was not Septimus now” (23). Woolf presents Septimus not as a “typical” victim of the war, but as a man whose damaged thoughts and perceptions are at once tragic, vividly individual and aesthetically challenging. As Septimus sits in Regent’s Park, “A sparrow perched on the railing opposite chirped...drawing its notes out, to sing freshly and piercingly in Greek words how there is not crime and, joined by another sparrow, they sang in voices prolonged and piercing in Greek words, from trees in the meadow of life beyond a river where the dead walk, how there is no death. There was his hand; there the dead. White things were assembling behind the railings opposite. But he dared not look. Evans was behind the railings!” (24–5). These hallucinations are a deeply personal response to Septimus’s experiences of loss and trauma; at the same time, the rhythms of his thoughts merge with Woolf’s prose, emphasizing the universality of the horror he has experienced.

Clarissa Dalloway, similarly, is revealed to the reader to be much more than “the typical successful man’s wife” for whom the superficial observer might mistake her (182). Her wide-ranging stream of consciousness touches on such unconventional topics as her ambivalent wish that she had married Peter Walsh and her powerful memories of a youthful love affair with Sally Seaton. Her musings on life, death and aging serve to bring her closer to Septimus, a character who differs vastly from her according to the “conventional carving knives” of gender, age, class and life experience. After hearing of Septimus’ suicide, she inwardly observes that “A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an

attempt to communicate; people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone” (184). The similarity among contemporary Londoners’ thought processes is underscored by the many moments in the text when characters reflect on modernity itself. Peter Walsh observes London after years in India: “As the young people went by with their despatch-boxes, awfully glad to be free.... He was astonished by the beauty...and more than suspect[ed] from the words of a girl, from a housemaid’s laughter—intangible things you couldn’t lay your hands on—that shift in the whole pyramidal accumulation which in his youth had seemed immovable” (162). For these characters, and for the narrator, the most meaningful historical change is embodied in individuals. Thus Woolf’s representation of these characters’ inner lives focuses not on the differences between sociological types, but on the power of the modern sensibility to unite people who would otherwise remain separate.

Modernist fiction blended reality and fiction in novel ways, creating depictions of modernity that readers found uniquely accurate and moving. The genres that have arisen in the following decades similarly present new blends of referential-world and storyworld-specific items. For instance, nonfiction novels like *In Cold Blood* present themselves as entirely referential, attempting to efface any suggestion of fiction. An application of conceptual blending theory to Capote’s novel could attempt to identify which elements of the texts are unique to the Capote storyworld (for instance, Capote’s opinions about his subjects, like his belief that detective Alvin Dewey Jr. was the “hero” of the story, inevitably color his portrayal of the characters [282]). Contemporary genres such as surrealism, magical realism, dystopian fiction, science fiction and “alternative

history” novels present similar problems. They reject the straightforward referentiality of conventional realism to keep readers guessing about which elements of a referential world will carry over into the storyworld. Further research into fiction and referential worlds could explore these and other genres in detail, identifying what type of ontological blend is characteristic of each genre.

Critics often associate attempted referentiality with one specific type of literary fiction, a style of realism they denounce as aesthetically reactionary or epistemologically naive. Reference, instead, is a central feature of all narrative genres: an ideologically neutral feature of literary language that can produce works that are good or bad, revolutionary or pedestrian. Any fictional text must contain referential world elements to tether its invention to the world the reader knows, and keep her interested and absorbed. Further research into ontological blending could help theorists more accurately articulate what is distinctive about specific works and genres, providing us with a vocabulary for what is familiar, as well as strange, about the worlds we find in fiction.

END NOTES

¹ The passage Forster refers to appears in Chapter XXXII, in which Nicholas first arrives in London: “Nor were there wanting objects in the crowd itself to give point and purpose to the shifting scene. The rags of the squalid ballad singer fluttered in the rich light that showed the goldsmith’s treasures; pale and pinched up faces hovered about the windows where was tempting food; hungry eyes wandered over the profusion guarded by one thin sheet of brittle glass—an iron wall to them; half-naked shivering figures stopped to gaze at Chinese shawls and golden stuffs of India. There was a christening party at the largest coffin maker’s and a funeral hatchment had stopped some improvements in the bravest mansion. Life and death went hand in hand; wealth and poverty stood side by side; repletion and starvation laid them down together. But it was London” (345). Forster’s paraphrase of Dickens veers at times into unacknowledged quotation. It is as if Forster finds Dickens’ referential effect so powerful, he can only indicate it by restaging Dickens’ rhetorical moves.

² As this line suggests, Sean Latham’s *The Art of Scandal*, a book which excavates the largely forgotten history of *romans à clef*, is one exception to this rule. Latham points out that early novels like *Robinson Crusoe* were founded on a textual pretense “that the signifier does have a referent, that it can come to rest in the very historical reality shared by the reader and author” (41). Latham shows that books which offered titillating portraits of real people were among the most popular in the modernist period, trading on public interest in aristocratic and exclusive artistic coteries. He also convincingly argues that libel law was one of the novel’s shaping forces—“the law of fiction” (78)—and that the *roman-à-clef*’s wily attempts to circumnavigate that law constitute one of modernism’s most daring assaults on realist conventions. Among other things, Latham’s work demonstrates that perceptions of referentiality can change readers’ comprehension of a text. For the reader, “to learn the key is to encounter a different text, one in which matters of form, character and symbol give way to questions about motive, veracity and revenge” (9). Latham’s work shows that attending to referential aspects of a storyworld can help bring light to often ignored facets of literary history.

³ A subset of theoretical works, by such theorists as Thomas Pavel, Lubomír Doložel, Marie-Laure Ryan and others, has rejected this proscription, seeking instead to advance what they call a “referential theory of fiction.” Although this terminology makes their theory sound similar to my own project, they use the word “reference” in a specialized sense. In the tradition of the philosophical concept of “possible worlds,” they argue that novels construct their own fictional worlds, to which they then refer. These works argue that novels engage in “fictional reference” to the goings-on in constructed cosmos; in doing so, they often elide questions about real-world reference. While I will often use insights from fictional world semantics, my focus is on reference in its more familiar sense, discourse that refers to entities believed to exist. I will generally use “reference” in this usual sense, and not to mean “fictional reference.”

⁴ Pavel emphasizes contemporary theorists’ distrust of claims for reference, summarizing the critical consensus that “Reality in fiction is just a textual convention, not so different from the compositional conventions of the rhyme pattern in sonnets, the five acts in tragedies, or the alternation between main and secondary plots in Renaissance drama and eighteenth-century epistolary novels. The literary trend that strove most consciously toward minute referential adequacy, realism, has repeatedly been described as a mere ensemble of discursive and textual conventions.... The realist convention is just as arbitrary and nonreferential as any other” (114). Pavel will go on to argue against this consensus.

⁵ Even when people can perceive something directly, such as their own town and the people in it, those perceptions are never unmediated; for example, a London resident’s experience of that city would be colored by having heard or read about its history. And subjects make sense of the world they see by integrating it with knowledge of other entities they haven’t seen—for example, a London resident who reads *Mary Barton* or *North and South* might learn about how her part of the world contrasts with Manchester.

⁶ Herman emphasizes that all reading instances require a deictic shift to the world of the text. “Interpreting nonfiction (retrospective) narratives entails relocating not to an alternative possible world but to a possible world that is an earlier—and perhaps competing—version of the world deemed actual” (15). Theorists like Hayden White have long noted the similarities between nonfiction texts and fiction—they must construct a version of the world that seems verisimilar, and build up a rich background of entities and states of affairs against which and through whose agencies the action takes place.

White notes in “The Historical Text” that “we make sense of the real world by imposing upon it the formal coherency that we customarily associate with the products of writers of fiction... [We] experience the ‘fictionalization’ of history as an ‘explanation’ for the same reason that we experience great fiction as an illumination of a world that we inhabit along with the author. In both we recognize the forms by which consciousness both constitutes and colonizes the world it seeks to inhabit comfortably” (61). They will fail, by losing their readers or being deemed un-cohesive, if their version of the referential world is less convincing than competing versions.

⁷ Amy Cook makes this point in “Staging Nothing: Hamlet and Cognitive Science”; she writes that “suspension of disbelief has become the predominate narrative of theater theory, yet it is untenable, given current cognitive linguistic theory and research in emotion” (88).

⁸ These political novels were not entirely a new development, but represent a cyclical resurgence of a recurring tendency. Political novels had been popular during the dramatic years of the 1790s, because, as Franco Moretti writes, “ideological exchanges are an easy way to capture Braudel’s ‘dramatic rush of the event’: to turn a book into *A tale of the times*, *A tale of the day*, *The philosophy of the day*, to quote some typical 1790s subtitles” (*Graphs, Maps, Trees* 24). He describes the Jacobin novel as a form that was short-lived because it was dry, rife with “ideological declarations” and long discussions. (The Jacobin novel died out after ten years, whereas Moretti argues that most genres last 25 or 30 years.) While the attempt to infuse the novel with “speculations on reform” was not new, the Condition of England genre differed from these in the rich description and formal realism it sought to achieve.

⁹ Other definitions do not highlight realism’s supposed commitment to accurate mimesis, but see it as a tool of skepticism and social inquiry. In *The Serious Pleasures of Suspense*, Carolyn Levine traces a narrative for nineteenth century realism, arguing that it began as an “epistemological method” rather than a “descriptive model” (10). In her account, the “suspense” in fictional stories was an epistemological parallel to the suspense of judgment prized in science at the time. Experimental science emphasized the ability to wait for outcomes rather than making assumptions based on appearances. The plots of suspenseful novels work somewhat like these experiments, forcing readers to question first impressions of characters and assumptions about what must or should happen. Following science, they insist on the world’s fundamental otherness, insisting that we attempt the impossible task of viewing it without imposing our beliefs on it.

Novel plots thus aimed to bring readers closer to reality by forcing them to set aside their assumptions and schemas: For them, “The real was that which did not belong to the mind—that which stood separate from patterns of thought and belief” (3). Far from being naïve, then, the realism of Victorian novels functioned as “a rigorous political and epistemological training, a way to foster energetic skepticism and uncertainty rather than closure and complacency” (2). Only later in the century did (for example) Proust, James and Wilde critique realism as if it were intended to be an exact fit with the real world (199).

¹⁰ Similarly, reception theory like that of Hans Robert Jauss has demonstrated that the horizon of expectation of readers encountering a text is integral to its meaning. Jauss writes that “the historical life of a literary work is unthinkable without the active participation of its addressees” (19). And he emphasizes that readers’ expectations both determine their reaction to a text, and are likely to be revised in the process of reading. A “process of the continuous establishing and altering of horizons also determines the relationship of the individual text to the succession of texts that forms the genre. The new text evokes for the reader . . . the horizon of expectations and rules familiar from earlier texts, which are then varied, corrected, altered, or even just reproduced” (23).

The ever-shifting horizon renders a texts' meaning perpetually in flux: The distance between a new text and pre-existing conventions, "at first experienced as a pleasing or alienating new perspective, can disappear for later readers, to the extent that original negativity of the work has become self-evident and has itself entered into the horizon of future aesthetic experience" (25).

In this study, I focus on each texts' original readers, who most closely share the author's background. I follow Jauss in assuming individual works reflect as well as challenge their readers' expectations. And I will attempt to reconstruct the horizon of expectations that rendered each text significant. Reference is not a neutral feature of texts, but a product of readerly assumptions about the real, and how it should be portrayed. Shifting horizons may explain, for example, how a text that once seemed realistic may come to appear stiff and conventional to later generations.

¹¹ Northrop Frye makes a more extreme version of this argument when he claims that "the fundamental act of criticism is a disinterested response to a work of literature in which all one's beliefs, engagements, commitments, prejudices, stampings of pity and terror, are ordered to be quiet" (*Well-Tempered Critic*, 140).

¹² Similarly, Seymour Chatman's *Story and Discourse* provides a methodical account of the different aspects of a fictional narrative, with chapters and subsections dedicated to sequence and causality, "Time and Plot," character, represented speech, and types of narrator, while largely ignoring setting and other referential issues.

¹³ Introduced by Boris Tomashevsky, the *fabula/sjužet* distinction has become one of the defining features of fictional narratives; Dorrit Cohn in *The Distinction of Fiction* writes that this binary "has functioned as the initiating and enabling move of all major narratological studies.... It has dictated the organization of all studies that overarch both levels" (111). It corresponds to that between, for example, Chatman's story and discourse, and Genette's *histoire* and *récit*; Cohn provides a useful chart of the terminology on page 111. The importance of this concept is emblematic of a discipline which views both levels of a text as fictional constructs, and brackets entirely the idea of reference.

¹⁴ Compare this to Hayden White's idea of "the content of the form." "A discourse is regarded as an apparatus for production of meaning rather than as only a vehicle for transmission of information about an extrinsic referent. Thus envisaged, the content of the discourse consists as much of its form as it does of whatever information might be extracted from a reading of it" (42).

^{xv} Warhol further argues that this tactic was associated with female writers, since women had few opportunities outside fiction to intervene in the issues of their day. She argues that "analysis of narrative discourse has not yet accounted for texts in which the narrative voice seeks to efface the boundary between the inscribed reader or narratee and the actual reader who holds the book and reads . . . certain realist novelists' narrators encourage the reader to identify with a narratee liberally endowed with characteristics and frequently addressed as 'you'" (x). These authors wrote the way they did because they saw themselves as engaged in referential and rhetorical discourse: They "thought of the novel as a vehicle for exerting influence on readers who would, in turn, work changes in the worlds of politics, society, and personal morality" (xi).

¹⁵ She goes on to write that "the engaging narrator explicitly draws on the actual reader's memory and emotion, through direct address to the narratee, to foster a commitment to improving the extradiegetic situation the fiction depicts" (41).

¹⁶ These theorists are concerned to counter a previous philosophical tradition which held that fictional texts could not have "reference" in any meaningful way. For example, Marie-Laure Ryan's *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence and Narrative Theory* critiques a theory that insists objects must be inherently either fictional or real: If so, "how can one explain the presence of historical individuals and real locales in a world of fiction? . . . These examples suggest that the attribute of fictionality does not apply to individual entities, but to entire semantic domains: the Napoleon of *War and Peace* is a fictional object

because he belongs to a world which on the whole is fictional. . . . The semantic domain of the text is recognized as fictional when it departs through at least one proposition from the actual world” (15).

Ryan’s work insightfully demonstrates that “reference” is not a property inherent to words and sentences themselves. But she oversimplifies by insisting fictions create fictional “semantic domains,” and that everything within those domains is fictional. She begins with the question of “ontologically mixed” fictions like *War and Peace*, but concludes that such texts are all fiction and not ontologically mixed at all.

Doložel’s *Heterocosmica* explores similar territory, seeking a reference based theory of fiction. He argues for his theory of fictional worlds on the grounds that “the actual world cannot be the domicile of fictional particulars” (3). Instead, “possible-worlds semantics . . . claims that Tolstoy’s fictional Napoleon or Dickens’s fictional London are not identical with the historical Napoleon or the geographical London” (16). Rather, these “prototypes” are linked across worlds by the more tenuous principle of “transworld identity” (18).

Doložel goes on to argue that fictional texts can make reference to the actual world only in “imaging digressions” (27), general arguments or truths about life like Tolstoy’s famous line “all happy families are alike.” Doložel’s claim here, that fiction can represent the real world when it refers to states of affairs in the abstract, but not to specific places, people, or entities, is counterintuitive.

¹⁷ He adds that “just as Spinoza proposed, conscious appraisal is needed for readers to disbelieve false (or fictional) information” (229). For a philosophical treatment of this issue, see Daniel T. Gilbert’s 1991 “How Mental Systems Believe.” Gilbert champions the idea, originally presented by Spinoza, that the mind must in some way accept an incoming piece of information in order to comprehend it, and contrasts it the Cartesian assumption that “one must comprehend an idea before one can assess it” (108). Gilbert presents experimental evidence and philosophical arguments that “unacceptance is a secondary psychological act in which the initial accepting that invariably accompanies comprehension is subsequently undone. Disbelief is by no means an impossibility in Spinoza’s scheme; rather it is merely a deliberate revision of belief” (108).

¹⁸ In this paper, “Consider the Source: The Evolution of Adaptations for Decoupling and Metarepresentation,” evolutionary psychologists John Cosmides and Jean Tooby address the question of how people mentally represent the sources for the information they take in. They argue that because humans evolved to adapt to a range of different habitats, the human mind developed a distinctive system for storing information that is unverified, or specific to a particular set of circumstances. Cosmides and Tooby’s theory accounts for what happens when we hear or read information whose truth is in doubt by positing a system of “tags.” The brain tags incoming information with information on in what circumstances it is helpful, while preventing it from affecting knowledge systems where it might not be relevant. The tags are “metarepresentations,” representing not only some idea about the real world, but the source of that idea. Examples of metarepresentational tags “include truth-value tags, source tags (self versus other; vision versus memory), time-and-place tags, reference-tags, creedal values,” and so on (54).

The ability to store and keep track of these tags is a specifically human cognitive endowment, and it means we do not have to simply accept or reject a piece of knowledge, but we can “store certain information or representations ‘under advisement,’” and “we can still carry out inferences on information that we know is incorrect. . . . but that the scope of these inferences will be relatively limited” (50). By contrast, information that the minds stores as universally true is free to circulate around the architecture of the mind’s conceptual systems. The existence of tags provides a way of thinking about how we store information; facts learned from a textual source, either fictional or nonfictional, would be stored in a “node” of content related to that source (but also to its referential content). Over time, the tag binding the fact to the associated source might fade.

Cosmides’ and Tooby’s remarks have obvious relevance for fiction, discussed at length in Lisa Zunshine’s innovative *Why We Read Fiction*. And the authors themselves point out fiction’s educational potential, writing that “‘false’ inputs contain many elements that are true or informative” (90). But they

gloss over the implications of this by adding that “true narratives about relevant people and situations—‘urgent news’—will displace stories” (90). But it is not difficult to imagine reviewers recommending *Mary Barton* or *Hard Times* as “urgent news.” A *Manchester Guardian* review of *Mary Barton* insisted that “there are popular works published in the form of novels that depict either important historical events of bygone years, or the passing realities of the present” (Greg 403). Charles Kingsley wrote that the nation should “placard its sheets on every wall” (429). For many readers, this fiction was the among the most vital news of the day.

¹⁹ For the purpose of my argument, I will adopt this distinction between “context details” and “context-free assertions.” For the sake of clarity, though, I will refer to these different classes of information as “text-specific” and “text-independent” details; this will help avoid confusion when creating distinctions between fictional texts and the broader contexts in which they are received.

²⁰ Because the sample texts typically used in scientific research tend to be short and simplistic, the categories and distinctions their research generates may be vulnerable to critique if applied to the more complex and emotionally involving texts that readers are likely to find most interesting. For example, what determines whether readers will judge a piece of information or idea to be text-independent? Gerrig suggests it must match some information the subject already accepts as true, creating an “association between the story concepts and the preexisting world-knowledge concepts” (224). While this claim seems plausible, its vagueness—it does not explain what that “association” might be, or what these “world-knowledge concepts” might be—suggests that it requires more nuanced analysis.

²¹ It is worth noting that while many cognitive studies conflate “fiction” with “narrative,” one such study (“Fact Versus Fiction Labeling,” Green *et al.*) explicitly studied differences between fiction and non-fiction in a non-narrative context. The researchers presented a group of undergraduates with speeches on a topic relevant to their own colleges. They told one group the speech was real, another that it was from a TV drama. They found that the speeches labeled as “fact” were no more convincing than fictional ones (267). In fact, their findings suggested that fictional utterances could be more persuasive for some readers, since their context promotes a more immersive and less analytic experience (270). The speech was convincing “even when the advocated position was contrary to their initial attitudes, the power of fiction framing does not appear to be limited to advocacies that are irrelevant, agreeable, or approached with full attention” (282). It is not uncommon for argumentative or speech-like passages often occur in real novels, especially in Condition of England novels like *Mary Barton* in which characters debate current issues.

²² Other works detailing psychological experiments include Marsh, Meade and Roediger’s “Learning Facts From Fiction,” Marsh and Fazio’s “Learning from Fictional Sources” and “Learning Errors from Fiction: Difficulties in Reducing Reliance on Fictional Stories,” Melanie C. Green’s “Research Challenges in Narrative Persuasion,” Green, Garst and Brock’s “Power of Fiction: Determinants and Boundaries,” David N. Rapp and Panayiota Kendou’s “Revising What Readers Know: Updating Text Representations During Narrative Comprehension,” Deorah A. Prentice, Richard Gerrig Daniel Bailis’s “What Readers Bring to the Processing of Fictional Texts,” Melanie Strange’s “How Fictional Tales Wag Real-World Beliefs,” and Schank and Berman’s “The Pervasive Role of Stories in Knowledge and Action.” None of these studies address texts as complex as literary works, so all of them leave many questions open about what may make a text more or less persuasive. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that none of them have presented evidence to counter Gerrig’s basic assertion that facts and scenarios presented in fiction can exert persuasive force.

²³ Abraham *et al.* did an fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) study that looked at the differences involved in having subjects imagine they were meeting a real, or a fictional, personage. Their results showed that the “real” scenarios triggered more information in the brain in regions associated with episodic memory retrieval (973). The researchers attributed this to the fact that “information concerning real entities is more personally significant or self-relevant,” and thus more likely to be remembered as vivid events, rather than abstract information. They conclude that “if the degree of coded self-relevance of a representation is one of the factors that affects what we take to be real and unreal, it may be necessary to approach the question of how we process fiction versus reality not simply in terms of a dichotomy (between

what is classified as universally real and unreal), but in terms of the degree of personal relevance associated with the characters in question” (974). This study left it open whether the two types of hypothetical situations affected the brain differently because one was referential, or because one was more personally relevant.

²⁴ I am thinking here of the richly detailed storyworlds of Victorian fiction, but a similar argument would apply to any fictional storyworlds. A reader cannot imagine a world in any degree of detail without bringing over much of what she already knows about physical space, social interaction, and so on. Gerrig makes this point, citing Marie-Laure Ryan’s principle of minimal departure: “We reconstruct the world of a fiction...as being the closest possible to the reality we know. This means that we will project upon the world of the statement everything we know about the real world, and that we will make only those adjustments which we cannot avoid” (qtd. 18). Even if a writer did not go to great lengths to evoke the real world, readers would need to import it.

²⁵ Cohn makes a similar argument to this in *The Distinction of Fiction*: “The potential of fiction to refer to the actual world inaccurately is most obvious when unreal localities are placed in real surroundings: when Proust’s narrator vacations at a Normandy resort called Balbec, when Emma Bovary takes a postal coach from Yonville to Rouen, when Mann’s Adrian Leverkühn moves from his school in the fictional Kaisersaschern to the real University of Halle. It is equally evident (i.e., readily revealed by consulting historical sources) that no man named Willie Stark was ever the governor of Louisiana, that the entire post Napoleonic government of the dukedom of Parma is one that Stendhal fabricated out of full cloth.... These imaginative manipulations of more or less well-known facts highlight the peculiar way external references do not remain truly external when they enter a fictional world” (15). Her text acknowledges that external reference is common, but states rather equivocally that it is not “truly external.” Significantly, though, this passage emphasizes how often real cities are likely to contain fictional people, and to be neighbored by imagined towns.

²⁶ Other well-known examples of unconventionally blended characters include E.L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime* and Max Apple’s short story “The Oranging of America.”

²⁷ Furthermore, referential worlds may be more or less richly detailed. For a reader of H.G Wells’s *Tono-Bungay*, the Victorian British world in which the narrator spends most of his time may be rich with detail and rife with personal memory, while the Africa he visits may be practically devoid of detail.

²⁸ The full story of the Ashton murder can be found in Thomas Middleton’s *Annals of Hyde and district: containing historical reminiscences of Denton, Haughton, Dukinfield, Mottram, Longdendale, Bredbury, Marple, and the neighbouring townships*, pp. 85-94.

²⁹ Gaskell’s letter is reprinted in *Mary Barton*, ed. Jennifer Foster, Broadview Press, 2000, pp. 491-2.

³⁰ Some critics, such as Gaskell’s biographer Jenny Uglow, simply assume the novel’s murder plot was “based on” the Ashton story (57); nevertheless, since no other reader noticed the parallel, it seems likely that Gaskell did not intend the incident to be a recognizable reference to any real murder.

³¹ All citations of *Mary Barton* reviews are from *Elizabeth Gaskell: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Angus Easson, unless noted otherwise.

³² Nevertheless, Gaskell did feel the need to defend her book against the accusation of sensationalism, writing in her Preface that she began work on the novel “above a year ago,” although her ideas “have received some confirmation from the events which have so recently occurred among a similar class on the Continent” (60). A letter to her publisher Edward Chapman makes her point more explicit: “The only thing I should like to make clear is that it is no catch-penny run up since the events on the Continent have directed public attention to the consideration of the state of affairs between the Employers, & their work-people” (quoted in Uglow 191). Even when dealing with matters of public import, there are

rules of propriety to be followed, and maintaining a degree of autonomy (by not basing her work too closely on outside events) seems to have been essential in Gaskell's mind to her work's respectability.

³³ Even the critical *British Quarterly Review* is compelled to admit that it is "already, in many quarters, regarded as giving, an average picture of Manchester life" (113).

³⁴ Henry F. Chorley in the *Athenaeum* wrote that "we have met with few pictures of life... so forcible and so fair"(62), while J.J. Taylor of the *Prospective Review* said that "the conception of the while is compact and forcible" (139). Other critics praised its "powerful interest" (Forster 68), and "surpassing energy and vitality" (*New Monthly Magazine* 406). The rare negative reviews also conceded that it had "simplicity and force" (*British Quarterly Review* 112) and "internal force and vitality" (*Manchester Guardian* 120).

³⁵ Many critics use almost identical words to describe their experience; the anonymous reviewer in *The Sun* writes that "we join the humble tea party at John Barton's hospitable board, we feel ourselves actually mingling in the scenes we read, we inhale the smoky atmosphere of the manufacturing city, we join in the jovial mirth of the factory worker in their days of plenty" (10), while the *Eclectic Review* writes that Gaskell "would have her reader... follow her through the dwellings of the rich and the poor, till they are impressed by what they see and hear" (96), and that "we feel that we are led by the hand of a clear, warm, and noble nature" (97).

³⁶ Those readers who were Manchester residents might still have found the material eye-opening: "The town was unique in Engel's experience in 'the systematic way in which the working classes have been barred from the main streets' and the 'tender susceptibilities of the eyes and nerves of the middle classes' were thereby protected" (Nord, *Walking the Victorian Streets* 147). Nord continues to summarize Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class*, writing that "A middle class man might live in Manchester for years...and travel daily to and from work in the center of town without ever seeing a slum or a slum dweller."

³⁷ Mary Barton was not actually the first novel to take on industrial subjects; earlier examples were Frances Trollope's *Michael Armstrong, the Factory Boy* (1839), Charlotte Tonna's *Helen Fleetwood* (1841), and Elizabeth Stone's *William Langshawe, the Cotton Lord* (1842). But these works are never mentioned in reviews of *Mary Barton*, which is instead most often compared to the works of Dickens. These reviews suggest a critical consensus that *Mary Barton*, along with Dickens' works, is the first novel of significant literary quality to take on these issues.

J.J. Taylor, in the *Prospective Review*, offers one of the most comprehensive accounts of *Mary Barton*'s newness. He offers a theory of the novel's prominence in the modern age: "The Novel is now, what the Drama was in the reigns of Elizabeth and James the First—the most popular organ of our national literature," and cites as a striking new feature "the choice of its subjects from the humbler classes of society" (137). He sees the rise in populations of factory towns as itself novel: "A phenomenon so vast and startling—so ominous of good or of ill to future generations—demands a literature" (138-9). Hence this social development is natural material for novelists.

³⁸ The *British Quarterly Review* objects that "the idea of calling the factory population of Manchester a *dumb* people, is rather diverting. They have always seemed to us by no means chary of expressing what they think and feel, and that too in no very timid or measured manner" (106). But what seemed new about it was its inclusion in a fictional work, with all the emotional involvement that implies.

³⁹ In contrast to their near-ubiquitous enthusiasm for its "material," these critics do express divergent views of the novel's plot. While they value originality of plot, for some reason, judgments of whether any plot element is fresh or stale vary greatly, perhaps depending on whether a particular critic happened to have encountered a similar one elsewhere. At one extreme, Gaskell's fellow novelist Maria Edgeworth writes "the story is ingenious and interesting; the heroine is in a new and good difficulty between her guilty father and her innocent noble lover. It is a situation fit for the highest Greek tragedy"

(90). Chorley writes that “the author is superior to melodramatic seductions, and has described misery, temptation, distress and shame as they really exit. Only twice has he (?) had recourse to the worn-out machinery of the novelist,—and then he has used it with a master’s hand” (63; Chorley does not indicate which two incidents he means). The *Prospective Review* writes that “the conception of the whole is compact and forcible. The incidents are... happily arranged, and flow... easily and naturally out of each other” (139). The *Sun* calls the murder “an awfully tragic incident... which at the same time invests [the narrative] with heart-thrilling interest and a most stern beauty,” and calls the trial scene “the grand scene, the masterpiece of the novel” (80).

By contrast, diarist Henry Crabbe Robinson complains that “the trial is wretchedly managed” (100), and J.E. Bradford in the *Christian Examiner* says the fire, the trial “and other thrilling scenes” are less interesting because they are “more like what we meet with in all novels, and which a clever imitator, void of all originality, might work up with tolerable effect.” (140). And the *Standard of Freedom* complains that “the plot...is composed of hacknied materials. The veriest novel-wrights have long dealt in them *ad nauseum*.” The conservative writer for the *British Quarterly Review* is alone in judging that the plot is “simple and natural,” up until the climactic scene between Barton and Carson, which is “forced and unnatural, and tricked out with a quantity of sentimental flourishes, totally inappropriate to the occasion” (110). Other reviewers quoted that scene approvingly in their reviews. These unpredictable disagreements make the critical consensus elsewhere that much more striking.

⁴⁰ The *Standard of Freedom* writer is alone in using “materials” to refer to the elements of the plot, the writer’s tools, rather than the material of life. Nevertheless, he draws a similar contrast: The plot “is composed of hacknied materials... we are bound to confess, however, that the pen of a master hand has dealt with these materials, and imparted to them a value which, in the hands of a less skillful writer, they would have forfeited altogether.”

⁴¹ Gaskell conceived of the book after her son Willie died in August 1845; she started writing it some months later. From the reader’s perspective, though, the actual time it took to write the novel is not as relevant as the fact that two years’ leeway is plausibly enough time to write and publish a novel.

⁴² My argument that fictional characters are based on real social types is closely related to the Marxist theories of Georg Lukács, who argues that writers should base their fictions on the most significant aspects of a particular historical development. Since it is usually impossible to narrate actual great historical events and figures in fiction, Lukács claims, novels must instead present typical instances of widespread trends: A true realism will focus on “the characteristic development of social elements” (70). He discusses Scott, Balzac and Stendhal as writers who were concerned with “conscientiously uncovering the true driving forces of the social process” and “the most typical and essential traits in every social phenomenon” (70).

My analysis is similar to Lukács’s in identifying realist characters as “typical” of certain social types. But my use of the idea of conceptual blending is intended to answer a question Lukács does not address: how readers make sense of and interpret such characters and situations. Unlike Lukács, I assume that all genres of literature, not just canonical realism, include referential world elements of some kind. And unlike Lukács’s prescriptive stance, my theoretical account is open-ended, predicting that any element of a referential world—not just “the essential aspects of some definite stage of development, evolutionary tendency or social group”—can be combined with fictional elements in a fictional text.

⁴³ One focus for their praise is Job Legh, the naturalist: Robinson writes “only one character relieves from the monotony. An entomological workman—This is true to history—there has been a race of naturalists among the workmen who are dying out” (100). Bradford agrees that Legh is “true to life; and the peculiar direction his favorite scientific pursuits presents by no means a rare instance in the manufacturing districts” (134).

⁴⁴ It is possible that one of the ways genres differ from each other is in the ways they encourage readers to construct conceptual blends. For instance, nineteenth century sensation novels like those of Wilkie Collins differ from industrial novels in that they typically insert less historically based, more

“archetypal” characters into situations involving distinctively modern life. In Collins’s *Basil: A Story of Modern Times*, a noble aristocrat meets and falls for a scheming sexual adventuress, thanks to the promiscuous social mingling that occurs on an omnibus. In Collins’s works, the most prominent referential world elements are typically taken from the realms of science, technology and medicine, rather than politics and the economy. And the most prominent features of the *Basil* storyworld are relatively transhistorical human types thrust into abnormal, unnatural modern circumstances. *Roman à clef* novels create characters by combining real biographical individuals (rather than sociological types), and furnishing them with dialogue and actions imagined as “typical” of that person. Some genres use blends in particularly attention-getting ways. Identity-switch films like *Big* and *Freaky Friday* present us with the spectacle of minds in incongruous bodies. The relation of conceptual blends to genre is an interesting subject for future research.

⁴⁵ The spelling of Clarke’s name varies in eighteenth century sources; I use the one that appears in Bulwer’s novel.

⁴⁶ In fact, Aram’s one published scholarly work, “Essay Towards a Lexicon on an Entirely New Plan,” was published only as an appendix to biographical pamphlets that focused on his criminal history (Tyson 19). See Eric R. Watson’s *Eugene Aram: His Life and Trial* for the full text of this essay.

⁴⁷ In fact, the evidence for Aram’s guilt is not overwhelming; as Tyson and other have noted, prosecutors decided to focus on convicting Aram not because he seemed the most guilty, but because the evidence he himself supplied against Houseman seemed less likely to result in a guilty verdict.

⁴⁸ Tyson summarizes the parallels between Aram and Caleb William on pages 37-45; most significantly, “in the radical philosophy of the late eighteenth century, the circumstances of Eugene Aram’s life appeared to exemplify the evils of this unequal social order. The deprivations of his social station, in conflict with his intelligence and his scholarly inclinations, are noted in nearly every account of his life” (41)..

⁴⁹ It follows up his previous *Paul Clifford*, which had explicitly called for reform of the criminal justice system.

⁵⁰ Bulwer’s interest in Aram may have predated Hood’s poem; as Campbell notes, “in 1829 Bulwer learned that Aram had been engaged occasionally by his grandfather to tutor his daughters at Heydon Hall, Judge Bulwer’s home. This discovery led Bulwer to collect local information about Aram. During his research, he met Admiral Burney, who once studied at King’s Lynn, where Aram served as an usher. From Burner, Bulwer received details about Aram’s connection with the Lester family, material he used almost verbatim in the novel” (44-45).

⁵¹ Beyond these differences, there are many similarities between the two novels. Most obviously, each centers around a “sympathetic” murderer, presenting the crime as born out of poverty and desperation rather than innate evil. Both present murder as an extreme act, destructive of the social fabric and far outside the normal social order. And both (with varying degrees of success) employ representations of individual psychology to to knit the “extreme” act back into the fabric of social life and historical context. In each case, the murdered man is himself unsympathetic, willing to exploit society’s weaker members, represented in each text by a virginal woman. Clarke rapes a woman who “supported her family by her dexterity in making lace” [502]; Carson is willing to ruin Mary Barton, who supports her family as a dressmaker’s apprentice.

In both cases the crime is presented as futile. (Aram never unearths his share of the stolen money; John Barton feels no satisfaction at his “revenge” on the masters). Instead, the aftermath of both murders is one of regret, withdrawal from society, dissolution of a family, and the murderer’s eventual death. Both novels supplement the murder plot with a romance plot focusing on a young woman’s choice between two suitors, a high-status outsider and a childhood companion. Furthermore, the discourse surrounding each novel presents that subplot as a sort of add-on to or distraction from the book’s darker subject matter. Bulwer added the Madeline character and the romance, presumably to make his book more commercially

viable; Gaskell insisted that John Barton was the true hero of her story, and that she had changed the work's title to *Mary Barton* only at her publisher's insistence (Gaskell, *Letters* 42:74). Both feature detailed climactic trial scenes.

There is a similarity in the overall contours of each narrative, both of which trace the downfall of happy families. These similarities suggest that the two authors had many of the same literary conventions and plot materials to work with; although seventeen years separate the publication of their novels, they were entering a literary marketplace with fairly similar expectations about what constituted a balanced, interesting work of fiction.

⁵² *Eugene Aram*'s plot looks forward to Conrad's *Lord Jim*, in which the course of an otherwise admirable young man's life is unpredictably altered by a single moment of criminal weakness. This suggests Bulwer's proto-modernist interest in unknowable character, and in plots centered around anomalous psychological dilemmas.

⁵³ To add to the confusion, Bulwer had visited Lynn, and his description of its topography may be based on real observation, although readers would not have known that.

⁵⁴ Allan Conrad Christensen makes this point, remarking that "the fictional confession, based on the original factual account, constitutes an attempt—the only one, really, in the novel—to understand the criminal mind" (63). He goes on to argue that this "psychological" approach serves to rhetorically justify his choice of transgressive subject matter. "Bulwer has gone too far against the law of genre, and he must make amends for his own authorial transgression. Aram's confession is thereby made to justify not only his criminal actions, but also the author's penning of a criminal narrative: Bulwer's attempted psychological analysis of the thoughts and events that might drive a man to murder both questions the cultural construction of morality and serves to excuse his own choice of subject matter" (64).

⁵⁵ An especially unconvincing touch is Aram's belief that he needs funding to make a particular, but unspecified, contribution to science. As he tries to lose himself in reading, "suddenly... a gigantic discovery in science gleamed across me. I saw the means of effecting a vast benefit to truth and to man,—of adding a new conquest to that only empire which no fate can overthrow, and no time wear away. And in this discovery I was stopped by the total inadequacy of my means. The books and implements I required were not within my reach,—a handful of gold would buy them: I had not wherewithal to buy bread for the morrow's meal. In my solitude and misery this discovery haunted me like a visible form" (496).

The narrator purports to be critical of Bulwer's amoral decision, but expresses that choice in a Romantic rhetoric that lends it apparent textual authority: Aram is "trembling and spell-bound in the ceremonies of human laws, without hope, without reward" (498). This rhetoric of an outworn, meaningless moral code recalls earlier works (like *Caleb Williams*) that defend the right of starving people to preserve their lives by any means necessary. At the same time, because this language of the "ceremonies of human laws" is so closely associated with Romantic rhetoric, it seems outdated and bound by convention. Bulwer's critics picked up on this, comparing the novel to such works as *The Sorrows of Young Werther*.

⁵⁶ Also, readers have come to expect psychological novels to plumb the more irrational, emotional and extreme aspects of psychology. Bulwer presents Aram's decision to murder as a largely rational one: "Was it not an ordination that called upon men to take fortune in their own hands, when Fate lavished her rewards on this low and creeping thing [Clarke]? Was it worth while to be virtuous, and look on, while the bad seized upon the feast of life?" (497). This methodical thinking is not what we might expect from someone who is "friendless" and near starvation. Although the novel suggests that Aram was tempted into bad reasoning ("I thought I heard the devils laugh out at the fool who boasted reason" [505]), it always expresses these sentiments by means of abstract logical arguments, rather than suggesting that Aram was overcome by emotion. In *Mary Barton*, the lurid horror of a killing is balanced, as well as explained, by the more banal horror of starvation and poverty.

⁵⁷ One counterexample is the *Spectator* review, which wrote “His solitary sufferings are the agonies of a demigod: It is Prometheus and the Vulture; and far, very far above either the remorse or the apprehension of poor Eugene Aram of Knaresborough. In this we see nothing to blame; we are merely informing our reader that Mr. Bulwer’s tale is far more like Manfred than *The Newgate Calendar*,—a compliment certainly; though not of the kind that will contribute, in these days, to the sale of the book” (17). This seems to have been the only critic who assumed (wrongly) that the book’s style would hurt its sales.

⁵⁸ *Aram* appears in Chapter VII of *Felix Holt*, in a scene in which the Debarrys talk politics in Treby Manor after learning Harold Transome will run as a Radical. We are told that the two young ladies of the family “were feeling rather dull than otherwise, having finished Mr Bulwer’s ‘Eugene Aram,’ and being thrown back on the last great prose work of Mr Southey” (103). The text uses Bulwer’s novel as a signifier of the time period while ambiguously failing to specify whether it is the cause of their boredom, or a respite from it. In identifying *Aram* as the quintessential early 30’s text, Eliot ambiguously positions it as potentially either a typically irrelevant piece of entertainment for out-of-touch aristocrats, or a timely reflection of the time’s class conflict. The allusion may suggest that Eliot’s text, another “gentle murderer” tale, is a more sophisticated attempt to explore the effects of poverty and the psychology of violence. The potentially ambivalent reference reflects the hesitation between social realism and romantic idealism found in *Aram* itself.

⁵⁹ All reviews of *Felix Holt* are from *George Eliot: The Critical Heritage*, ed. David Carroll, unless stated otherwise.

⁶⁰ It is also worth noting that judgments like the anonymous *Nation* reviewer’s do not depend just on their largely unconscious processes of building situation models and recalling relevant schemas. More conscious factors about what textual features a reader chooses to value, or considers literary, will also strongly influence the final opinion she expresses about different parts of a story. In this case, a large body of Western literary criticism praises character consistency as a marker of psychological realism and artistic unity. This difference might correspond to the one between online and offline processing of a text, discussed in Elfenbein’s “Cognitive Science and the History of Reading.” Nevertheless, this critic’s remembering Phineas’ timidity as a problematic part of the text indicates it likely bothered him while he was reading it.

⁶¹ They emphasize that this cognitive ability is unique to humans. Most species are “naïve realists” (60), only storing information that is presumed to be universally true. “Because the true-is-unmarked system is the natural way for an evolved computational system to originate, and because there are many reasons to maintain this system, we might expect that this is also the reason why humans—and undoubtedly other organisms—are naïve realists” (61).

⁶² As with *Mary Barton*, critics are emphatic that they can sense when some elements of the work are drawn from life, “an illustration of human experience” (Venables 279) and “truth to nature” (*North American Review* 557).

⁶³ In this chapter, I use these two genre terms relatively interchangeably, not because I think they are identical but to denote the difficulty of drawing hard-and-fast distinctions between them. The industrial novel, social problem novel and Condition of England novel are terms that have overlapping although not identical boundaries.

⁶⁴ Karl summarizes the plot similarities between the various works, writing that “an innocent man...is accused of a serious crime, murder, theft, or the like, and the novel is diverted from the strong social issues to the proof of ‘innocence’ of the person accused...when the innocent person is exonerated, then the author has redeemed his or her original premise; and all the while the political issues go begging” (390). The plot device of a murder committed by an upper-class or otherwise peaceable person also occurs in later political/social novels including *Howards End* (Leonard Bast dies of a heart attack brought on by Charles Bast threatening him with a sword), *The Secret Agent* (Adolph Verlock accidentally kills his

brother-in-law in the course of a staged terror attack, and is in turn killed by his wife when she finds out), and *Tono-Bungay* (George Ponderevo murders an African). These correspondences make this a strangely durable genre motif.

⁶⁵ The Introduction notes that “the inhabitants were probably so free from superstition that they were in much less awe of the parson than of the overseer. Yet they were saved from the excesses of Protestantism by not knowing how to read” (6). Chapter III says that the town’s Dissenting population had been “of a quiescent, well-to-do kind...occupied by a sparse congregation of Independents, who were as little moved by doctrinal zeal as their church-going neighbors, and did not feel themselves deficient in religious liberty, inasmuch as they were not hindered from occasionally slumbering in their pews, and were not obliged to go regularly to the weekly prayer-meeting” (43).

⁶⁶ And they suggest the way the same stimulus can lead to opposing reactions—what once was new, rapid and technologically advanced is now a nostalgic reminder of the good old days. Jay Clayton writes of Hazlitt’s essay that “the same sound vibrates to the brain with strangely opposed effects....The Letter-bell becomes a mark of this inversion in the subject” (57). These memories of the postal service are not just isolated experiences, but connected with the themes (prominent in both Hazlitt and Eliot) of youthful political idealism. Clayton explains that the postal system’s then-new technologies were viewed as “harbingers of a modernity that Hazlitt, along with many of his peers, once hoped would foster revolution and democracy” (56). Hazlitt’s nostalgia for revolutionary zeal is thus similar to Eliot’s depiction of the 1830’s as a time of somewhat naive faith in democratic reform.

⁶⁷ The *Register* complains that “the electors were despotic in the exercise of an unaccustomed privilege in the vigour and wantonness of its first existence” (300-1), and doubts that “sober reason would be able generally to defeat the influence of mere narrow views, vulgar love of power, and mere short-sighted self-interest” (301). Here, it is liberal reformers (and those who benefit from their actions), and not the rich and powerful, who are tyrannical and narrowly self-interested.

⁶⁸ In *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams situates *Felix Holt* in a tradition of backward-looking nostalgia that extends from the 20th all the way to the 16th century. Like many later critics, he asked, “wasn’t George Eliot, in *Mill on the Floss* (1860) and in *Felix Holt* (1866), looking back, similarly, to the old rural England of the 1820s and early 1830s?” (9). Williams observes that such critics often insist “the decisive changes...had happened during their lifetimes,” and theorizes that the ever shifting location of authentic country life is a result of differences in historical perspective. “Old England, settlement, the rural virtues—all three, in fact, mean different things at different times, and quite different values are being brought to question” (12).

⁶⁹ Eliot cites a detail that seems to be lifted from *Eugene Aram* when she writes of the town’s “windows showing pots full of blooming balsams or geranium, and little gardens in front all double daisies or dark wallflower” (7) as a sign of a village’s virtue and industry. This detail is similar to a passage on the first page of *Aram* that says “wherever you see a flower in a cottage garden...you may feel sure that the cottagers are better and wiser than their neighbors.” The seemingly innocuous detail was controversial enough that it drove Maginn to a moment of textual scholarship. After quoting the offending passage, he contrasted it with another, from a biography of Aram, stating that he and Houseman cultivated attractive gardens by stealing plants from their neighbors. Maginn’s critique is intended to show up Bulwer’s naïve and immoral belief in beautiful appearances as a marker of interior goodness. This debate is suggestive of a long-running debate in English realism as to whether one can “read” character through internal signs, a question that is at the forefront of *Felix Holt*.

⁷⁰ Similarly, Henry James writes of characters with “eccentricities, and humors, and quaintnesses...which appears to belong of right to old English villages.”

⁷¹ The argument that metaphorical reasoning is best thought of as a mapping between two concepts that alters the subject’s understanding of each is made by the philosopher Max Black as early as 1962; Black argues that “this use of a ‘subsidiary subject’ to foster insight into a ‘principle subject’ is a distinctive

intellectual operation (though one familiar enough through our experiences with learning anything whatever), demanding simultaneous awareness of both subjects but not reducible to any comparison between the two” (46). Black emphasizes that metaphors result from and prompt mental analogies, and thus are not just literary paraphrases. The similarity between Black’s view and that of contemporary cognitive science is noted by Holyoak and Thagard in “Analogical Mapping and Constraint Satisfaction” (849).

⁷² For example, it is commonly noted that readers expect and tolerate greater conventionality in works of genre fiction like romance, science fiction and mystery novels, while literary or realistic fiction is expected to be comparatively innovative. And the modernist period introduced a greater degree of formal innovation to the psychological novel, producing works like *Ulysses* that reflected the fragmentary experience of the time in their textual difficulty. A person’s preference for certain genres may also reflect her desire for more or less conventionality; some readers find romance novels too predictable, while for many of his contemporaries, James Joyce’s fiction was too willfully obscure to be enjoyable.

⁷³ The notion that proper use of conventions creates a believable text is aligned with principles of literary criticism as old as Aristotle: “The canon of verisimilitude, as expounded by Aristotelians, attained its highest level of generality by restricting the subject-matter of literature, fixing the characters and standardizing the themes that were considered worthy of literary treatment” (28). The idea that verisimilitude is a matter of obeying certain mutually understood conventions for what subjects are appropriate and how they should be portrayed has long been applied to poetry, drama and other genres. My approach reveals that it applies to realist novels, seemingly the most “formless” and artless works, equally well.

⁷⁴ A similar argument about innovation’s basis in convention appears in Martin Price’s *Forms of Life*. Price writes that new forms of realism are not the result of observing reality, but of creating increasingly detailed and specific forms for convention. “The elaborate forms of realism may be generated less by the desire to represent the actual than by the pressure of conventions reaching outward for more complex differentiation” (26-7). He cites George Eliot as engaging in “an extension of the conventions of romance into a realm where plots are bent to absorb the actualities of historic life, where the traditional characters are bleached and thickened until they become our colorless and undistinguished neighbors” (27). Rather than being abandoned, conventions acquire detail and local color. As a result, “the generalized form is differentiated so sharply as to direct our feeling where it does not normally flow” (as when readers take an interest in Eliot’s seemingly dull and unromantic characters).

⁷⁵ With its multi-genre plot about an idealistic young Parliamentarian who stumbles into a murder mystery, *Phineas Redux* shows strong similarities to Bulwer’s novel *Pelham*.

⁷⁶ The bill, voted in during Gladstone’s administration, did not go into effect until 1871.

⁷⁷ The novel’s interest in circumstantial evidence echoes debates that were current at the time in both fiction and legal scholarship. Alexander Welsh explains in *Strong Representations* that circumstantial evidence rose in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a form of proof considered more trustworthy than testimony because “circumstances cannot lie.” This trend coincided with the rise of realist fiction and other “empirical” forms of knowledge; its apparent objectivity makes it “generally appropriate to realism” (8). The resulting story as constructed by lawyers or Fielding-esque omniscient narrators is “conclusive” and “purports to review all facts” (9). Trollope’s novel expresses skepticism of circumstance, implying an idea articulated by Welsh that law’s “customs of representation...are no more timeless than literary realism and natural religion are timeless” (10). A novel Welsh analyzes that explores the competing claims of circumstantial evidence and “faith in personal acquaintance” (228) is Wilkie Collins’ *The Moonstone*.

⁷⁸ The book’s ending is made less anticlimactic by Phineas’ long-awaited proposal to Madame Max. He has come to love her, and her wealth will leave him free to chart an independent course in politics.

There is not enough evidence to convict Emilius of the murder, but he is found guilty of bigamy and sentenced to 5 years in prison.

⁷⁹ While the novel sometimes encourages readers to differentiate between rational, “objective” institutions (like forensic police work) and those that are governed by intuitive unwritten rules (like politics and social life), Trollope’s depiction of Phineas’ trial shows this distinction is unsustainable. The “objective” evidence about Phineas’ clothing and whereabouts is shown to be just as misleading as the guesses made by Phineas’ acquaintances. And Mr. Monk observes that “there are still circumstances in which a man, though on his oath, may be untrue with no more stain of falsehood that falls upon him when he denies himself at his front door though he happens to be home” (2.204). Lady Glencora (later the Duchess of Omnium) is shameless in her belief that rhetoric and social standing shape all legal outcomes: “If you get men who are really,—really swell...and pay them well enough, and so make it really an important thing, they can browbeat any judge and hoodwink any jury” (3.6-7). If justice is not meted out this way, “why are people so very anxious to get this lawyer or that or to bamboozle the witnesses?”

⁸⁰ The epistemological uncertainty stirred up by the trial affects Phineas too. On his first day home after the verdict he touches his face and chest, “feeling himself as though doubting his own identity” (3.157). He feels that he “could never more enjoy that freedom from self-consciousness” that he once took for granted (3.158). On the same day, he goes so far as to actually try on the gray coat he had worn on the night of the crime and walk the route taken by the criminal. “Here it was that the wretch of whom he had now heard so much had waited for his enemy—the wretch for whom during the last six weeks he had been mistaken” (16). It is as if Fawn’s doubts about what “identity” consists of infect him, too.

⁸¹ Chaffanbrass defends Phineas by offering a better plot than the one the prosecution had been able to, speaking of a man who “had dogged the steps of his victim on previous nights” and formulated a murder plan.

⁸² One critic notes that “the mechanism for this ‘proof’ is the compelling narrative, but Chaffanbrass refuses to hear Finn’s ‘own story’.... One reason for the refusal, he explains, is that such stories are only ever part of pre-existing, predictable narratives” (x). “But what doesn’t work in the courtroom does work in the novel as its narrative turns to Phineas himself and to other sites (e.g., the prison cell, the drawing room, the club and the House) where characters construct competing narratives” (Grossman 100).

⁸³ Interestingly, Chaffanbrass does not believe the convention-based defense that he himself offers: “He was telling himself at the moment how quick may be the resolves of an eager mind...; and he was telling himself also how impossible it is for a dull conscientious man to give accurate evidence as to what he had himself seen,—for he was convinced Lord Fawn had seen Phineas Finn in the street” (3.113).

⁸⁴ Carolyn Dever makes a similar point when she writes that “Trollope is deeply invested in the production of a ‘realistic’ history, and... Trollope’s satire of formal tropes advances his constitution of the ‘real.’ In [the Barsetshire] novels, Trollope experiments relentlessly with the tensions—not the correlations but the tensions—between novelistic capacity on one hand, and the romantic plots of *Bildung*, romance, and liberal modernity on the other.” Trollope’s self-referential discourse calls attention to the conventions used to narrate individuals’ stories without detracting from the plausibility and realism of those stories.

⁸⁵ All citations of *Old Wives’ Tale* reviews refer to James Hepburn’s *Arnold Bennett: The Critical Heritage*.

⁸⁶ While descriptions are not necessarily of places, I focus here on spatial description as the most prototypical and frequently criticized variety. Critics focusing on the negative aspects of description typically dwell on depictions of houses, interiors and landscapes (rather than, say, characters’ appearance). And because of its association with exposition and setting, spatial description is seen as more static and non-narrative. Focusing on depictions of space also allows me to make use of the body of research in cognitive psychology that deals with the spatial situation models subjects construct while reading.

⁸⁷ This argument is not entirely new; for instance, Michael Riffaterre writes that description's "primary purpose is not to offer a representation, but to dictate an interpretation" (427). And Franco Moretti convincingly demonstrates the ways space depicted in novels facilitates the construction of a "semantic sketch" for a text's meaning. My purpose here is to offer a more comprehensive account for how texts prompt readers to mentally recreate such sketches, as well as to offer empirical evidence for this account of description's function.

⁸⁸ And one hundred years later, Pierre Larousse's *Grand Dictionnaire* indicts contemporary poets for "monotonous and tiring abuse" (quoted in Hamon 8).

⁸⁹ *Mental Maps* by Peter Gould and Rodney White (1974) takes a similar approach, using data from real survey respondents to see how people mentally organize their surroundings and nation. "The perceived differences between various parts of the earth's surface affect movements of many different kinds" (17). But these perceived differences are themselves based on culturally mediated schemas of value. They quote a study done by Terrance Lee, showing that "social space and physical space are so tightly linked that most people simply do not distinguish between the two" (34).

⁹⁰ Tversky points out that even mental representations of spaces we know well are partial: "In many instances, especially for environments not known in detail, the information relevant to memory or judgment may be in different forms, some of them not maplike at all. . . . In these cases rather than resembling maps, people's internal representations seem to be more like collages. Collages are thematic overlays of multimedia from different points of view. They lack the coherence of maps, but do contain figures, partial information, and differing perspectives....Memory and judgment are systematically distorted and potentially contradictory, thus not easily reconcilable in a maplike structure" (15). Cognitive representations are not inherently image-based, and may combine detailed images of certain places with almost complete ignorance of the intervening space.

⁹¹ In research on text comprehension, the situation model represents the deepest level of comprehension, in contrast to a readers' model of a text's specific wording and overall structure. It is comparable to the storyworld model in suggesting full engagement with a text's content.

⁹² Readers' imperfect mapping was clear in their tendency to mis-locate the protagonist's house, failing to realize that it was adjacent to both the square and the river. Ryan attributes this to narrative "hints" about its location, hints that never become explicit or appear "in the same passage" (227). While García Márquez likely had a complete mental map of the town in mind, readers engaged in a thorough reading of the text did not combine textual details to recreate this map.

⁹³ For a discussion of this metaphor, see Dierdre Gentner's "Spatial Metaphors in Temporal Reasoning" in the same volume.

⁹⁴ In "Spatial Representation as Cause and Effect: Circular Causality Comes to Cognition," Brandan McGonigle and Margaret Chalmers similarly suggest that spatial experience is the true internal organizer of thought. "Adult humans use linear vectors to organize the premises of transitive inference tasks" (247). This type of argument reinforces the claims made for conceptual metaphors in Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By*. It is not clear whether this cognitive strategy is a natural part of human thought, or learned. "Are the privileged spatial vectors that subjects report the residue of a primary component in the development and evolution of relational encoding. . . . Or are they instead a later addition—an optional mental 'map' based on the culturally expressed conventions of what Popper has described as the 'third world' of books—the product of a 'society of mind' rather than the product of an individual one?" (250). Researchers have also asked whether spatial information is some sort of mental bedrock, or whether there is some more basic conceptual system used in the brain. The authors surmise that linear orderings based on size judgments "are derived from core design primitives which are neither spatial nor linguistic in origin" (251).

⁹⁵ While some critics do find the book meaningful, their sense of its value is still shaped by its apparent objectivity and lack of message. Frederic Taber Cooper in the *Bookman* (New York) credits the

novel with “deep and hidden meanings of human existence” (231). He describes these as rooted in the fact that the characters are “fair average representatives of the human race, sufficient exponents of the three great mysteries of life, birth, marriage and death.” The book does not offer any unique comment on them, but “mirror[s] back...truly and with...a fine sense of proportion the relative amount of joy and sorrow that enter in to the average human life.” Its value lies not in any message, but merely in its difference from other texts that sensationalize human life.

⁹⁶ Similarly, her critique of *Anna of the Five Towns* focuses on the undue attention Bennett pays to real estate (“rents and freeholds and copyholds and fines” [454]).

⁹⁷ The similarity of this scene to the imaginary scene of inspiration sketched by Woolf in “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” is striking. Since Bennett’s explanation of his work’s genesis appeared as the preface of the 1911 edition of the novel, it is quite likely Woolf read it at some point, and her memory of the passage may have had some role in her critique of Bennett. The two encounters may also be examples of twentieth century authors’ interest in chance encounters, and in expanding the range of readers’ sympathy. In any case, his sympathetic interest in character is clearly at odds with Woolf’s representation of him as a cold materialist. There are other noteworthy similarities between *Wives* and Woolf’s attack on Bennett; for instance, Woolf’s description of the Victorian versus modern cook seems to echo Bennett’s subtle portrayal of the way household servants changed over decades. Woolf notes that the “Victorian cook lived like a leviathan in the lower depths,” while at the turn of the century, Constance is “astounded by the bearing and the demands of modern servants (540), and Sophia tells her “You’ll never get a servant to stay in that cellar-kitchen” (548).

⁹⁸ In Squillace’s analysis, the smallest details convey the minute shifts in mores that gradually change history. For instance, the absence of a sign outside the Baineses’ shop signifies John Baines’ genteel aversion to all forms of “puffery”—a display of rectitude and self-control typical of Victorian Bursley. In this context, a young Samuel Povey enacts revolution on a small scale by creating enticing new clothing tags with such previously verboten words as “exquisite”; Bennett half-satirically depicts this innovation as an outbreak of “the modern spirit” (Bennett 89). By compiling such subtly important details, “Bennett achieves an analysis of secrecy and its exposure, of the secret self that obsessed Edwardian novelists, as remarkable as that found in any work by Conrad or James and strikingly different in form. . . . Bennett masks his novel’s secrecy in a misleading lucidity and discovers in the changing culture of secrecy a tale of social evolution, of the slow death of patriarchal authority” (44).

Squillace makes a compelling case for Bennett’s engagement with epistemological doubts raised by modernity. Like much early twentieth century fiction, *Wives* rejects and satirizes the Victorian age while ambivalently finding pathos in the new developments that disrupt settled habits—for instance, the decline of the square and the Baines’s shop. In this novel, historical change is intimately reflected in the way characters experience the space they inhabit. The falling fortunes of the Bursley town square seem to signal the decline of the values it stands for, as well as the loss of place-bound meaning itself. “The great principle of ‘self-isolation,’ on which the dignity of both the town and [John Baines’s] career have depended, will prove suicidal for St. Luke’s Square in the course of the novel, its retail trade ultimately siphoned off by ‘arrogant and pushing [and progressive] Hanbridge’” (44). Its successful new competitor, Midland Clothiers Company, “is entirely decentered, not the property of any particular citizen of any particular community but a sprawling conglomeration of branch stores. . . . Its identity is not invested in place” (Squillace 67).

⁹⁹ Like the murders in *Eugene Aram*, *Felix Holt* and *Mary Barton*, this crime is based on a real incident: “The furious protest mounted by the actual town of Burslem against the hanging of William Frederick Horry for the murder of Jane Horry, his wife” (56). As in those earlier novels, murder serves the purpose of making characters and readers question the peaceful and safe appearance of their community, raising deeper questions about how appearances reveal or conceal inner realities.

¹⁰⁰ Unless otherwise noted, these citations refer to R.P. Draper’s *D.H. Lawrence: The Critical Heritage*.

¹⁰¹ Critics have often noted the bizarre combination of realism and “perverid futurism” that seems to define Lawrence’s style. Shanks writes insightfully of Lawrence’s failure to sustain the conventional realist mode, pointing out that “in novels, more particularly where the author says: ‘She wore a dress of dark-blue silky stuff, with ruches of blue and green linen lace in the neck and sleeves; and she had emerald-green stockings,’ we expect all the events and details to be invented, however they may be arranged, strictly with a view to probability. It is something of a shock when we find they are not. Now Mr. Lawrence does nothing to soften this shock” (198). However, they assume Lawrence simply places implausible events within a background of quotidian reality. For instance, Shanks implies Lawrence’s details are genuinely in the realist mode, that it is only the characters who do not fit: People “do not behave in this way” (198).

¹⁰² Lawrence’s strategy is “almost identical repetitions designed to bring out profound differences in what might be mistaken for sameness” (179). And “from the point of view of traditional fiction, these transparent analogies subvert a desirable diversity of character and plot. . . . Lawrence nonchalantly exposes what the realistic novelist seems anxious to disguise: the derivation of his work from a single creative imagination” (178).

¹⁰³ Wollaeger goes on to note that the two couples in *Women in Love* “represent numerous contrasts. The most fundamental is between the human/organic and the non-human/mechanical, but the oppositions can be extended almost indefinitely: nature versus technology, authenticity versus irony,” and so on (602). In *The Rainbow*, similar dichotomies can be mapped on to such contrasting characters as Skrebensky and Ursula. But I argue that while the novel’s central symbolic opposition may acquire new connotations (casting one way of life as natural and others as mechanical, for instance), Lawrence’s text seeks to block any reading that would magnify the number of meaningful “symbolic oppositions” (601).

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