CONSUMING SYMPATHIES: WORKING-CLASS CULTURAL CAPITAL IN SEVERAL NINETEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH TEXTS

by Aaron McCullough

The nineteenth-century English texts I examine in the following chapters consistently explore the problem of working-class consumption. But as they do so, they explicitly link the represented consumer with bourgeois taste. The consumer community thus created interacts according to the discourse of sympathy. And sympathy circulates according to what Pierre Bourdieu has called the economy of symbolic goods. The working-class individual, in order to become “sympathetic,” must enter the capitalist economy as productive hand and consumer homme. Through such representations, these texts devalue what has historically been seen as the precondition of working-class identity, involvement with the public sphere.
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Introduction

Economic Signifiers, Symbolic Signifieds: The Bourgeois Ghost in the Working-Class Machine

The English worker is a contested identity through the first half of the nineteenth century. Propertyless, politically disenfranchised, on the one hand, the working class exists at the margins of English civil society as hands, the convulsive body, the uncontrollable rabble, the product of conditions nonetheless necessitated by industrial capitalism. On the other hand, the working class is the object of reform, of study and speculation, a sign of capitalism’s failure. Middle-class observers descend past the abyss’ threshold to address perceived social ills and to reconceptualize the content of the workers’ humanity. In particular, literary accounts attempt to counteract stereotypical, ideologically driven representations of the working class. But as political interventions, they respond rhetorically to their middle-class audience’s preconceptions, navigating their sympathies. If bourgeois ideology, as Marxists argue, conflates bourgeois man and hombre, commodity owner and human being, the working class that bears value in bourgeois fictional texts is a potential bourgeois individual.

The nineteenth-century texts I examine in the following chapters consistently explore the problem of working-class consumption. But as they do so, they explicitly link the represented consumer with bourgeois taste. The consumer community thus created interacts according to the discourse of sympathy. And sympathy circulates according to what Pierre Bourdieu has called the economy of symbolic goods. The working-class individual, in order to become “sympathetic,” must enter the capitalist economy as productive hand and consumer homme. Through such representations, these texts devalue what has historically been seen as the precondition of working-class identity, involvement with the public sphere.

Many have argued that a potential working-class identity can only emerge within the context of a political public sphere. That is, disparately located and employed individuals can only conceive of themselves as possessing similar sociopolitical interests,
even, to a certain extent, possessing a similar identity, within the context of a unifying public discourse. For instance, E. P. Thompson, in *The Making of the English Working Class*, finds that class and class-consciousness emerge among individuals who, discursively perceiving mutual interests, interact socially. Dror Wahrman, in *The Making of the Modern Self*, sees class emerging wholly as a political identity. However, the expression of political interest, for the working class in particular, depends on economic interest, in as much as the political and economic can overlap. Of course, class identity emerges as political expression. But even access to the public sphere depends on an initial consumption of discourse whose possibility requires economic preconditions. And, generally speaking, the content of such political expressions is economic.

This is particularly the case when we observe bourgeois representations of the working class, especially those showing the influence of utilitarian political economy. What indicates working-class identity within the representational economy is insufficient capital. Of course, property is a particularly intentional criteron posed by conservative social contractarians, such as Edmund Burke, who would deprive the poor of immediate political representation. One would need sufficient interest in the state, that is, sufficient property, to enter civil society, that variously defined, curious admixture of state, economy and society. But, less explicit, if more commonsensical, the working class would lack the socio-political skills, the necessary “cultivation,” to participate in civil society. The working class, as such, is materially determined by their place within the economy. Without the leisure or capital to invest in consumption beyond subsistence, their deficiency from a bourgeois standpoint is determined by insufficient consumption. They lack what Pierre Bourdieu would call, speaking broadly, cultural capital.

Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital is useful in its very diffuseness, covering as it does a wide array of socio-economic practices. In his essay “The Forms of Capital,” Bourdieu delineates two kinds of cultural capital: embodied and objective. The most important form of cultural capital, according to Bourdieu, is embodied. That is, acquired through invested time, such capital is presupposed to accumulate within a physically conscribed individual. This accumulation is only most obvious in the certification by which individuals prove their educational competence within state bureaucracies; what Bourdieu calls “institutional” capital, such certification admits of “the biological limits”
of embodied capital. That is, attached to the individual, embodied capital’s authority – its worth much as the dollar is backed by the economy – rests within the institution. But the family, as well, by investing time in the individual prior to the institutional investment, incorporates cultural capital. Of course, the early to mid-nineteenth century lacks the extra-familial institutional framework (for instance, that of required state education and its hegemonic categories), of the late twentieth-century societies Bourdieu generally has in mind. But this only requires that we place more emphasis on the family and the individual, while keeping in mind that nineteenth-century English society does invest value in various institutions, though their social value is more unstable and contested.\(^1\) In any case, we might observe nineteenth-century embodied capital to comprise the idea of “cultivation” variously manifested, marketable knowledge, the inclination to consume cultural goods, etc., to draw distinctions that are necessarily imprecise.

Objectified capital, however, exists outside the individual and institution. It comprises the signs of distinction that social observers and critics have often noticed, corresponding to what Thorstein Veblen infamously defined as conspicuous consumption. In an intimate relation to embodied capital, objectified capital comprises the goods that the individual consumes by virtue of their embodied capital. Embodied capital is necessary to properly consume objectified capital, which Bourdieu lists as "pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc." Bourdieu explains the connection with the following example; "To possess the machines, he only needs economic capital; to appropriate them and use them in accordance with their specific purpose (defined by the cultural capital, of scientific or technical type, incorporated in them), he must have access to embodied cultural capital, either in person or by proxy.” And objectified capital further exists as signs that indicate the embodied capital of the consumer, his or her taste and knowledge, and thus the social category the individual occupies.

Together, embodied capital and its correlative objectified capital indicate what Bourdieu would elsewhere call the habitus, “the generative and unifying principle which

\(^1\) Of course, educational institutions outside the family do circulate institutional capital in nineteenth-century Britain, especially in the late century. Also, for our purposes, the union represents a particularly interesting and anxiety-creating locus of institutionally conferred value.
retranslates the intrinsic and relational characteristics of a position into a unitary lifestyle, that is, a unitary set of choices of persons, goods, practices” (Practical Reason 8). The habitus occupied by an individual can be classified, but it is also, itself, classifying. It reflects a hierarchy of values that are not simply economic, narrowly speaking, though they relate intimately to the economy. Such values are symbolic – they have social value; thus, “differences associated with different positions, that is, goods, practices and especially manners, function, in each society, in the same way as differences which constitute symbolic systems… that is, as distinctive signs [emphasis in text]” (8).

Consumption, in the form of cultural capital, produces a sociological “mythical system,” the distinction within a category, a habitus, that is itself classifiable (9). Within the class representations of the nineteenth-century public sphere, then, represented consumption produces the distinction of a class-oriented habitus. But this social practice poses a problem for middle-class representations of the worker. With insufficient leisure or monetary capital, they often appear unable to enter a habitus that produces “distinctive signs.” That is, they often produce signs indicative of deficiency.

Jon Klancher, in The Making of English Reading Audiences, describes the early nineteenth-century public sphere in terms that reveal Bourdieu’s influence. Describing the constitutive consumption of political discourses, he notes that the relationship between differing modes of political discourse affected the representations of audiences within those discourses; and imagining audiences was a primary means of imagining and perceiving the social world within the emerging public spheres of the nineteenth century. Reading past the anachronistic postmodern tendency to see history merely as the struggle over signs, Klancher observes early nineteenth century England engaged in interconnected political and semiotic battles over social representations of class. Thus reconceptualizing class’ constitutive importance to early nineteenth-century society, he examines the notion of audience in Bakhtinian terms since one’s awareness of belonging to a particular public can only be acquired relationally. One encounters some other audience as a form of textual interference, as heteroglossia. Further, the ‘audience’ itself mediates between one’s singular reading and one’s awareness of belonging to other collective
formations – class, gender race – which themselves become conscious by being textually represented. (12)

In other words, represented audiences constituted the way readers interpreted themselves and others – they were a social effect even as they affected society. Though Klancher here cites Bakhtin (he will only later rely on Bourdieu), we might also see him describing a kind of representational habitus; particular classes consume particular representations of other classes, a practice that, in turn, defines the consumer’s class.

Bourgeois representations of the working class, however, indicate a representational dilemma. Without property or cultural capital, such represented individuals exist at the margins of civil society. According to Klancher, the early nineteenth-century bourgeois audience is asked to interpret the working-class “rabble” in several ways, nonetheless dependent on the actual rhetoric of radical working-class speech. Radical texts, exactly opposing the middle class’ discursive mode, are “not meant to form a singular bond between reader and writer, but to bind one reader to another as audience” (100). Middle-class texts, however, represent a rhetorical dialogue between individuals. Paraphrasing the emblematic Samuel Coleridge, Klancher finds the middle-class perspective anxious about the radical’s lack of an “individuated reader, ‘a future self’ who could be formed in the dialect of text, reader, and audience” (100). As un-individuated, the radical working-class rabble is outside the circulation of social-class signifiers that Klancher identifies as cultural capital; they are “innocent of signs, sometimes frighteningly violent, at other times the sole repository of goodness and community” (68). Not involved in the invidious and conspicuous consumption of cultural capital, the working class becomes capable of “fellowship” but, for the same reasons, it is capable of irrationally revolutionary violence (66). For writers like Edmund Burke, the radical masses are at the margins of political representation within society’s basically entropic social contract (105).

But the represented working class, beneath the desire to consume commodities for invidious comparison, is also beneath forms of embodied cultural capital. As Martha Vicinus explains, even working-class political organizers were anxious to circulate a representation of operatives as the “sober, self-disciplined, literate union man”: more specifically, “The development of a class-based ideology was reflected in a new
Trade unions used both songs and printed material as propaganda. . . . The gullible, carousing braggart had to be transformed both in actuality and in the public’s mind” (60). Organizers’ strategies entailed countering negative middle-class representations, possessing no cultural capital, with their own. And if the precondition for possessing cultural capital lends itself to an economic analysis, the nineteenth century did not lack a popular economic discourse: political economy. Significantly, Klanacher does not mention the increasing popularity of political economy from the 1820s and on. But grafting this national interest in laissez-faire capitalism’s discursive premises onto his analysis, we might begin to see that bourgeois representations of the working class are rational within early nineteenth-century economic models. Representing a working class that possesses cultural capital poses an economic problem: the working class’ limited opportunity for consumption. “Hands,” from the perspective of mainstream political economy, would be without leisure or monetary capital to consume luxury or educational goods. They are “beneath signs,” in Klancher’s several senses, because they possess insufficient cultural capital; materially constructed by their laboring positions, they occupy an uncertain position in relation to consumption.

Karl Marx’s representation of the worker, based as it is on political economy, presents an interesting illustration of this problem. From the perspective of political economy and the bourgeois, the working class enters the economy with no capital other than its labor. Since working-class wages are determined solely by the price of subsistence, the capital earned only serves physical reproduction. The working classes are the headless hands, the convulsive body. Even for Marx, due to alienation from the commodities they produce, the working class’ “labour has lost all semblance of self-activity and only sustains their life by stunting it” (Marx Reader 191). Revolution and working-class enfranchisement is possible because the bourgeois state has “rendered the great mass of humanity ‘propertyless,’ and produced at the same time, the contradiction of an existing world of wealth and culture” (161). Marx’s proletariats are beneath culture because they lack the capital to consume it. In this binary opposition, the proletariats are “propertyless” in a very broad sense. Not only do they lack capital, they lack access to “culture.” We might expand on Marx here through Bourdieu, and thus maintain that the working class lacks both the embodied and monetary capital to enter the world of culture.
Hence, for Marx, the working class is less than human because of its consumer identity, or lack there-of. And yet the working class, through mutual dis-enfranchisement, is “put into a position to enter into relation with one another as individuals” (191). The working class, then, comes to constitute a separate civil society. Working-class individuals are somehow both stunted, produced by “the reality of an inhuman existence” that serves only physical reproduction and, at the same time, capable of the social production, beyond subsistence, of a revolutionary civil society (Marx Reader 133). They can organize outside of a capitalist society whose social interactions are deficiently constituted by alienated labor and commodity fetishism.

Marx’s seeming gaps and inconsistencies on the constitution of working-class identity reveal an uncertainty as to the content of working-class cultural capital. As Klancher notes, they are both beneath distinctive signs, that is, outside civil society, and yet thus capable of fellow feeling since outside the competitive cash nexus and the conspicuous consumption of a consumer society. And it is significant that Marx identifies the working class “individual” as the basic component of working-class civil society; like Klancher’s rhetorical dream of community between the bourgeois writer and individuated reader, working-class individuals interact outside the capitalist economy as civic humans, and not homo economicus. Outside the cash nexus, they are capable of sympathetic, human relations.

The idea of moral sentiment, and sympathy in particular, occupies an uncertain relation to bourgeois society, especially in relation to utilitarian philosophies. Since the self-interested individual is the foundational unit of utilitarian political and economic philosophy, fellow feeling seems beyond humanity thus defined. However, sympathy seems at the same time a prerequisite for social interaction. For instance, David Hume would see sympathy as the necessary framework of justice, since breaches of justice would need to filter through the sympathy of civic man in order for such breaches to affect social action. Adam Smith, in The Wealth of Nations, finds that sympathy is necessary to keep the poor from revolutionary actions against extreme economic inequality. Even Jeremy Bentham, and his utilitarian disciple J. S. Mill, find sympathy to be a prerequisite of a utilitarian society; in order that otherwise self-interested
individuals desire to maximize society’s happiness, they must possess fellow feeling. That is, to desire a utilitarian society, the best of all possible worlds, the individual must have feeling for those with whom he or she would create it. But beyond the limits of utilitarian discourse, sympathy exists within the far broader matrix of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century bourgeois consumer culture – as a sign of distinction.

Colin Campbell, in *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, explores the historical influence of Sentimentalism on the emerging bourgeois. The middle class, developing signs of distinction other than the aristocracy’s neoclassical aestheticism, reconciled morality and consumerism within the discourse of Sentimentalism, defined as “an ideal sensitivity to – and spontaneous display of – virtuous feeling, especially those of pity, sympathy, benevolence, of the open heart as opposed to the prudent mind” (Campbell 141). On the one hand, an individual’s morality might be indicated by their response to immediately ethical situations, “especially such stock symbols of pathos as small children, the poor and animals, and if they did possess a true delicacy, then they were expected to experience and display a genuine pity” (152). On the other hand, the individual might display the same moral sensibility through a consumer shorthand: “through their aesthetic taste or sense of beauty” (152). Thus, the ability to properly consume literature, landscape, and music, among others, became a sign of morality as it became a sign of class distinction. Romanticism added to Sensibility’s moral interpretation of feeling and pleasure, an oppositional retreat from the “life-denying philosophy and institutions of a materialistic utilitarianism” (205).

Consumption, ironically, became the Romantic opposition to the utilitarian economy.

As such, Campbell’s genealogy of consumerism confirms Bourdieu’s “two-faced” depiction of the symbolic good. On the one hand, the symbolic good bears an exchange value in relation to the economy. But, on the other hand, its cultural value depends on a denial of the economy. The economic denial, in turn, acts to strengthen exchange value. In other words, effective economic circulation depends on a quasi-mystical denial of the economy. Moral sympathy emerges in relation to cultural capital as the economy-denying signified of the economic signifier. And as fellow feeling, sympathy connects people that display a similar habitus. Bourgeois sympathy, dependent on the mutual perception of cultural capital, is the prerequisite for bourgeois social capital.
From a bourgeois perspective, working-class individuals must enter the world of bourgeois cultural capital in order to transcend their “stunted” utilitarian-determined identities. The signs they produce and exchange must be the distinctive signs of symbolic goods, signifying not economic dependence but the distinctive signifier “humanity.” Working-class dialogue, narrative, food, cultural goods, etc. must circulate according to the parameters of the bourgeois habitus. In the analyses that follow, I trace how several nineteenth-century middle-class authors imagine the working class within a consumer society, desiring, purchasing, exchanging and consuming goods that, in turn, garner symbolic value for individuals who would otherwise exist outside the economy of symbolic exchange. These texts’ working classes consume and produce sympathy. And sympathy circulates through the exchange of objectified capital or on its own as a symbolic sign. Where Klancher identifies a classes semiotic distinctions as conspicuous consumption, we must examine also the symbolic nature of cultural capital, its subtle moral excuses. The working class, in bourgeois representations, produces the signs of symbolic capital.

In Chapter 1, I examine Mary Shelly’s *Frankenstein* and argue that the creature, like the working class, exists at the limits of a bourgeois habitus. Desiring to enter the economy of symbolic goods, in particular that of the bourgeois household, he represents himself as bourgeois man in all but appearance. To contract with Victor Frankenstein, to represent himself as worthy of Victor’s sympathies he must reveal bourgeois cultural capital, and the consumer desires that distinguish the bourgeois habitus.

In the next two chapters, I examine texts that deal explicitly with the mid-century industrial laborer. In Chapter 2, I examine Thomas Carlyle’s *Past and Present* and Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times*. Critiquing a capitalist economy quite ready to sacrifice the happiness – indeed the lives – of its workers in order to maximize the happiness of its capitalists (to twist the utilitarian formula), these texts move marginally beyond the stereotypically inarticulate rabble. In doing so, they inscribe their represented working class within an economy of signs, finding them indicating the desire for a more moral economy, indeed for sympathy. But sympathy is merely the desired moral addendum to
the unsympathetic economy. And both texts marginalize radical, revolutionary
discourses as they negotiate a place for the worker within laissez-faire capitalism.

Mary Barton, though hardly critical of utilitarian political economy, locates far
more cultural capital within her working-class individuals. They are fleshed-out
consumers of objectified capital and bearers of embodied capital. Hence, in Chapter 3, I
find Gaskell’s workers circulating symbolic capital through their own class, and so
indicating and arguing the possible – perhaps necessary – discursive marriage of
sympathetic and self-interested individual within laissez-faire utilitarianism. Proletariat
and capitalist, their interests mutually linked within both productive and consumer
economies, must interact sympathetically in order to temper the often harsh effects of
economic law.

Finally, in Chapter 4, I examine George Eliot’s Adam Bede, arguing that, much
like Bentham, her ideal utilitarian community runs on the fuel of moral sympathy. But if
her workers occupy an ideal place within the productive economy, they occupy a less
certain place as consumers. In particular, Adam Bede himself must enter a kind of
bourgeois habitus in order to soften his hard-line utilitarian relations to others. He must
become the tasteful consumer of symbolic goods in order to occupy his eventual place in
the society of the bourgeois narrator, and hence as the centerpiece of the novel’s value
system.

The alternatives to such representations are the bumpkin, the comic laborer or the
self-interested and dangerous radical. Thus, these authors do take an oppositional stance
even as they negotiate the ideological preconditions of their culture’s oppositional
relations. They represent what Bourdieu in The Field of Cultural Production calls
position taking. Not simply stereotypical representations reflecting class ideology, these
texts’ working classes occupy a position within a complex matrix of possibilities. They
are unique political statements, though they betray their cultural origins. As a useful
contrast, in the conclusion, I offer a quick reading of Thomas Hardy’s Return of the
Native. Though it offers stereotypical representations of the laborer, it rigorously
critiques bourgeois cultural capital and the habitus that values it as the precondition of
full humanity.
Chapter 1
Sympathetic Exchanges: Contracting with Cultural Capital in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein

Reading Shelley’s creature into a Marxist allegory of working-class disenfranchisement would be artificial as well as limiting; however, neither is Frankenstein a classless novel nor would it be awkward to read the creature as a being whose search for enfranchisement bears discursive similarities to bourgeois representations of the working class, navigating a similar liminality. Human and non-human, desiring and prohibited from bourgeois community, the creature occupies the same discursive place as Marx’s laborer in the ideological conflation of bourgeois and homme. But, at the same time, the creature internalizes and represents himself within a habitus that actively distinguishes itself from the laborer. In particular the creature’s relation to the domestic sphere and its symbolically valued commodities qualify our ability to interpret him strictly as laborer. The creature is at the threshold of a bourgeois habitus, desiring but not possessing its products; thus he negotiates his enfranchisement within that habitus, and on its own terms. In particular, sympathetic intercourse produces the social capital that yields the possibility of cultural capital. But, within the novel, sympathetic intercourse and the desire for sympathy, depend on acquiring and displaying distinctive cultural capital. Thus, the relation between bourgeois cultural capital and sympathetic interaction reveals the limits of sympathy as social capital; Victor Frankenstein expresses sympathy only for those who possess similar distinctions. I will extend David Marshall’s reading, which shows Shelley’s Frankenstein exploring the terms and limits of Rousseau’s notion of sympathy, by examining the socio-economic preconditions of sympathy, the novel’s social ideal. By examining the novel’s treatment of education and the consumption of goods and services I will argue that the novel represents bourgeois sympathy as social capital, even as it explores the economic preconditions for utilizing it.

David Marshall reads Frankenstein as a near-allegorical reflection of Rousseau’s investigation of sympathy and at the same time consistently relates Shelley and her novel
to the extensive 18th century and 19th century philosophical fascination with sympathy. His subsequent analysis of the novel explores the generally abstract conditions of interpersonal sympathy. For Marshall, the novel’s allegorical tableau represents a relatively metaphysical realm peopled by such abstract qualities as “identification, resemblance, likeness, difference, comparison, and the possibility of transporting oneself into the thoughts and sentiments of another” (Marshall 181). He does not discuss the concrete social world from which such ideas might be derived, such as class, race, family relation, education, etc. And when Marshall’s analysis descends to the worldly, he arrives at the realm of theatre. The abstract pre-conditions and limits of sympathy receive figurative illustration in the context of the relation between audience and performance. By following an abstract narrative that arrives at concrete society only through a theatrical figure, Marshall’s reading does not so much pre-empt (his abstract terms contain the possibility of a more political reading) as elide the socio-economic questions the novel consciously explores. If Marshall finds Shelley investigating eighteenth-century moral philosophy, he does not examine the contextual importance of sympathy both within Frankenstein and within eighteenth-century philosophical discourses.

It has become a critical commonplace that the beginning of the creature’s narrative reflects Rousseau’s depiction of natural man (Marshall 183). But Shelley’s reflection is by no means reflexive. In his Discourse On the Origin of Inequality, Rousseau finds sympathy to be a quality uncomplicatedly present in the pre-social individual and to be the source of “all those social virtues . . . generosity, clemency or humanity” (Part I). Within the state of nature

compassion is a natural feeling, which, by moderating the violence of love of self in each individual, contributes to the preservation of the whole species. It is this compassion that hurries us without reflection to the relief of those who are in distress: it is this which in a state of nature supplies the place of laws, morals and virtues, with the advantage that none are tempted to disobey its gentle voice. (Part I)

Sympathy in pre-social man is the original virtue and originary to those virtues of social man. However, the creature’s first experience of sympathy occurs not within the context
of a natural order but in relation to the De Lacey’s impoverished bourgeois household. He recalls that, observing their pathos-laden domestic drama, he “felt sensations of a peculiar and overpowering nature: they were a mixture of pain and pleasure, such as I had never before experienced, either from hunger or cold, warm or food; and I withdrew from the window, unable to bear these emotions” (100). We might dismiss the class-specific nature of the De Lacey’s’ origin as a narrative accident and find the creature’s first experience of sympathy to be merely the natural expression of original man, that is, lacking class distinction.

However, two circumstances qualify reading a strict reflection of Rousseau’s narrative within the creature’s. First, much of the pathos of the De Lacey scenes derives from the family’s unfortunate fall from bourgeois capitalist status to subsistence-level poverty, and the creature is particularly moved by their ameliorative expressions at consuming art and literature. The creature’s subsequent education and his vicarious (and theatrical) consumption of the family’s interpersonal sympathies whets his appetite for the same. In fact – and this represents our second qualifying circumstance – the novel represents, and implicitly interrogates, a habitus that locates the possibility of interpersonal sympathy solely within and between a bourgeois class’ members. Thus, both Robert Walton and Victor Frankenstein implicitly assume the possibility of sympathy only within and between members of a particular class, and in particular within the bourgeois family.

In his ethical counsel to Walton, Victor locates his ethics solely within family relations; “‘If the study to which you apply yourself has the tendency to weaken your affections and to destroy your taste for those simple pleasures in which no alloy can possibly mix, then that study is certainly unlawful, that is to say, not befitting the human mind. If this rule were always observed; if no man allowed any pursuit whatsoever to interfere with the tranquility of his domestic affections, Greece had not been enslaved; Caeser would have spared his country; America would have been discovered more gradually; and the empires of Mexico and Peru had not been destroyed’” (59). The panacea for all of canonical history’s ethical transgressions is to locate moral value within the domestic sphere, as Victor has already described it, the edenic paradise of his childhood.
But Victor absolutely misreads his domestic sphere. Although he describes his father as “one of the most distinguished of [Geneva],” a civic man par excellence, he indicates his family’s wealth by the ease with which commodities emerge and pass through his narrative: Thus, his parents are “the agents and creators of all the many delights which we enjoyed. When I mingled with other families, I distinctly discerned how peculiarly fortunate my lot was, and gratitude assisted the development of filial love” (45). In an edenic trope that identifies not money but his parent’s god-like benevolence as the originator of commodity enjoyment, Victor wholly misreads the terms of economic ease. Indeed, intellectually, he claims to have no interest in “the structure of languages, nor the code of governments, nor the politics of various states,” the more humanitarian pursuits that might reveal the secrets of wealth rather than “the secrets of heaven and earth,” as he terms natural philosophy in a conflation of science and universality that elides moral philosophy (45). But if the intellectual result of his upbringing is his disinterestedness towards social sciences, the moral result of his familial education is the limitation of his sympathies.

Turning from Rousseau’s philosophical treatment of sympathy to the moral philosophy of David Hume, we find an examination closer to that represented in *Frankenstein*. In Hume’s narrative of moral philosophy, sympathy begins inside the family as a feeling that links members together in opposing the stranger. Social justice, though it binds society through the individual’s rational self-interest in property maintenance, depends on the faculty of sympathy the family nurtures. For Rousseau, imagining pre-social man to organize in social structures similar to the modern family unit is a mistakenly anachronistic imposition. He references the modern family only to negate its importance to sympathy within his system; that is, he opposes misguided philosophers who constantly consider families as living together under one roof, and the individuals of each as observing among themselves a union as intimate and permanent as that which exists among us, where so many common interests unite them: whereas, in this primitive state, men had neither houses, nor huts, nor any kind of property whatever; every one lived where he could, seldom for more than a single night; the sexes united without design, as accident, opportunity or inclination brought
them together, nor had they any great need of words to communicate their designs to each other; and they parted with the same indifference. (On the Origin of Inequality)

Sympathy, as a natural attribute, then extends to all members of the species unreservedly. But for Victor, as for Hume, sympathy begins within and extends only provisionally beyond the limits of the family; as Victor states “it was my temper to avoid a crowd, and to attach myself fervently to a few. I was indifferent, therefore, to my school fellows in general” (45). And the few to which he shows affection are not opposed to the “crowd” simply as other individuals; rather, Victor – and his family’s – “fervent attachments” depend on specific preconditions.

The Frankenstein family seems to display a more or less flexibly inclusive domestic sphere, accepting several individuals into the family seemingly without prejudice. But there are indeed limits beyond which their charity will not extend, and the lack of prejudice is more a function of Victor’s rhetoric than an accurate representation. Victor’s father marries the daughter of his friend, a fallen mercantile capitalist, out of homosocial affection. Again conflating supernatural and monetary power, he describes his father arriving “like a protecting spirit to the poor girl, who committed herself to his care” (41). Social capital is whitewashed by the symbolic nature of Victor’s figure.

And when the family’s affiliations extend beyond homosocial relations, they do not extend beyond class and race similarities. When Victor and his mother visit a poor family during an excursion to Italy, one child distinguishes herself “above all the rest. She appeared of a different stock. The four others were dark-eyed, hardy little vagrants; this child was thin, and very fair. Her hair was the brightest living gold and, despite the poverty of her clothing, seemed to set a crown of distinction on her head” (43). Victor’s descriptive tropes continue to evoke class and race. Elizabeth is a “of a distinct species” and a “garden rose among dark-leaved brambles” (43). Thus her face is “expressive of sensibility and sweetness,” both prequisites for sympathetic intercourse since sensibility, in eighteenth-century moral philosophy, indicates the ability to feel the experience of others. She is then “distinct” not from humanity inclusive of the Frankenstein family but merely from the poor, dark, Italian family fostering her. Conflating socio-economic background, race and the ability to relate sympathetically and receive
sympathy, Victor’s description rationalizes his mother’s charity. Bourdieu identifies one form of symbolic capital as “ethnic identity” since it, “with names or skin color, is a percipi, a being perceived, functioning as positive or negative symbolic capital” (Practical Reason 104). As such, ethnic identities function as social distinctions that individuals and groups use to shore up social capital. While the Frankenstein’s “benevolent disposition often made them” – merely – “enter the cottages of the poor” they will extend charity to a being resembling themselves (42).

Hume’s sociological examination of sympathy sounds much like Shelley’s portrayal – and Bourdieu’s definition of symbolic social capital. Though Hume finds sympathy necessary to his version of the social contract, he also delineates sympathy’s limits since “the sympathetic transmission of sentiments can vary in effectiveness depending upon the degree of resemblance and contiguity between the observer and the person with whom he sympathizes. I receive the sentiments of someone very much like me or very close to me far more strongly than I do those of someone unlike me or farther away” (Cohon, sec. 8). Hume particularizes the qualities of resemblance that might “facilitate the sympathies,” more specifically than the general similarity of humanity as “manners, or character, or country, or language” (Treatise, II, I, 11). The Frankensteins’ – and especially Victor’s – sympathies follow a similar division of resemblances. However, the general resemblance among all human beings does not strongly activate the Frankensteins’ sympathies. Victor’s descriptive tropes indicate the desire to separate intra-species distinctions that activate his sympathies into the distinctions of a separate species; he conflates bourgeois affiliation with human affiliation, limiting the possibility of sympathy.

While the novel dramatizes specific limitations of sympathy and resemblance, the creature bears the allegorical weight of all such limits. David Marshall has shown that Victor has confused the creature, the “figure of a man,” for a monster thus denying him the status of the human; “by misreading the figure of a man as a monster, by persisting in an illusion rather than granting him the name of man, Frankenstein turns his own form into a deception and forfeits his own legend of man” (211). But by limiting himself to the abstract – and perhaps to a reading based on Rousseau – Marshall disregards the novel’s more specific attentions to sympathy and thus miscalculates the specific weights
of the creature’s allegorical albatrosses. If the creature remains beyond the pale because of a countenance at the limit of resemblance, the creature represents the limits of those specific resemblances – class, race, nationality, family, etc. – that hinder one’s extension of sympathy to general humanity. And to give undue weight to the importance of countenance would be to fall into the same confusion as does Victor while either describing Elizabeth or denying sympathy to the creature.

The possibility of sympathy, as dramatized in the Frankensteins’ adoption of Elizabeth, bears an economic value exchangeable as cultural and social capital. That Victor’s impression depends on an immediately appraised appearance elides the fact that Victor’s mother adopts the child after the foster mother relates the narrative of Elizabeth’s genealogy, revealing that her mother is German and her father a Milanese nobleman and thus similar to the Frankensteins in both race and class. By focusing on the immediate impression of appearance, Victor suppresses the importance of identification through verbal communication, while privileging the discourse of identification through appearance, allowing him to naturalize class as a distinct species. Perhaps reflecting his later scientific pursuits and his indifference to social questions, Victor does not acknowledge cultural differences to be merely subdivisions within the species man.

The family’s sympathetic identification, then, depends on the recognition and ideological conflation of a distinction that translates into cultural capital. Though Elizabeth cohabitates with the poor, her appearance, and the narrative establishing her background, translate immediately into a currency that, symbolically sanitized by Frankenstein’s internalization of sympathetic and scientific discourse, the Frankensteins exchange for adoption; Elizabeth’s appearance and narrative birth certificate equal a cultural capital that exchanges for social capital. Thus, to see the full narrative of Frankenstein’s tableau of sympathy, we must acknowledge a broader social context, introduce figures of social divisions that constitute the social field in which sympathy’s drama plays out.

While the adoption of Elizabeth problematizes visual resemblance and sympathy, the novel’s homosocial sympathies depend on a less complicated division of distinction
and resemblance: the cultural capital of education. For example, Victor breaks his pattern of “indifference” to associate with Henry Clerval because of his “talent and fancy” as manifested in literary consumption and production; “he was deeply read in books of chivalry and romance. He composed heroic songs, and began to write many a tale of enchantment and knightly adventure” (45). Victor derives his valuation of Clerval directly from a literary representation that then indicates Clerval’s character. Though Victor states that Clerval “loved enterprise, hardship, and even danger, for its own sake,” an interest in the literary representations of Clerval’s perceived personality traits constitutes Victor’s only specific proof (45).

Marshall has indicated how Victor is not a good reader, often assuming that representation reflects reality. Thus, Victor presumes that the creature is a monster and not a kind of literary “figure of a man,” rationalizing his disgust (207). But Victor’s naïve reading of the monster is only one scene of misrecognition. As we have seen, Victor is the ideological interpreter, par excellence. He misreads the source of his domestic ease as the metaphysical beneficence of his parents. He misreads class and race as indicating species distinctions. He misreads science as universality and the works of discredited natural philosophers as accurate. In this later sense we see Victor dramatizing the problems of the self-educated since Victor’s reading is conspicuously unsupervised. According to Bourdieu, the cultural autodidact presumes the inherent use value of high culture, thus buying the fiction glossing what is merely symbolic value (Distinction 330). If Victor conflates appearance and narrative in rationalizing his sympathies for Elizabeth, for Clerval he conflates character and literary representation, buying literature’s fiction that its representation translates directly to use value.

For both Victor and Walton, the autodidacts’ reading of science constitutes a moral transgression, beginning with similar misrecognitions of value. Victor’s initial mistaken readings are the “lords of his imagination” and have irrational power over his scientific worldview. Thus, this initial imaginative impulse produces his transgressive desire to create a human being, which, as he narrates, takes “an irresistible hold of my imagination” (59). Walton’s autodidacticism follows a progression similar to Victor’s. The effect of reading travel literature, he indicates, is that “I have thought more, and that my day dreams are more extended and magnificent” (31). Later he admits that he has
“often attributed [his] attachment to, [his] passionate enthusiasm for, the dangerous mysteries of the ocean, to that production of the most imaginative of modern poets.” Speaking more generally, he admits: “‘I am practically industrious – pains-taking; – a workman to execute with perseverance and labour: – but beside this, there is a love for the marvelous, intertwined in all my projects, which hurries me out of the pathways of men, even to the wild sea and unvisited regions I am about to explore’” (33). The uncritical Romantic imagination produces the ethical transgression Victor will hinder Walton from completely realizing. Enlightenment science and, by association, the industrial revolution, are transgressions because of an initial misreading and a subsequent desire for the “marvelous.” Of course, this constitutes Victor and Walton’s embodied capital within the scientific community.

Frankenstein’s oppositional location of value within the domestic sphere depends on a similar sublimation of the monetary and class origins of cultural capital. His relationship with Clerval dramatizes the importance of cultural capital as a precondition of valuable sympathies. But Walton is more explicit in acknowledging the role of class and education in sympathetic relationships. Confessing his desire for friendship, he examines and then dismisses his shipmates on the basis of their perceived ignorance. He first states the problem as a discrepancy in feeling; that “feelings, unalloyed to the dross of human nature, beat even in these rugged bosoms” pejoratively values his shipmates’ “courage and enterprise,” characteristics which translate into capital since he hires the men on their basis (31). Describing his relationship to his exemplary lieutenant thus, he limits their interaction to an immediately market-based transaction; “I first became acquainted with him on board a whaling vessel: finding that he was unemployed in this city, I easily engaged him to assist in my enterprise” (31). That the lieutenant is “unsoftened by cultivation” indicates to Walton his employee’s lack of feeling, and hence his inability to sympathize (31).

Walton’s subsequent description of his relation to the ship’s master then complicates his easy alignment of education and sympathy; a narrative indicating the master’s excessive ability to sympathize contradicts Walton’s preceding sympathetic distinctions. Finding that the woman with whom the master contracts to marry loves a poor man, the master lends land and monetary capital to his fiancé and rival, and breaks
the marriage contract with the woman’s father. Sympathizing beyond the limits of class, an act of which both Walton and Victor are incapable, the master is yet “uneducated: he is as silent as a Turk, and a kind of ignorant carelessness attends him, which, while it renders his conduct the more astonishing, detracts from the interest and sympathy he would command” (32). Contradicting his earlier description, Walton here locates the precondition of sympathy not within education’s affects but within the observer’s perception of embodied capital. Sympathy depends on the taste for a particular kind of individual and, perhaps, since the master is silent, on the ability or desire to self-represent, to market oneself as “cultivated.”

This is particularly apparent in Walton’s description of Victor and his own desire to enjoy Victor’s sympathetic friendship;

On every point of general literature he displays unbounded knowledge, and a quick and piercing apprehension. His eloquence is forcible and touching; nor can I hear him, when he relates a pathetic incident, or endeavors to move the passions of pity or love, without tears. What a glorious creature he must have been in the days of prosperity, when he is thus noble and godlike in ruin! He seems to feel his own worth, and the greatness of his fall. (179)

Thus, contrasted with the ship’s master, Victor is both educated and facile in speech. He is especially fluent rhetorically. These characteristics translate into his value for Walton. The economic basis and hence value of Victor’s personality, implicit in the terms “worth” and “prosperity,” becomes especially apparent in combination with a subsequent description; “I have longed for a friend; I have sought one who would sympathize with and love me. Behold, on these desert seas I have found such a one; but, I fear, I have gained him only to know his value, and lose him” (180). Victor’s embodied capital, based on the initial investment of capital necessary to sustain the bourgeois sphere, constitutes a perceived symbolic “value” for Walton, the satisfaction of his market-based taste. Of course, this is a mystified perception, both locating fellow feeling within a particular class and within an individual merely an embodiment of a cultural investment. Recalling Victor’s prelapsarian “prosperity,” Walton’s description distinguishes Victor from the ship’s crew, all members of a lower class. Walton perceives the possibility of sympathy with Victor through an initial identification; the recognition of his own habitus and the
implicit capital sustaining it.

The representation of bourgeois education then constitutes an ideological illusion within the novel, capital valued within the habitus occupied by Walton, Victor and, perhaps, the creature. John Guillery, in *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, has claimed that the bourgeois class acquired vernacular literature as cultural capital, distinguishing itself from the aristocracy’s distinguishing cultural capital, classical literacy. In *Frankenstein*, such capital translates into social capital by means of sympathy. Walton rationalizes his valuation of education by believing cultivation to be a prerequisite for a potential object of sympathy’s reciprocal feeling; cultivation is a “distinctive sign” but is not constitutive of real difference outside the habitus the novel explores and questions. The creature, representing himself within the novel’s habitus, attempts to trade cultural capital for sympathy and social capital.

The creature’s self-representation, his narrative, produces the cultural capital he hopes to exchange for social capital in his contract with Victor.² The creature states the terms thus: “‘Let your compassion be moved and do not disdain me. Listen to my tale: when you have heard that, abandon or commiserate me, as you shall judge that I deserve. But hear me. The guilty are allowed, by human laws, bloody as they are, to speak in their own defense before they are condemned’” (94). The terms of compassion and sympathy are the mobilizing force. But the courtroom figure the creature uses then reminds us that though he desires sympathy, the aims are justice. The deployment of terms is again similar to Hume’s description of sympathy and justice within civil society; “when the injustice is so distant from us, as no way to affect our interest, it still displeases us; because we consider it as prejudicial to human society, and pernicious to every one that approaches the person guilty of it. We partake of their uneasiness by sympathy”

² In *Story and Situation*, Chambers directs our attention to the ways in which texts reveal the transactional basis of narrative since “narrative is most appropriately described as a transactional phenomenon… Transactional in that it mediates exchanges that produce historical change, it is transactional, too, in that this functioning is itself dependant on an initial contract, an understanding between the participants in the exchange as to the purposes served by the narrative function, its ‘point’” (8). Meaning is dependant upon the situation in which the story is told, a situation most succintly understood as a contract.
Frankenstein later states that “compassion confirmed my resolution” to hear the creature’s tale (95). And the desire for justice is a subsequent mobilizing motive; “For the first time, also, I felt what the duties of a creator were, and that I ought to render him happy before I complained of his wickedness” (95). But, for Hume, sympathy is only the means of “considering justice.” As with John Locke, property is a precondition of civil society in Hume’s system; “the repeated experience of transgressing it” establishes the “stability of possession” which then creates justice (Treatise, III, II, 2).

To fully explore the importance of property, we must then turn to the preconditions of the business contract, or, what the eighteenth century called speaking generally, commerce.

In “Self-Love, Identification, and the Origin of Political Economy,” Pierre Force examines moral philosophy’s late eighteenth century split into ethics and economics. Putting into conversation La Rochefoucauld, Rousseau and Adam Smith, he finds that identification, the ability to objectify a subject, might yield either moral sympathy, rational self-love or both depending on the system. Peering beyond the historical split, he finds La Rochefoucauld proposing that “self-love . . . manifests itself in identification: we love ourselves through an imaginary projection into others (‘a feeling of our own misfortunes in those of other people’). This identification with others leads us to start exchanging goods and services with them (‘we help others to start make sure they will help us under similar circumstance’) . . . . Thus the causal chain is: self-love produces identification; identification produces commerce” (49).

Similarly, Frankenstein troubles the historical distinction but is less utilitarian rationalization than sociological critique. Victor’s original repulsion – “there can be no community between you and me” – is transformed into the possibility of commerce by sympathy (94). And Victor and the creature’s commercial contract produces the property necessary to enter the social contract. Rather than rationalized self-interest – exclusively – Victor’s sympathy depends on an ideological distinction of “community” based not directly on justice protecting property, but on the identification of cultural capital. The creature is, on the one hand, the generalized “other;” but on the other hand, he possesses cultural capital that complicates his otherness. In Frankenstein, cultural capital predicates entrance into the social contract.

If rhetoric yields sympathy and sympathy yields the possibility of commerce,
speech, rhetoric and, by extension, narrative, equal cultural capital. As the creature admits during his bildungsroman, his initial impression of speech and his subsequent desire to learn it result from his perception of their rhetorical power; “I perceived that the words they spoke sometimes, produced pleasure or pain, smiles or sadness, in the minds and countenances of the hearers. This was indeed a godlike science and I ardently desired to become acquainted with it” (103). Similarly, the creature’s desire to gain the sympathies of the De Lacey household motivates his acquisition of speech; “by my gentle demeanor and conciliating words, I should first win their favor, and afterwards their love. These thoughts exhilarated me, and led me to apply with fresh ardour to acquiring the art of language” (105). However, we must remember that the creature’s very desire for domestic sympathy depends on an original class distinction: his observance of a bourgeois household. His first sight of the De Laceys he has described thus: “I heard a step, and, looking through a small chink, I beheld a young creature with a pail on her head, passing before my hovel. The girl was young and of gentle demeanor, unlike what I have since found cottagers and farm-house servants to be” (99). Much as a subsequent narrative seems to confirm Victor’s first impression of Elizabeth, the creature later discovers the De Lacys to be “descended from a good family in France” and raised in Paris, “surrounded by friends, and possessed of every enjoyment which virtue, refinement of intellect, or taste, accompanied by a moderate fortune, could afford” (110). His initial impression is based on a class distinction that continues to color his subsequent relation to and desire for sympathetic intercourse. He later states, “what chiefly struck me was the gentle manners of these people; and I longed to join them” and “the gentle manners and beauty of the cottagers greatly endeared them to me” (101; 103). That he refers to them as cottagers in the second instance indicates an ideological slippage, since he has already distinguished them from cottagers: the reduced monetary capital of their current status naturalizes their cultural capital, nevertheless acquired during a prior state of monetary plenty. For the creature, sympathy, and the desire for sympathy, are products of the bourgeois family.

His education – both his social observations of the De Laceys and his acquisition of speech, literacy and literary knowledge – prepares him for the moment he intends to confront the De Lacey’s but it also seems to increase his desire for domestic sympathy.
As with Walton, the creature occupies a habitus that values literature as the prerequisite for social capital. He describes his response to Goethe’s novel of bourgeois romance, *The Sorrows of Young Werter*, thus: “The gentle and domestic manners it described, combined with lofty sentiments and feelings, which had for their object something out of self, accorded well with my experience among my protectors, and with the wants which were ever alive in my bosom” (115). The creature thus transforms the desire for romantic love to the desire of the “outcast” for the bourgeois family; his “increase of knowledge only discovered to me more clearly what a wretched outcast [he] was” (118). Idealizing what he is not, his education increases his consumer desire for bourgeois cultural capital.

The creature, desiring the domestic sympathy of the bourgeois, thus comes to self-represent himself as bourgeois man outcast from the bourgeois domestic sphere. He is able to subsist on “nuts and berries” and engage in educational leisure without capital. Similarly, the texts that educate him arrive from outside the marketplace, within “a leathern portmanteau” lost in the forest. Some critics have interpreted the creature, disenfranchised despite his supernatural strength, as a figure for the proletariat.

Certainly, as outcast, he resembles the early nineteenth-century worker; but we might also see within his strength and ability to subsist and consume educational leisure without the support of capital, a habitus that ideologically sublimates the importance of money to the cultural acquisitions of bourgeois man. It is this later resemblance that allows him to negotiate contractually with Frankenstein, to play on his sympathy, indeed to represent himself as constructed for sympathy; “Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous” (94). Rhetorically locating happiness in all mankind elides the fact that his own taste for happiness depends on a class distinction, one that his own education and observations belie. Victor accepts the creature’s request based on similar terms; he finds that the creature’s “tale and the feelings he now expressed, proved him to be a creature of fine sensations” (129). His “fine sensations” – nurtured within a bourgeois household and apparently bourgeois themselves – are then confirmed for Victor by the nature of the request, a female of the species: and his own private sphere, since the creature will then return to the wilderness to consume “acorns and berries” (129). The promised return to the state of Rousseau’s natural man conceals the creature’s
cultivated taste for bourgeois domesticity: especially since family ties postdate natural man within Rousseau’s narrative.

Thus, the promised self-banishment to the wilderness is, in approximation, entrance into the bourgeois domestic sphere, imagined as intimately independent of society, marketplace and politics. The family retreat is, in fact, a recurring situation within the novel. Of course, the De Laceys are banished from Paris, thus experiencing an enforced separate sphere that then produces particularly conspicuous sympathies. But also the Franksteins, though paragons of civic men, reside mainly in their country house; as Victor notes, “the lives of my parents were passed in considerable seclusion,” a statement which elides their implied possession and deployment of capital (44); goods and money can only circulate because of interaction. Bourdieu describes what he calls “family discourse,” the ideological representation and real enactment of the intimate and separate family thus: “the domestic unit is . . . a world in which the ordinary laws of the economy are suspended, a place of trusting and giving – as opposed to the market and its exchanges of equivalences” (*Practical Reason* 65). But not only is the family permeated by market considerations, by commodities, by “exchange of gifts, service, assistance, visits, attention, kindnesses,” it functions as valuable capital in and of itself: “the family in its legitimate definition is a privilege instituted into a universal norm: a de facto privilege that implies a symbolic privilege – the privilege of being *comme il faut*, confirming to the norm, and therefore enjoying the symbolic profit of normality” (69). Thus, the creature translates a desire for a separate domestic sphere into capital – by internalizing and deploying a norm upon which sympathy depends.

In Frankenstein that norm, and the terms of its exchange, point very clearly to a feminist reading. At a very basic level, we might observe within Victor and the creature’s sympathetic contract Levi-Strauss’ notion of the gift as Gayle Rubin describes it: subjectified woman is the object of exchange that creates kinship in pre-state societies and therefore creates society itself (“The Traffic in Women”). The contract for a female is both the terms and the prerequisite of commerce between Victor and the creature; the possible female has no agency in entering the contract. Victor and the creature’s homosocial and contractual relations thus depend on an assumed desire for a domestic sphere, and the mutual perception of each other as bourgeois, civic men. This
identification is made possible not solely by their commodification of women, but by their mutual identification of a wide realm of cultural capital: domestic desire, education, and the mutual sublimation of the foundational importance of monetary capital in the marketplace. The creature develops the taste, the consumer desire, for the commodities of the bourgeois sphere, sympathy and the commodity he assumes it requires, woman. Within the commercial contract between Victor and creature, Victor exchanges his cultural capital, his ability to produce the desired commodity, for the monster’s self-representation as bourgeois civic man: and the contract’s terms and the commodity to be exchanged indicate a social contract. But if property is the precondition of entrance into the social contract, the creature’s thwarted desire for property rationalizes the revolution that follows the contract’s dissolution. In the words of Hume: “if interest first produces obedience to government, the obligation to obedience must cease, whenever the interest ceases, in any great degree, and in a considerable number of instances” (Treatise, III, II, 9).

Victor’s discontinuation of the contract rests on his recognition of the family’s economic roles, sexual and ultimately social reproduction; “one of the first results of those sympathies for which the demon thirsted would be children, and a race of devils would be propagated on the earth, who might make the existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror” (144). He again identifies the creature as a separate species rather than a sub-category of man. And he also continues to figure rhetorically figure the creature as outside, and hence in conflict with, homo-sapiens. If the creature is bourgeois he enters enfranchised society: if not, he represents those destructive forces that contract against society. The ultimate limits of Victor’s sympathy then point us (by analogy but not by allegory) to the working-class movement and especially the reform movement prior to 1832.

In her introduction to the Norton second edition, Johanna M. Smith, shows Shelley’s ambivalent relation to the reform debate: “Clearly Mary favors ‘progress’ and ‘tyrant quelling’ but equally clearly she fears ‘sick destructiveness’; yet the latter seems a corollary to the former, and is perhaps necessary to force the propertied classes to cede their exclusive right to the vote; ‘yet it is very sad’”(16). Smith continues to explain the
novel’s political allegory thus:

In Victor’s view, the creature is like the rebellious working class: he has no right and no claim to the recognition he demands from his superior. Yet when the creature asks nicely – for sympathy, for understanding, for a mate – Victor can recognize the justice of his claims, just as the more benevolent middle- and upper-class liberals might heed respectful requests for the vote from the respectable working class. But when Victor imagines the consequences of ceding control, of passing his power to create life to the creature and creaturetute, he fears the ‘sick destructiveness’ that they, and especially she, might then engender . . . . Victor then withdraws his concession and justifies himself by arguing the creature’s ‘malignity’ (p. 184) just as opponents of working class suffrage justified themselves by arguing that the lower orders were ‘helots’ quite willing to ‘set London on Fire’ if balked” (16).

Though this narrative usefully reminds us where our historical sympathies might lie, I have tried to focus on the way Shelly represents the creature “asking nicely,” playing on our and Victor’s sympathies. This points us not only to historical facts but to rhetorical strategies, the way representations negotiate with other representations within the nineteenth-century public sphere.

Hence, if E. P. Thompson finds opponents of the working-class reform movement arguing against their perceived unsociable mob, the opposing representation displays a cultural capital exchangeable in social or political capital. For instance, both Thompson and nineteenth-century political organizers put a premium on representing the worker as educated, sober and organized. The creature argues that “the love of another will destroy the causes of my crime, and I shall become a thing, of whose existence everyone will be ignorant. My vices are the children of a forced solitude that I abhor; and my virtues will necessarily arise when I live in communion with an equal. I shall feel the affections of a sensitive being and become linked to the chain of existence and events, from which I am now excluded” (130). Becoming the individual within the domestic sphere he enters the social contract, “the chain of existence and events” of civil society. The alternative is social revolution, as imagined through the anxiety of Victor’s bourgeois habitus.

Victor Frankenstein’s social interactions reveal that the terms and limitations of
his habitus are acquired, embodied cultural capital. To desire commerce with the creature, he must perceive his own habitus. But if the creature’s narrative establishes his cultural capital, his appearance yet produces the signs of alterity – and the limits of sympathy.
Chapter 2
Hard Times Require Soft Solutions: Consuming Conspicuously in the Laissez-Faire Economy

Shelley’s creature, negotiating to enter bourgeois civil society, indicates the problems of working-class representations generally. Even those authors who attempt to depict the working class sympathetically, to motivate their audience politically, navigate their audience’s conservative anxieties. This is especially the case during times of political unrest, when working-class agitation and politically radical speech would be dismissed as wholly dangerous and misguided or misguided and indicating needed but less radical change. The two texts I examine in this chapter, Thomas Carlyle’s Past and Present and Charles Dickens’ Hard Times, find the working class indicating the failure of utilitarian capitalism. But the accurate signs working-class suffering produces must not be the signs of radical, critical speech. Rather, exorcising the radical crowd from their texts, these authors depict working-class individuals who desire, beyond subsistence needs, communal fellowship, the sympathetic economy.

Nineteenth-century working-class consumption as it related to the problems of subsistence and social reproduction was a particularly visible issue. Thomas Malthus’ model of population growth, published in the early 1820s and the subject of much debate, suggests the problem of working class over-consumption, but generally in terms of subsistence. Without sexual restraint, the working class would soon outstrip the food supply and would be the first to suffer due to the high prices caused by increased demand. The working-class crowd, transgressing moral and economic law, were overly reproductive and hence over-consumers. Similarly, Malthus’ law suggests that an oversupply in the labor population would yield decreasing demand for labor and hence rationalize low wages. But if Malthus’ law suggests a theoretical problem for labor within the system of neo-classical economics, the crises of the 1830s and 1840s would pose a more complex – and less theoretical – economic puzzle. Overproduction and high prices came about not from the fulfillment of classical free-trade theory, but from a conflict of class interests. The immediate problem of high agricultural demand,
manufactured by the Corn Laws’ protective tariffs, caused an increase in food prices the poor could ill afford. The situation was then exacerbated when overproduction of other commodities led the manufacturers to decrease their labor force. These factors produced a sharp change in other classes’ representations of the laboring class: suddenly the worker was both hands and mouth.

*Past and Present*’s working class provides a useful illustration of the problem of working-class consumption. Complicating Klancher’s semiotic class distinctions as described in my Introduction, the working class crowd of the “Manchester Insurrection” emerges in silent and respective protest as “the first practical form of our Sphynx-riddle,” what Carlyle might elsewhere refer to as a “sign of the times” (22). On the one hand, the crowd *is* beneath the circulation of signs. Consistently attacking an economic and political society that produces, circulates and consumes false representations, Carlyle depicts a working class crowd that is irreproachable because, despite some “violent” yet insubstantial radical speech, its members are “inarticulate” and “dumb”; “a deep unspoken sense lies in these strong men, -- inconsiderable, almost stupid, as all they can articulate of it is. Amid all violent stupidity of speech, a right noble instinct of what is doable and what is not doable never forsakes them: the strong inarticulate men and workers, whom *Fact* patronizes” (23). On the other hand, then, Carlyle’s rabble produce – or rather are patronized by – a sign. Noble and speechless as savages, they yet indicate the truth by which all false representations are judged, the nearly religious “Court of Courts, that same; where the universal soul of Fact and very Truth sits President” (15). In opposition to the “Governors and Governing classes that can articulate and utter” but who only produce further false representations, Carlyle’s inarticulate workers then enter his text as “augury” for his editorial narrator to interpret, and in several ways.

Carlyle first translates the working-class sign into the terms of the “cash nexus,” the free-trade economy he will eventually critique; “these poor Manchester manual workers mean only, by day’s wages for day’s work, certain coins of money adequate to keep them living – in return for their work, such modicum of food, clothes and fuel as will enable them to continue their work itself” (26). The workers desire to reenter the economy only to reproduce themselves. Carlyle’s articulation of labor’s consumer desire
is too conspicuously close to Marx’s analysis of capitalist wages to pass unnoticed. Clearly paraphrased by Gayle Rubin, Marx’s economic analysis identifies capital as the difference between the wage earner’s subsistence and the price of the good produced; the worker gets a wage; the capitalist gets the things the worker has made during his or her time of employment. If the total value of the things the worker has made exceeds the value of his or her wage, the aim of capitalism has been achieved. The capitalist gets back the cost of the wage, plus an increment – surplus value. This can occur because the wage is determined not by the value of what the labourer makes, but by the value of what it takes to keep him or her going – to reproduce him or her from day to day, and to reproduce the entire work-force from one generation to the next (108).

In fact, Marx’s subsistence-supporting commodities are similar to Carlyle’s – “food, clothing, housing, fuel” (109). Thus, beneath signs, Carlyle’s workers are capable of representing a sign – but the sign indicates the desire to return to the cash nexus, to simply reproduce their own lifestyle as producers. Carlyle’s working-class “insurrection” produces a sign that calls attention to the transgression of an economic law. But the workers working again, dispersed into their individual members, the sign submerged into the cash nexus’ status quo, they would again be merely self-reproductive, beneath cultural signs. In fact, the workers would produce a different sign, the sign of capitalism: money and the surplus value of the capitalist.

Of course, Carlyle harshly condemns the free-trade economy; hence he interprets a further desire in his insurrectionary augury, something closer to his meta-representational “fact.” But this desire is “still inarticulate, cannot shape itself into a demand at all, only lies in them as a dumb wish; perhaps only, still more inarticulate, as a dumb, altogether unconscious want” (26). Carlyle thus suppresses the very articulate “Six Points,” the demands of the Chartist party – “universal manhood suffrage, the secret ballot, payment for members of parliament, abolition of the property qualifications for members, annual elections, and equal electoral districts” – beneath his own admittedly vague antidote (Altick, vii). Carlyle will not authorize political representation though he will admit the representation, the sign whose meaning his editor can reproduce.

And, Carlyle’s “unconscious want,” significant in its vague extension of the
desire for subsistence consumption, admits the problem of working-class consumption generally. The working class desires a different social configuration, a different culture, where representation, if it is not precisely truth, at least aligns itself with Carlyle’s “Court of Courts.” If it is obvious that the working class is incapable of participating in such a culture’s production, it yet possesses the correct taste, the desire for it. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital accumulates through a family’s investment only after the needs for basic reproduction are met; “the length of time for which a given individual can prolong his acquisition process depends on the length of time for which his family can provide him with the free time, i.e., time free from economic necessity, which is the precondition for the initial accumulation” (“Forms of Capital”). Its conspicuous desire, constitutes the working class’ value for Carlyle’s editor. What would supply the working class’ “unconscious want,” beyond the means of subsistence, is the cultural capital of a different habitus. But what that cultural capital might be is merely latent. Uneducated, inarticulate, the rabble is yet incapable of entering the public sphere as representation, unless through the embodied capital of Carlyle’s distinguishing editor. Thus, Carlyle’s working-class cultural capital is generalized, indeed unrealizable. But if articulated, what would the working class desire, what consume? What want might be supplied for the working class outside the present terms of the laissez-faire economy? What specific signs would workers circulate? How would they speak?

In Book III, “The Modern Worker,” Carlyle returns to the problem of wages and working-class “augury.” He finds that the “dumb millions of toilers” produce revolutionary signs – “French revolutions, Chartisms, Revolts of Three Days” – because they “work sore and yet gain nothing”; they are “heart-worn, weary, yet isolated, unrelated, girt in with cold universal Laissez-faire” (210). “It is not to die, or even to die of hunger, that makes a man wretched,” Carlyle argues; it is isolation, the lack of sympathy (210). Here, Carlyle summons a further sign of laissez faire’s insufficiency, the “Irish Widow” who, turned away from all charities, “proved her sisterhood by dying of typhus fever and infecting seventeen persons” (210). Fellow feeling is the correct correlative to society’s necessary, factual fellowship. Hence, laissez faire remains unaligned with “fact” because it privileges isolated individuals related merely by the invisible hand, which Carlyle interestingly dismisses as a mere rhetorical representation.
Carlyle’s editor thus demands sympathetic social relations as a corrective to laissez faire. And sympathy is necessary in Carlyle’s examples, not among a particular class’ members, but between different classes. The desire for sympathy and sympathetic aid, for acknowledged community, is here the working class’ “unconscious want,” the sign produced by a yet “dumb” class. *Hard Times’s* workers will produce a similar sign, but in Dicken’s text the desire for communal sympathy emerges within a consciously articulated consumer sphere.

In *Hard Times*, Dickens is equally critical of the cash nexus and utilitarian enlightenment. Satirizing laissez-faire economics, parliamentary investigations, industrial factories, and especially institutional education as symptoms of the same social disease, *Hard Times’s* argument for more humane social institutions seems similar to *Past and Present’s* wholesale critique of the “cash nexus.” But Dickens, unlike Carlyle, does not refuse to give us a “Morrison’s Pill,” a cure-all to stave off the market’s infiltration into all social space; encouraging “imaginative graces and delights” will create a more humane society.

Dickens’ vague and narrowly articulated, if seemingly potent, project relies on the mid-century discourse of culture and cultivation and its binary opposition to a laissez-faire society. Dickens’ working class, then, occupies an unstable relation to the novel’s idea of culture. His workers are a product of industrial society, but they are also “innocent of signs,” free from market desire. As the latter, they indicate a socially critical sign that Dickens then links to his “imaginative” ideal. Dickens finds his working class’ cultural capital, its value beyond production of the cash nexus, to be that of the cultural critics who desired that education yield, according to Raymond Williams, “cultivation, the work of perfection, which Arnold was to name as Culture,” and that “received increasing emphasis in opposition to the powerful Utilitarian tendency which conceived education as the training of men to carry out particular tasks in a particular kind of civilization” (*Culture* 111). Though Dickens’ working class is conspicuously un-educated, he yet attempts to translate its “cultural” capital into political capital through his working class hero, Stephen Blackpoole.

*Hard Time’s* working-class crowd is much like Carlyle’s of *Past and Present*. 
Gathered at a union meeting led by an immoral demagogue whose rhetoric reflects that of Milton’s Satan, they themselves are “a crowd of earnest faces, whose honesty in the main no competent observer free from bias could doubt” (106). Their demagogue leads them to believe that “every man felt his condition to be, somehow or other, worse than it might be; that every man considered it incumbent on him to join the rest, toward the making it better; that everyman felt his own hope to be in his allying himself to the comrades by whom he was surrounded” (106). However, the narrator interjects, they are “unhappily wrong” (106). But like Carlyle’s editor, Dickens’ narrator finds that working class discontent indicates a “sign” since “to pretend that these men went astray wholly without cause, and of their own irrational wills, was to pretend that there could be smoke without fire, death without birth, harvest without seed, anything or everything produced from nothing” (106). Producing a symbolic sign in excess of their production within the cash nexus, their sign has merit – it is endorsed by their “honesty” though their honesty fails to lead them to the correct articulation of the problem. Although Dickens in 1854 faced a much better economy, with less working-class economic hardship, than Carlyle did in Past and Present, the working-class radical produces similarly interpretable signs. However, left to themselves, they are generally the inarticulate “hands,” relying on others for thoughts and action.

The narrator, opposing the demagogue’s interpretation of systemic crisis, interprets the problem as the lack of culture. After describing the romantic, union-opposing intercourse between Blackpoole and Rachel, he addresses his narratees as those possessing institutional power;

Utilitarian economists, skeletons of schoolmasters, Commissioners of Fact, genteel and used up infidels, gabbler s of many little dog’s eared creeds, the poor you will always have with you. Cultivate in them while there is yet time, the utmost graces of the fancies and affections, to adorn their lives so much in need of ornament; or in the day of your triumph, when romance is utterly driven out of their souls, and they and a bare existence stand face to face, Reality will take a wolfish turn, and make an end of you. (125)

Blackpoole and Rachel are the ideal bearers of an innately romantic cultivation. And cultivation, according to the narrator, is what the working class really indicates in its
signifying radical speech.

In this argument, the narrator aligns himself with the general movement at mid-century which led Samuel Coleridge, J. H. Newman and others to argue for “the harmonious development of those qualities and faculties that characterize our humanity” beyond utilitarian functionality (Culture and Society 111). For Newman, “the culture of the intellect is a good in itself and its own end” (111). That is, it possesses its own “utility” but is not simply the intellectual utility within a “profession.” Dickens’ narrator, in arguing cultivation for the worker, thus seems to find the working class desiring – like Carlyle’s “unconscious want” – an existence beyond its construction as utilitarian selves. Such arguments are not uncommon within the movement for cultivation. For instance, Charles Kingsley commends Cambridge University for “helping to educate these men… unhappy and most dangerous – the men conscious of unsatisfied and unemployed intellect” (112). Raymond Williams finds Macaulay functionally arguing that “the ‘ignorance’ of the ‘common people’ was a danger to property, and that therefore their education was necessary” (112). The inculcation of culture, employing the mind beyond participation in the laissez-faire economy, would supply unsatisfied working-class desire, thus preempting potential revolution – or simply property destruction. But Dickens’ narrator – while he relies on it – also subtly qualifies the discourse of culture and cultivation.

Firstly, the idea of cultivation emerges only as the abstract idealization of Stephen Blackpoole’s and Rachel’s relationship, a simple if ostensibly powerful friendship. The friendship’s immediate power – and benefit for an audience anxious about radical agitation – is to provide an alternative to union membership. Where the union members’ are required to join through an oath, Stephen has already sworn that he will place his happiness in no one’s power but Rachel’s and thus promises to abandon economic reform. Stephen’s contract with Rachel – not quite a contract for Rachel – yet bears similarities to the creature’s narrative contract since he then becomes an individual in the economy of bourgeois symbolic exchange and not a member of the dangerously revolutionary crowd. By firmly refusing to break his oath to Rachel, he is ostracized by his fellow class members who contract with the union. Not a member of the misguided institution, the union, but a member of society, he is “cultivated,” bearing an identity
beyond his utilitarian place as laborer within the industrial economy.

Secondly, Dickens’ passage on working-class cultivation indicates his difference from the general discourse on cultivation as education. The novel’s educational system is notoriously and simplistically utilitarian – with no space for Newman’s or Arnold’s culture. As such, it produces stifled and broken human beings. The most successfully constructed utilitarian is the amoral Bitzer who reduces all personal actions to the doctrine of rational self-interest. But Louisa Gradgrind is its most indicative, her “humanity” stifled to near unconsciousness, much like the radical crowd’s desires. Rejecting the utilitarian system, revolting against her marriage and her father’s education that both inform her doctrinaire utilitarianism, she parallels potential working class revolt. Indicting her father’s educational system, her language is similar to the narrator’s when arguing for working-class cultivation; Louisa claims that the “graces of her soul” were stifled by her utilitarian, fact-based education. Sounding much like Shelley’s creature addressing Victor Frankenstein, she demands of her father “‘how could you give me life, and take from me all the inappreciable things that raise it from the state of conscious death? Where are the graces of my soul? Where are the sentiments of my heart? What have you done, O father, what have you done, with the garden that should have bloomed once, in this great wilderness here?’” (164). The concluding garden metaphor indicates the need for “cultivation;” but the novel identifies no institutional alternative to the utilitarian model that might provide the needed gardening.

Although the narrator has addressed those holding institutional power, the only concrete alternative seems to be the enjoyment of leisure as commodity. Again, the narrator describes the need for “fancies and affections” as the need for “ornament.” Culture becomes a necessary, if simple, addendum to the utilitarian system, a commodity to be enjoyed as leisure. For Stephen and Rachel, this takes the form of friendship, practically “a hurried parting in a common street . . . a sacred remembrance to these two common people” (125). But the novel’s fullest articulation of culture as “fancy and affection” centers on the circus and its commercial product, Sissy Jupe.

Raymond Williams finds *Hard Times*’s circus an antiutilitarian vision, a comprehensive alternative to the systems both he and Dickens critique. Thus “the circus is an end in itself, a pleasurable end, which is instinctive and (in certain respects)
anarchic. It is significant that Dickens has thus to go outside the industrial situation to find any expression of his values” (Culture, 95). Certainly we might, paraphrasing Bakhtin, find it producing a kind of carnivalesque levelling. “Chaste Shakespearean quips and retorts” stand by comedy performed on horseback (9). But the circus, if outside industrial production, is far from “outside” capitalist production and consumption. It is impossible to overlook the value of the circus within the consumer economy. As Sleary admits, he has two “philosophies,” embodied in his rolling eyes: one aimed toward human feeling but the other toward exchange value.

In his dual nature, Sleary thus represents what Bourdieu calls the “the two-faced reality” of cultural goods; they are “a commodity and a symbolic object” dependent on their exchange value but bearing as well the fiction of their autonomy, their difference from mere commodity that, in turn, supports their exchange value (113). In this form they represent both the economic commodity and, as Raymond Williams describes, “‘subjectivity’, ‘the imagination’, and in these terms, ‘the individual’”; Williams continues to state of the nineteenth century that “‘Culture’, or more specifically ‘art’ and ‘literature’ . . . were seen as the deepest record, the deepest impulse, and the deepest resource of the human spirit” (Marxism, 15). Terry Eagleton, in “Ideology and Literary Form,” provides the needed historical contextualization – utilitarianism, faced with its own harsh inhumanity, “is driven to exploit the fertile symbolic resources of Romantic humanism” (170). Sleary, though producing a more “popular” commodity, circulates cultural value, the potential presence of humanity within the laissez-faire economy. But, of course, he does not critically interrogate his economy of symbolic goods, other than to recognize the humanizing benefits of its dual dimension.

The link to bourgeois ideology and cultural capital is made explicit through Sissy and her father. Jupe decides to educate his daughter to augment his own ignorance, which he conflates with powerlessness; According to Sissy, “‘It was . . . because he felt himself to be a poor, weak, ignorant, helpless man, that he wanted me so much to know a great deal, and be different from him’” (46). His idea of education is thus very close to the contemporary discourse of cultural education. Education would create a more complete human being. But, according to the novel’s value system, Jupe is not wrong because he receives an ideological indoctrination in cultural education’s symbolic value.
He is wrong, rather, because the utilitarian educational system into which he enrolls his
daughter admits no room for cultivating “fancies.” The circus, however, fusing
utilitarianism and imagination, creates better human beings by circulating as a leisure
commodity, creating consumers of cultural commodities. On the one hand, the
carnivalesque is a production for those who would consume it, exercising their fancies.
On the other hand, its producers represent a habitus that values cultural consumption.

Jupe attempts to invest his daughter with embodied cultural capital – “reading . . .
writing . . . ciphering” – so that she might become a marketable individual and able to
consume cultural commodities in leisure, for instance, imaginative writing. Sissy’s is
thus similar to the capitalist Bounderby’s familial education. His parents “never thought
it hardship on themselves to pinch a bit that he might write and cipher beautiful… to help
him out in life, and put him ‘prentice” (199). Upon entering the market proper,
Bounderby renounces his family, representing himself as the stereotypical rugged
individualist. He conforms to the market ideology that suppresses the necessary
investment of cultural capital. The only difference, besides their necessarily distinct
gender roles, is Jupe’s valuation of cultural goods, which produce in her the necessary
sentimental ties. Sissy then occupies the novel’s privileged place at its conclusion; she is
grown learned in childish lore; thinking no innocent and pretty fancy ever to be
despised; trying hard to know her fellow humbler creatures, and to beautify their
lives of machinery and reality with those imaginative graces and delights, without
which the heart of infancy will wither up, the sturdiest physical manhood will be
morally stark death . . . she holding this course as part of no fantastic vow, or
bond, or brotherhood, or sisterhood, or pledge, or covenant, or fancy dress, or
fancy hair; but simply as a duty to be done. (226)
A kind of symbolic good herself, she actively and freely circulates the ameliorating
cultural goods without which, according to Dickens’ narrator, the utilitarian economy
would eventually undermine itself in revolution. She is a microcosm of the economy of
cultural goods, circulating humanity with no deference at all to self-interest. Her cultural
capital, within the novel’s representational economy, translates not into monetary capital
but into a privileged place that indicates her value to the marketplace at large. Investing
his daughter with leisure and cultural capital, Jupe is thus a better utilitarian than the
utilitarians themselves.

But, if the novel concludes idealizing the near bourgeois Sissy Jupe, it also aligns the working class with its ideal circulation of cultural goods. Stephen Blackpool, though literate, is not educated. Nor, although his apartment contains “a few books and writings,” does he seem to possess the taste or desire for cultural goods or education that distracts Jupe (52). Beneath consumer desire, Stephen is yet cultivated, as the narrator implies, addressing utilitarian institutions. But this seeming contradiction is resolved if we see the working class’s innocence of consumption bearing the same symbolic value as cultural goods. “Innocent of signs,” “capable of fellow feeling” it is, with art, literature, and the circus, the “deepest resource of the human spirit.” And the workers’ cultural capital yet relates to an economic commodity; Stephen’s friendship with Rachel is the correct consumption of leisure time, the correct “ornament” to complement industrialization and the pursuit of self-interest. As the narrator says, to relieve hard work, he would give the working class “a little more play” (48). However, if the narrator interprets the working class’s sign as a kind of cultural capital, Stephen’s critique transcends the economy of symbolic goods; the novel translates his cultural capital into a more explicit political critique.

Raymond Williams finds Stephen’s expression, “‘aw’ a muddle,’” a poor critique of the system, especially given *Hard Times*’s dismissal of union discourse. However, the expression of general bafflement at mid-century economic woes keeps fairly respectable company. Stephen’s “muddle” sounds decidedly similar to Carlyle’s “Sphinx-question,” the puzzling, interrelated difficulties of the intricate present, if stated less allusively. And Stephen’s critique extends beyond the narrator’s argument for the circulation of cultural goods. On the one hand, Stephen deploys his critique when faced with institutional indifference to his personal happiness. Desiring a divorce from his drunkard wife, he solicits Bounderby’s advice on the practicality of his wish. When Bounderby reveals that divorce requires monetary capital, Stephen’s complaint – “‘tis a muddle’” – produces a properly indignant response: “‘don’t you talk nonsense . . . about things you don’t understand; and don’t you call the institutions of your country a muddle, or you’ll get yourself into a real muddle one of these fine mornings’” (58). Stephen’s critique is a socialist critique, for which Bounderby fires him. In death, as well, Stephen circulates a
union critique – the need for better working conditions. Falling into an exposed mine shaft that has been the death of many before him, Stephen dies and his death supplies an implicit critique. But his dying wish is the same as Carlyle’s working class “want”– the desire not for social change but for universal sympathy. The “muddle” in his mind clears at his religious revelation; “‘If soom ha’ been wantin’ in unnerstan’in’ me better, I, too, ha’ been wantin’ in’ unnerstan’in’ them better”’ and thus he wishes “’that aw th’ world may on’y coom together more, an’ get a better unnerstann’in’ o’ one another’” (206).

Forsaking critical discourse for the discourse of sympathy, Stephen ultimately exorcises his inner agitator. Sympathy, like culture, is the correct ornament to embellish the bare utilitarian system.

Marxists have found Hard Times reflecting positive values, even as it critiques the utilitarian economy. Terry Eagleton finds Dickens representing a “vulgar vitalism” even if it is “a significant aesthetic and ideological weakness” like the charity indicating “Christmas spirit” (188). Raymond Williams similarly finds Dickens, especially his circus, reflecting a lived and shared experience, much as Williams’ own ideal culture is a mutually produced and consumed, ever-changing idea. But, if his utilitarian critique is hard-hitting, Dickens’ alternative represents a vision of consumer culture that is ultimately a mere consumer addendum to laissez-faire production.

Hard Times, zooming in its narrative lens to reveal the individuals of Carlyle’s radical, anxiety-creating crowd, finds the working class’s “unconscious want” to be – consumer desire similar to the bourgeoisie’s. If Dickens’ satire critiques harshly the laissez-faire economy, his solution is the satisfaction of symbolic consumer desire. And if the working class possesses insufficient monetary capital for either political or economic enfranchisement, its cultural capital as consumers produces common interest, the worker’s interest in English society’s economy. Much like Sleary’s two-eyed gaze, or like Arnold’s sweetness and light, he finds consumerism containing the necessary humanity to temper a utilitarian society’s harsh, self-interested pursuits – and to re-incorporate (rehabilitate) the individual from the radical crowd. Sympathy – not a differently conceived political economy – erases perceived class difference, produces consumer equalities. Carlyle and Dickens privilege the economy of symbolic goods as the potent antiutilitarian revolutionary alternative. They thus fall prey to the illusion of
symbolic goods. If Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* instigates the family quarrel
estranging political economy from eighteenth-century moral philosophy, these texts
desire a reunion that yet does not essentially alter political economy’s “God-given” laws.
Chapter 3
Common Tastes, Common Interests: Mary Barton and Laissez Faire’s Symbolic Capital

Elizabeth Gaskell, less critical of laissez faire than Carlyle or Dickens, interrogates the problem of working-class representation as a problem of cultural capital explicitly. Generally, un-“presentable” to “polite society,” how would workers overcome their deficit of objectified and embodied cultural capital, of commodities and education, clothes and leisure? Descending into the lives, the intertwined domestic spheres, of several working-class families, Mary Barton presents the working-class consumer. Like Shelley’s creature, whose bourgeois desires are the precondition of his entrance into civil society, the workers’ thwarted consumer desires are the condition of their revolt. Both bearers of embodied cultural capital and consumers of objectified cultural capital, they believe their position as mere “hands,” producers within the laissez-faire economy, to become – unexpectedly – consumers within a bourgeois habitus. And Gaskell takes pains, like Shelley’s creature swaying Victor Frankenstein’s sympathies, to link the classes together. The “common interests” of bourgeois and worker within the productive economy become the common interests of individuals within the same habitus. All that is needed to restore consumer society to the utilitarian economy is sympathy.

Gaskell begins her narrative with the disclaimer that she “know[s] nothing of Political Economy, or the theories of trade” (30). The Broadview text editor, Jennifer Foster, responds with the disclaimer that, like many mid-century Victorians, “Mrs. Gaskell read Adam Smith’s The Wealth of Nations (1776) and was familiar with the work of Harriet Martineau and other political economists of the day” (31). But Gaskell similarly dissimulates when she describes the object of her narrative; “the more I reflected on this unhappy state of things between those so bound to each other by common interests, as the employers and the employed must so often be, the more anxious I became to give some utterance to the agony which, from time to time, convulses this dumb people; the agony of suffering without the sympathy of the happy, or of erroneously believing this is the case” (30). Not only does she reveal her knowledge of
political economy in stating the two parties’ “common interest” – a default claim of political economy – but she also betrays the perspective of her imagined audience, representing the laborer as “dumb” and hence expressing political demands that are “convulsive” or bodily reflexive, without thought. The former idea she returns to and would seem to support in her narrative. The later, however, she explicitly contradicts.

From the beginning, Gaskell attempts to create connections between classes, naturalizing bourgeois distinctive signs. In the novel’s opening scene, the working-class crowd on holiday consumes the “picturesque,” a pastoral countryside: and is consumed in turn by the narratee as the “factory girls” are dressed poorly but “in no unpicturesque fashion” (35). Inscribing the working class within a common discourse of aesthetic landscape consumption, Gaskell implicitly creates connections between the taste of her subjects and the taste of her audience. But Gaskell’s most transgressive description of the crowd is its general appearance, since “the only things to strike a passerby was an acuteness and intelligence of countenance, which has often been noticed in a manufacturing population” (35). The workers’ “intelligence” is unexpected to the higher-class narratee, who only anticipates pleasing pastoral subjects. But the narrator then suppresses the shock by arguing her description to be non-transgressive, that is, generally accepted. When the narrator pulls individuals from the crowd, the Wilsons and the Bartons, the expected pastoral subject is Mrs. Barton, who “had the fresh beauty of the agricultural districts; and somewhat of the deficiency of sense in her countenance, which is likewise characteristic of the rural inhabitants in comparison with the natives of the manufacturing towns” (36). The narrator thus establishes credibility by attributing embodied cultural capital to the manufacturing class, opposing them to the now pastoral, dumb agricultural laborer. Thus contradicting her introduction’s caricature, which attributes stupidity to the worker (the “manufacturing” class, at least), Gaskell interrogates the economic preconditions for more sympathetic representation by detailing working-class consumption. The most obvious of these is the monetary capital necessary for the consumption of objectified cultural capital: commodities such as furniture, food and clothing.

According to the narrator, one of John Barton’s character flaws is his extravagance. He is an over-consumer, since “he spent all he got with the confidence
(you may also call it improvidence) of one who was willing, and believed himself able, to supply all his wants by his own exertions” (55). Thus, when laid off due to “his master suddenly fail[ing],” he has no savings (55). The general opinion of working-class unthriftiness is tidily stated by the strict Mr. Thornton, of Gaskell’s later novel *North and South*, who claims of the working poor that their “suffering … is but the natural punishment of dishonestly-enjoyed pleasure, at some former period of their lives.” He continues stating “I do not look on self-indulgent, sensual people as worthy of my hatred; I simply look on them with contempt for their poorness of character” (79). *Mary Barton*, however, treats over-consumption with a more sympathetic eye.

When, towards the novel’s beginning and before the reader has learned that Barton’s consumption is a flaw, the narrator itemizes the slightly bourgeois commodities decorating the Bartons’ domestic interior, there is no editorial condemnation. While the Bartons extend hospitality to their friends, the Wilsons, the objects emerge to the reader’s eye as “Mrs. Barton lighted a dip by sticking it in the fire, and having placed it satisfactorily in a tin candlestick, began to look further about her, on hospitable thoughts intent. The room was tolerably large and possessed many conveniences” (44). The list of expenditures that immediately follows – for example, “a gay coloured piece of oil cloth,” “the place crammed with furniture,” “a bright green japanned tea-tray, having a couple of scarlet lovers embracing in the middle” – materialize as Mrs. Barton’s “hospitable thoughts,” the conflation of generosity and materialism justifying the described consumption, preempting the reader’s possible critique of the Bartons’ unthriftiness. Similarly, the further catalogue of their overexpenditures on the meal is tinged with pathos. Hospitality – not invidious comparison or “sensuality” – colors the signs of conspicuous consumption. When Barton, along with many other workers, loses his position, the narrator’s accusation of extravagance is tempered by his preceding consumption’s apparent kindness. The Bartons conspicuous consumption bears the symbolic value of fellow feeling, manifested in communal hospitality and friendship.

The economic bust that follows the novel’s opening, a period of apparent economic boom, then dramatizes the need for sympathetic exchange between bourgeois and working classes. But the bourgeois capitalist, represented by Mr. Carson, fails to enter into symbolic exchange other than with his own family. While John Barton and the
elder Wilson take pains to extend aid to the Davenport family, representative of the poorest, Mr. Carson refuses. His consumption, purely conspicuous, does not extend beyond his household. For instance,

Mr. Barton’s was a good house, and furnished with disregard to expense. But, in addition to lavish expenditure, there was much taste shown, and many articles chosen for their beauty and elegance adorned his rooms. As Wilson passed a window which a housemaid had thrown open, he saw picture and gilding, at which he was tempted to stop and look. (105)

Immediately preceding this portrayal through the eyes of Wilson, John Barton has critiqued the capitalists for spending on “‘great big houses’” while neglecting charity. The narrator’s description of the house receives a critical contextualization through Barton’s economic discourse: the narrator’s “good house” recalling Barton’s “‘great big houses.’” But the narrator masks this critique, choosing to emphasize the Carsons’ “taste.” Implicitly opposing the oft-represented conspicuous and distasteful spending of the nouveau riche, the narrator offers a positive representation of the Carsons’ expenditures within the value system of nineteenth-century aesthetics. And as the Carsons will spend conspicuously on their home, Mr. Carson cannot refuse his daughters request for luxury items.

The Carsons are tasteful consumers, but they yet possess limitations. When Mr. Carson’s daughter enters the “luxurious library” where Mr. Carson and his son “lazily enjoyed their nicely prepared food,” their conversation consists of her requests for “eau de Portugal” and expensive flowers. He submits, calling his daughter “‘little Miss Extravagance’” (108). Immediately preceding Wilson’s request on behalf of the Davenports for medical assistance, this passage implicitly critiques the Carsons’ consumption. His luxury consumption receives the symbolic value of family-oriented consumption, thus sublimating what appears to be, from Barton’s socialist perspective, mere conspicuous consumption. Replying to Barton’s socialist-based critique, Wilson has echoed Carson’s claim that “‘I shall ha’ to retrench, and be very careful in my expenditure during these bad times, I assure ye’” (105). Thus contradicting Carson’s earlier claim, Carson’s continuing “extravagance” is further critiqued when, acquiescing to his daughter’s request for luxury items, he refuses to comply with Wilson’s request in
a life or death situation.

Mr. Carson’s refusal, then, dramatizes the limits of his sympathy, the boundaries of his economy of symbolic goods. As he will later argue in his climactic discussion with Jeb Legh, the economy stands in for personal interactions, its laws absolving the capitalist of social responsibility. Carson will spend money on his daughter’s flowers but not workers’ lives; he will acquiesce to his children’s requests but not his workers’.

Outside the bourgeois family, the marketplace howls. But Gaskell’s implicitly ironic contrast between Carson’s spending for his family and spending for his workers’ family, while locating symbolic exchange within the family, also dramatizes the limited sympathies between social classes. As the working class’ representatives petition bourgeois society for aid, first marching in London and later through union negotiation with Manchester capitalists, their appearance preempts bourgeois sympathy.

To dramatize the difficulty of working-class self-representation, the novel first critiques conspicuous consumption and appearance-based social judgment through an allegory of clothing and economy. Both clothing expenditure and judging another based on clothing are suspect within the novel’s habitus. For instance, the Miss Odgens are the subject of a narrative jest when they cannot appear at their teetotaling father’s funeral because they lack presentable funeral garb. Mary Barton’s friend, Margaret Legh, provides the sympathetic explanation that “‘the undertakers urge her on, you see, and tell her this thing’s usual, and that thing’s only a common mark of respect, and that everybody has t’other thing, till the poor woman has no will of her own’” (81). Deferring to the “hypodermic” model of consumer manipulation, Margaret places the working-class consumer squarely within the consumer economy, if critically.3

But, more importantly, clothing and appearance become central issues in the novel’s climactic meeting between union organizers and capitalists when Henry Carson’s comic caricature sketch of the union delegation convinces the union men to pledge to murder him. Although the narrative distances the union’s condemnation and “fierce terrible oath” from the narrator’s condemnation, the narrator tentatively supports the

3 According to Colin Campbell, the “hypodermic” model “attributes a passive role to the consumer, whilst the onerous task of ensuring that the endless and continuous creation of new wants occurs is attributed to such agents of the producers as advertisers and market researchers” (46).
union’s outrage at Carson’s unsympathetic jest. The narrator describes their appearance before the masters as

little of stature, and their fustian clothes hung loosely upon their shrunk limbs. In choosing their delegates, too, the operatives had had more regard to their brains, and power of speech, than to their wardrobes; they might have read the opinions of that worthy Professor Teufelsdrockh, in Sartor Resartus, to judge from the dilapidated coats and trousers, which yet clothed men of parts and power…. Some of the masters were rather affronted at such a ragged detachment coming between the wind and their nobility (241).

If Carson lacks sympathy for the delegation because of its members’ initial appearance, as the passage seems to imply, then the narrator critiques the evaluative position that does not see past immediate appearances, especially in citing Carlyle’s critical allegory of the clothing industry. Carson’s negative misrepresentation of the working class bears allegorically the weight of all such caricatures and misperceptions that circulate through the public sphere. And, as in a Shakespearean comedy, the circulation of misrepresentations tangle into a single, meaningful knot. Gaskell’s denouement depends specifically on the clear self-representation of one class to another.

In particular, Carson’s caricature reflects Barton’s narration of his experience as a delegate accompanying the Chartists’ “Six-Points” petition. Gaskell’s narrator describes the petition as conceived by chartists and “operatives” to inform the government of their situation since “They could not believe that government knew of their misery; they rather chose to think it possible that men could voluntarily assume the office of legislators for a nation who were ignorant of its real state…. Besides, the starving multitudes had heard, that the very existence of their distress had been denied in Parliament” (128). The workers simplistically believe that representing the issue itself – accompanied by delegates that represent both politically their class and visually its hunger and poverty – will affect change. But they are unaware of the misrepresentation that precedes them, the representation that, reducing their humanity, excuses their oppression. Thus, Barton narrates the gratuitous beating he receives at the hands of a policeman who argues that he is upsetting the wealthy’s carriage horses. When he narrates his plight to the policeman, attempting to explain his position, Barton states that the policeman “‘only laughed’”
As he refuses to narrate the delegates’ further humiliation in the House of Commons, Barton’s smaller humiliation supplies a metonymy for the class humiliation that Gaskell’s text itself refuses to represent. Richard Altick supplies the missing referent. As his introduction to *Past and Present* describes, the six-mile long petition in favor of the Chartists “Six Points,” when presented before the House of Commons, “was rejected with alacrity mixed with laughter, a combination that did not noticeably conciliate the protesting crowds” (vii).

*Mary Barton*, then, both dramatizes the difficulty of seeing beyond layers of representation and poses a solution. As her narrator notes of the union delegates, Gaskell counters misperceptions with the claim that the working class can be intelligent and “men of parts and power,” capable of entering the political public sphere. But as Gaskell negotiates to ascribe embodied capital to the working class, she reveals the limits of her own countercultural representational system. The working class’s intelligence must inscribe it within a bourgeois habitus – not within a dangerously powerful union whose contractual oaths oppose by transgression the social contract. The narrative draws the distinction most clearly in its implicit comparison of the foils, Job Legh and John Barton. Both are conspicuously intelligent. Both conspicuously voice working-class criticism of the capitalist system. Entering the public sphere, accumulating political capital, requires displaying embodied cultural capital. But if Gaskell attempts a similar representation, she does so by opposing the union’s “awful power” (230). While Job Legh’s intelligence is a form of consumer taste that inscribes him within the economy of symbolic goods, John Barton’s consumption of socialist discourse causes his transgression.

Despite the implicit, tentative authority given to Barton’s socialist discourses, he is guilty of the “sin” of class warfare. When first described he is capable of either “good or evil” (36). As political disappointment follows famine, Barton becomes “a Chartist, a Communist; all that is commonly called wild or visionary” and his political thoughts and affiliations finally lead him to the inexcusable murder of Henry Carson (226). Even before the murder, however, the narrator clearly finds Barton moving towards his evil genus, though she does not cease to explain his case sympathetically. As he passes shops filled with food, the narrator condemns Barton as “the thoughts of his heart were touched
by sin, by bitter hatred of the happy, whom he, for the time confounded with the selfish” (101). After the failed petition, he has “diseased thoughts.”

The extent of Gaskell’s conservative negotiations is revealed when the narrator compares Barton to Mary Shelley’s monster. She argues that

No education had given him wisdom and without wisdom, even love, with all its effects, too often works but harm. He acted to the best of his judgement, but it was a widely erring judgement. The actions of the uneducated seem to me typified in those of Frankenstein, that monster of many human qualities, un gifted with a soul, a knowledge of the difference between good and evil. The people rise up to life; they irritate us, they terrify us, and we become their enemies. Then, in the sorrowful moment of our triumphant power, their eyes gaze on us with mute reproach. Why have we made them what they are; a powerful monster, yet without the inner means for peace and happiness? (226)

The Broadview text editor, Jennifer Foster, assumes Gaskell makes the common error of calling the monster by his creator’s name. Of course, it is tempting to assume that Gaskell’s slip is intentional, and that she perceptively sees the monster within the morally uneducated Victor. But this would add little to the argument at hand. It is more difficult to presume that the narrator makes the further mistake of forgetting the creature’s self-narrated bildungsroman, his autodidacticism, his able faculty of speech – and his “soul”; if the “uneducated” lack “the inner means for peace and happiness,” her own characters are misrepresentations. Her allusion’s misreading of Frankenstein, then, recalls the Preface’s “dumb people,” a representation the novel has didactically countered for nearly fourteen chapters. And implicitly comparing a misrepresentation of Frankenstein to a contradictory image of the now “sinful,” “mute,” and “uneducated” John Barton, the narrator momentarily forgets Barton’s articulateness, his education, remembered some few lines later as “rough Lancashire eloquence,” and “a pretty clear head at times, for method and arrangement” (227). The anxiety indicated in the passage’s contradictory representations of Barton and “his class” makes sense only if we see the narrator navigating – consciously or unconsciously – two interconnected prejudices of the mid-century middle class, stigmatized union membership and working-class education in political economics.
John Barton’s knowledge of political discourse would itself be suspect. In his leisure hours, he attends union meetings but also reads the famously radical *Northern Star* (124). His political discourse reflects knowledge of a radical political economy. E. P. Thompson details the funding battles within the emerging Mechanical Institutes, “mutual improvement societies” for the working-class. The middle-class patrons, such as the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, argued with trade unionists and radicals over the inclusion of orthodox political economy, or political economy of any sort, in the Institute’s curriculum (744). Job Legh’s intelligence, represented in his scientific education and interests, would be much less anxiety-creating for a middle-class audience who would see biology as the investigation of God’s creation. The narrator, denying Barton “educated” status thus reflects middle-class anxiety over the content of his education. In addition – she reflects anxiety over radical discourse and the representation of the radical audience, as Klancher terms it, the radical text’s “un-individuated reader.” She reveals this most particularly through her treatment of union membership.

The narrator steps lightly around the issue of the union. Her inconsistencies betray an uncertain valuation of the union’s institutional capital for a nineteenth-century middle-class audience. If Barton is “uneducated” or “mute”’ he is so only from the position that would devalue the institution and discourse in which he would be considered “educated” and “eloquent.” Of course, as Klancher describes, union discourse was often devalued in the representations of middle-class discourse. And we can observe in the narrator’s prevarications an attempt to navigate the union’s institutional capital for a middle-class audience. Barton is “relied upon and valued” by “everyone who came in contact with him” because “his class, his order, was what he stood by, not the rights of his own paltry self” (227). Similarly, his specific abilities are “a necessary talent to large combinations of men” (226). The union confers “value” upon Barton and the narrator attempts to translate that capital for her middle-class audience.

But the very fact that the narrator focuses attention and sympathy on the individual and remains so very skeptical about the institution destabilizes her attempted negotiation of the union’s institutional capital. Later, she will claim “combination is an awful power … capable of almost unlimited good or evil. But to obtain a blessing on its
labours, it must work under the direction of a high and intelligent will. The will of the operatives had not been guided to the calmness of wisdom” (230). The narrator’s idealization of the singular “intelligent will” opposes Barton’s own unselfishness – his devotion to his class but also his “value” only within the institution of the anxiety-creating, uncontrollable crowd. Barton’s worth for the institution, his unselfishness, contains the seeds of his and the union’s transgression – the unindividuated institution combines in the “terrible oath” that will devalue its political capital once and for all within the novel’s valuing system. Gaskell privileges an alternative more congenial to her own social class – and the terms of political economy. If the “unselfish” individual is valuable within the union’s institutional framework, the “enlightened self-interested” individual is an a priori condition of laissez-faire capitalist economic theory.\(^4\)

Job Legh becomes the novel’s privileged working-class political voice because he occupies a habitus, outside radical discourse, that values bourgeois consumption and symbolic exchange. Even more than Barton, Job is conspicuously intelligent: “his forehead was so large it seemed to overbalance the rest of his face…. The eyes absolutely gleamed with intelligence, so keen, so observant, you felt as if they were wizard-like” (74). And his intelligence is directed almost solely towards his scientific pursuits, which the narrator explicitly allies with aristocratic amateur biology. In a short narrative verifying her observational accuracy, the narrator describes an aristocrat in search of a specimen unexpectedly directed to working-class biologists, thus linking upper and lower classes in a mutually interested leisure economy.

Legh’s only political observations, until his privileged role at the novel’s conclusion, are to dismiss the union. Replying to Mary Barton’s inquiry into Job’s union membership, Job states,

“I were obliged to become a member for peace, else I don’t go along with ‘em. Yo see they think themselves wise, and me silly, for differing with them! Well! There’s no harm in that. But then they won’t let me be silly in peace and quietness, but will force me to be as wise as they are; now that’s not British liberty, I say. I’m forced to be wise according to their notions, else they persecute

\(^4\) Adam Smith’s economic ur-text *The Wealth of Nations* details the importance of the enlightened, self-interested individual to the capitalist economy.
me, and starve me out.” (259)

He articulates the constitutionalist argument – as E. P. Thompson describes, the more conservative and less threatening argument of working-class discontent. Mainly historical nostalgia, the idea of British liberty often refers to an ideal pre-Norman past or to a recent past when unstated yet constitutionally protected freedoms guaranteed individual freedoms. Thompson opposes such arguments to those such as the ever-popular radical Thomas Paine’s, who demystifies nostalgic constitutionalism, reinterpreting history for the lower class as its continuous disenfranchisement. But even the constitutionalist argument was generally deployed against industrialism’s perceived encroachment on the rights of “traditional” trades. By arguing for “British liberty” against the unions, Job represents himself as the individual, thinking man, much as the conservative working-class mouthpiece William Cobbett claimed to arrive at conclusions solely through his own observation and not through the influence of popular rhetoric.

As anti-union individualist, and as amateur biologist, Job Legh enters society as a consumer. In fact, his education creates consumer tastes that require spending beyond subsistence concerns. Much as John and Mary Barton overconsume during economic stability, Job Legh devotes available leisure and money to his scientific pursuits. The Legh’s domestic space, rather than filled with bourgeois domestic comforts, contains scientific commodities. As the narrator says, “Instead of pictures were hung rude wooden frames of impaled insects; the little table was covered with cabalistic books; and a case of mysterious instruments lay beside” (74). Margaret Legh reminds the reader of the price paid for her grandfather’s overconsumption; “‘grandfather takes a day here, and a day there, for botonizing or going after insects, and he’ll think little of four or five shillings for a specimen’” (83). But she excuses it since she is “‘so loth to think he should be stinted of what gives him so much pleasure’” (83). Rather than spending leisure time and money on discontented – and threatening – radical texts and union attendance, Job, again in the words of Margaret, is “‘happy as a king, working away till I make him go to bed. It keeps him silent, to be sure; but so long as I see him earnest, and pleased and eager, what does that matter’” (76). “Silent” is unfortunate for Margaret, but fortunate for the middle-class reader who understands that the alternative is John Barton and the potentially revolutionary radical crowd. “Happy as a king” similarly indicates
Job’s complacency, indicating that he is as comfortable with a social system that oppresses him as is the individual that tops the social hierarchy. Job’s scientific interests, far from politically destabilizing, create a non-threatening citizen only as they create a good consumer. The novel implies that a working class, with enough cultural and monetary capital to occupy their leisure hours, is both a “silent” class and productive.

But the novel is even more explicit about Job’s affiliations as he enters a symbolic exchange implicitly opposed to John Barton’s union affilations. While John attends a union meeting, Mary visits the Leghs and observes the flirtations of Margaret and Will Wilson, a sailor home on leave. Job’s antagonistic disbelief at Will Wilson’s mermaid narrative seems to threaten the relationship until Will Wilson appeases Job with a preserved flying fish. Job, wishing “to prove his gratitude” at the gift, decides to “ask Margaret to sing” (206). Will’s response prompts Mary to reflect, “it was possible the plain, sensible Margaret, so prim and demure, might have power over the heart of the handsome, dashing, spirited Will Wilson” (207). Job’s gift is his daughter’s voice, her cultural capital, which he exchanges for Will’s gift. As in Victor Frankenstein’s contract with his creature, the exchange of an objectified woman indicates Levi-Strauss’ society-creating gift. Of course, the situation indicates for Mary a lesson about beauty and attraction and Mary sees agency in Margaret’s “power” on the marriage market. But, for Job, the exchange indicates the extent to which he inhabits a conflated society and capitalist economy.

The symbolic exchange of woman, described as a moral exchange, disguises the economy behind the free gift, the obligation incurred in the exchange. In “The Economy of Symbolic Goods” Bourdieu describes the symbolic exchange as occurring between agents mutually predisposed to suppress the economic exchange rate of gift for obligated reciprocal gift; the reciprocated gift must be “deferred and different” in order to successfully suppress the economic nature of the exchange (Practical Reason 94). Job’s feeling of “gratitude” that leads him to reciprocate with Margaret’s singing voice, indicates the symbolic nature of the exchange; his implicit denial of calculation serves to inscribe him within the economy of symbolic exchange. That he does not defer the exchange serves only to expose its symbolic value, since it forcefully clarifies the correct feeling of reciprocity within the symbolic, moral economy. His fellow feeling garners
him symbolic capital that also takes the form of social capital: the pre-condition of society and social reproduction.

Such sympathetic exchanges occur often among Mary Barton’s working-class individuals. The opening meal conspicuously details sympathetic interactions, especially the feelings behind their manners. Alice thanks Margaret with “tears of holy sympathy” for singing (71). Mary responds to her father’s dejection after the London March, holding “his hand with silent sympathy” (143). The old sailor who harbors Mary Barton in London preceding Jem Wilson’s trial, expresses his anxiety on Mary’s behalf “from some repressed sympathy” and extends hospitality from the same motives (393). The narrative, then, explicitly severs Barton from such socializing activities. Immediately following the exchange of gifts between Job Legh and Will Wilson, and towards the end of the gathering, the narrative reminds us of Barton’s location, as Mary responds to the query with “‘I guess he’s at his Union! He’s there most evenings’” (208). The narrator will follow and detail the lives of working-class individuals, entering both society and economy, but begins to place John Barton at her text’s shadowy margins.

Raymond Williams finds Gaskell in Mary Barton representing John Barton to the limits of her sympathy and then forsaking him because of her own bourgeois anxiety. Thus “John Barton, a political murderer appointed by a trade union, is a dramatization of the fear of violence which was widespread among the upper and middle classes at the time, and which penetrated, as an arresting and controlling factor, even into the deep imaginative sympathy of a Mrs. Gaskell” (Culture 90). Such a reading, while informative, devalues Gaskell’s artistic project as she negotiates the sympathies not of herself as a member of a particular class, but of her audience – as Williams reluctantly admits, the change in title from the intended John Barton was a demand from the original publisher. Such a reading also devalues Gaskell’s philosophical investigation of and investment in political economy and the role of sympathy.

John Barton returns before his death, momentarily, in order to enter into sympathetic, symbolic exchange. But now, such exchange emerges not between worker and worker, but between capitalist and worker. Oppressed by his “conscience” Barton has become an “automaton” (437). Unable to interact with others, he is visited only by
those to whom in the past “he had given his sympathy and his confidence” (440). For others, due to his union involvement, he has “had a repellent power about him” – to which the narrator as well is subject (440). Barton emerges from his emotional torpor, however, when he confesses his crime to Mr. Carson. He comes to sympathize with Mr. Carson, realizing that “rich and poor, masters and men, were then brothers in the deep suffering of the heart” (450). To do so, he must see past class-oriented representations as Mr. Carson appears as “no longer the employer; a being of another race, eternally placed in antagonistic attitude … with a stony heart within” (450). Carson is no longer merely the economic, self-interested capitalist, “known only to those below them as desirous to obtain the greatest quantity of work for the lowest wages” (451). Barton, before he dies, humanizes and so sympathizes with Mr. Carson because he had not “imagined to himself the blighted home, and the miserable parents” (451). Imagining the man within the family, he humanizes Mr. Carson according to the dictates of family discourse’s symbolic value, identifying beyond economy and conspicuous consumption.

And yet, the sign produced by sympathy, bearing the symbolic value that opposes the marketplace, is ultimately reincorporated into the laissez-faire economy proper, outside family discourse. At the novel’s conclusion, John Barton discredited and dead, Job Legh becomes the working-class voice as he articulates working-class concerns to the spiritually reborn Mr. Carson. Translating his intelligence and feeling, his embodied and symbolic capital, into political capital he claims to speak for John Barton in absentia. Sympathetic working-class criticism cannot take place within the broader public sphere; it must take the form of individual social interaction, in the symbolic exchange of sympathetic dialogue and sincere self-representation. And instead of arguing for a socialist political economy to ameliorate working-class suffering, Job must argue for charity and sympathy. Job admits that industrial products are beneficial, “‘the gifts of God,’” and not the cause of labor’s lost liberties, as many workers would argue (472). Mr. Carson offers the utilitarian line that “‘facts have proven, and are daily proving, how much better it is for every man to be independent of help, and self-reliant’” (472). Job essentially agrees that the self-interested individual of utilitarian political economy is beneficial, tempering Mr. Carson’s position only with “‘what we all feel sharpest is the want of inclination to try and help’” (474). Both indicate the position, popular in
nineteenth-century laissez-faire political economy, that the laws of supply and demand stand side by side with the Ten Commandments.

And Job Legh’s effect on Mr. Carson is not to produce an Owenite, but to circulate the “common interest” theory of class based firmly in orthodox political economy. According to Francis Place, once oppressive laws were repealed, workers would, following their individual self-interest, cease unionizing. Once bargaining had yielded a mutual common interest, unions would be no longer necessary (Thompson, 519). Thus, Mr. Carson responds to Job Legh’s arguments by finding that “a perfect understanding, and complete confidence and love, might exist between masters and men; that the truth might be recognized that the interests of one were the interests of all” (475). As the narrator has argued during the trade dispute, common interests derive from the pursuit of rational self-interest. And if all are linked by common interest within the economy, class-difference disappears. All that is needed is fellow feeling – “a perfect understanding, complete confidence and love” – sympathy. As for Bentham and John Stuart Mill, one must have both sympathy and knowledge of utilitarianism to desire that best of all possible worlds, the laissez-faire society. But first, the gospel – the economic truth through which fellow feeling identifies factual fellowship – must be made known.

Sympathy is the perception of humanity within otherwise merely economic individuals, but, as such, is merely the perception of the capitalist economy itself. If the worker would submit to lower wages, the Manchester cloth industry would be saved from foreign competition and wages could be raised – following the market’s laws is in the interests of all. The narrator states, echoing Carson’s deference to “fact”: “the employers and employed must rise or fall together. There may be some difference as to chronology, none as to fact” (227). The problem, then, is one of education, since the masters “did not choose to make all the facts known” (227). If only the capitalist would inform their workers of Ricardo’s law of comparative advantage, the workers would follow their self-interest, their industries’ interest. Thus, Mr. Carson finally realizes that common interest requires “the consideration and deliberation of all; that hence it was most desirable to have educated workers, capable of judging, not mere machines of ignorant men” (475). Conflating “ignorance” and ignorance of orthodox political economy, opposing the mechanically reflexive crowd and the rationally self-interested individual, the text finally
devalues its representations of working-class discourse as it negotiates its audience’s prejudices.

Mary Barton, exploring the domestic lives of its working-class characters, attempts to inscribe them within the capitalist economy as sympathetic consumers. As such, it opposes the usual representation of the rabble, the threatening crowd, the class constructed by their laboring position within the marketplace. Gaskell’s characters accumulate cultural capital, desiring, consuming, and possessing more than mere subsistence and the necessary knowledge for the reproduction of themselves and their labor. Gaskell then attempts to translate that cultural capital into political capital as first John Barton and then Job Legh articulate a working-class political position. But Gaskell’s and her narrator’s negotiation of middle-class prejudices and anxieties yield inconsistencies – and ultimately a conservative stance toward the working class within the economy. As John Barton’s threatening discourse recedes from the text, and individuals such as Margaret and Jem Wilson enter the foreground and the market successfully as liberal selves, the problem of working-class subsistence recedes as well; the novel’s working class suddenly have enough to eat and live. The problem of sufficient monetary capital disappears as characters and narrator enter fully the sympathetic habitus of the bourgeois.
Chapter 4
Buying Organic: Producing Knowledge, Consuming Community in Adam Bede’s Utilitarian, Prelapsarian Paradise

George Eliot’s organic community represents, in a microcosmic test tube, capitalism’s idealized, romantic desire for the humanizing effects of sympathy. The community’s social economy interacts according to the invisible hand of the free market. The authoritative bourgeoys narrator thus values Adam Bede as the novel’s utilitarian ideal, the rising, self-interested liberal self. But the utilitarian economy, if its cogs turn merely through self-interest, yields consumer desires that cause destructive conflicts between self-interested consumers. Thus, the utilitarian community, through its paragon Adam Bede, must learn to value sympathy and the dual-natured symbolic exchanges that are sympathy’s prerequisites.

In its utilitarianism, Adam Bede’s drop of ink adds much to the preceding chapter’s visions. Eliot’s rural economy does not struggle with a working class materially determined by its place within an industrial economy. The novel is not, immediately, a critical intervention in mid-century political and economic representations. If Eliot follows Carlyle’s imaginative retreat to an ostensibly ideal past, she leaves no immediately observable discursive trace. Working-class identity is, in large part, dependent on the radical sphere, which Eliot’s idyllic 1799 occludes. Although Thompson notes the English middle-class’s confused conflation of Methodism and radicalism, the Methodism of Seth and Dinah is a conservative factor, though associated with the industrial city. In any case, Tom Paine and “Jacobinism” are important only in their conspicuous absence. Thus, Eliot locates her “organic” community in the rural, politically unified countryside; but examining its capitalist and moral economy, she does not neglect class-critical action and speech. They simply become more explicitly economic, moral and personal concerns.

5 According to both Wahrman and Thompson, by the turn of the century, radicalism had submerged beneath a strong current of anti-Napolean nationalism (represented in Adam Bede through several conversations among members of the lower orders).
As such, the rural economy that sets Eliot’s drama does represent a kind of economic public sphere where individuals and discourses emerge and circulate, accumulating authority. On the one hand, there is a kind of national institutional authority held by the aristocracy, the Anglican church, the military, etc. that penetrates and structures the organic community. But, on the other hand, other authorities emerge, organically so to speak, as individuals accumulate capital within the social economy. Information, useful discourse, circulates through the community with some fluidity, conferring authority much like Carlyle’s hero-discriming, democratic, invisible hand by which his medieval monastery rights itself. In Eliot’s vision, utilitarian value circulates freely, conferring power and capital on deserving individuals such as Dinah Morris, Adam Bede, Mrs. Poyser and Gardner Craig. As such, it is like a dream of pure laissez-faire capitalism.

The fluidity of this vision has led critics to find mid-century identities in *Adam Bede* dramatizing a class allegory. Terry Eagleton finds Adam Bede a “petty bourgeois pragmatist” whose latent liberal individualism the novel’s retreat to a rural, organic society contains and resolves (178). But such a reading is far too static, informed as it is by a backward glancing Marxist lens. On the one hand, such a reading does not sufficiently take into account George Eliot’s own historical glance. Adam Bede’s artisanship indicates a pre-industrial laborer, though his morality might appear petty bourgeois. His value within the rural economy is not a priori his “class-collaboration” with the aristocracy but his utility as the locus of various kinds of capital. Of course, as Eagleton describes, Adam’s utilitarianism represents a “Carllyean gospel of work” (178). But his gospel cannot be easily severed from his place within Eliot’s vision of a 1799 rural economy. Adam, originally merely laborer, rises to a position that only appears petite bourgeois. He does so through his immediate exchange value and his perceived symbolic value because of his embodied cultural capital.

The novel betrays a utilitarian relation to knowledge. Eliot’s laborers are not “beneath signs.” But the signs they produce, their conspicuous speech and consumption, relate them immediately to their socio-economic role. In as much as each individual’s attention is focused on his community and role within his community, he uses his
knowledge to negotiate interconnected economic and social situations. We see this most fully in those sections when the narrator follows the Poysers. Walking to church the day of Thias Bede’s funeral, their conversation consists of folklore, textual allusions and personal observations, all made in relation to interrelated social and economic concerns. They value neighbors and acquaintances based on their perceived capability. And that perceived capability is conferred or denied based on the Poysers’ cited authority. For instance, Mrs. Poyser argues the merits of breeds of cows, and the merits of the housewives that raise them. Mr. Poyser holds the successful gardner “Mr. Craig in honour, as a man who ‘knew his business,’ and who had great lights concerning soils and compost” (174). One man’s successful business ostensibly fails because he neglects to observe the Sabbath – religious observation is related back to the social economy.

But it seems that, even on the Sabbath, business continues as Hayslope meets to circulate useful knowledge. The women discuss the merits of home remedies over doctors, servants’ wages, and prices. The men discuss “a little ‘bout ‘bus’ness” (165). Jonathan Burge expresses an “inward scorn of all knowingness that could not be turned into cash” (166). But Burge’s mystified perspective, like the economist’s, sees knowledge only in direct relation to monetary capital, not in capital’s dual capability as exchange and symbolic value. The novel presents a more sociological vision of knowledge circulating as cultural capital. As the narrator reveals several sentences later, during the funeral service, the part of the village not concerned shares their complaints against their landlord and his steward’s stinginess. While the working-class laborer is generally the “hand,” more or less ignorant, Adam Bede’s country laborers judge, compute, and circulate knowledge in a local economy to which they are intimately wed. As Thias Bede says of Methodism among the industrial class “‘Its on’y tradesfolks as turn Methodist …. There’s maybe a workman now an’ then, as isn’t over clever at’s work, takes to preachin’ an’ that, like Seth Bede’” (163). Thus, useful knowledge circulates, preempting uneconomic speech. The industrial class, as mere hands, turn to Methodism.

If knowledge circulates rather freely through the rural economy, it has a constitutive relation to individuals that embody it. Mrs. Poyser herself is a source of knowledge and also a great authority. Her value as housewife and dairy owner is her
economic power. E. P. Thompson explains how the laborers’ community valued women for their household management; “According to conventions which were deeply felt, the woman’s status turned upon her success as a housewife in the family economy, in domestic management and forethought, baking and brewing, cleanliness and child-care” (416). But Adam’s mother fits this image better, supporting only those men within her household, her knowledge and valuing system intimately related to her supportive role as domestic wife. Elizabeth Bede’s labor supports her sons and husband and, only indirectly, her labor relates to their exchange value on the market. However, Mrs. Poyser’s interrelated dairy and farmhouse labors are intimately allied with the economy. Her goods circulate, beyond the domestic sphere, and even beyond Hayslope. As such, she is a kind of proto-capitalist. As the center of authority within the dairy, the “freezing arctic ray of Mrs. Poyser’s glance” is like Foucault’s surveying power, an embodied corporate panopticon (64).

But we see the relation between discourse and authoritative bodies most clearly in Dinah, and in microcosm during her sermon. Her simple narrative climaxes in the imaginative embodiment of Christ, moving from Biblical text to speech to visual representation. A “sinner woman’s” life “lay open” before Christ like a book, he reading. Dinah herself embodies a text, the traveler through whose consciousness we read the rhetoric of her body. Her eyes “had the liquid look which tells that the mind is full of what it has to give out, rather than impressed by external objects” (21). What she “gives out,” what she circulates through her audience is text embodied, through her own performative body, which then becomes text itself for the observing traveler. The powerful discourses that freely circulate through and from her body thus constitute her authority, her power as a Methodist preacher, but also her power within society. As Mr. Irwing appreciatively describes, she “‘brings with her “airs from heaven” that the coarsest fellow is not insensible to’” (232). As the effective embodiment of Christian text, she circulates reformatory power. The source of her authority is her ability within the novel’s social economy.

The sources and guarantees, the original investment, of Adam’s value, however, are not immediately obvious. The narrator confers value upon him as an individual; he seems to emerge in the text preformed, already and visibly valuable. Like Joselyn to his
Samson, Adam’s dog directs our sight to the rightful individual, a selection the narrator confirms in his description of Adam’s physical power and intelligence. The narrator’s description and interpretation of Adam’s body, however, obscures the extent to which Adam’s power is discursive. His authority in the workplace is further constituted by his textual knowledge. He is able to sermonize and to embody the sermon in his physical presence; he enters the text working and singing an Anglican hymn and he subsequently sermonizes on the value of work as stated in the bible. That his embodied authority is discursive as well is again glossed in the chapter’s closing lines. A traveler who emerges as a kind of embodied narratee is distracted from his journey merely through “admiration ... excite[d]” by Adam’s physical presence (12). But as Adam crosses the field, he reverts to text, singing an Anglican hymn; “‘Let all thy converse be sincere/ Thy conscience as the noonday clear/ For God’s all-seeing eye surveys/ Thy secret thoughts, thy works and ways’” (12). As the traveler surveys Adam, so, apparently does God. The hymn then circulates publicly, God’s authority embodied in Adam’s voice.

Adam’s embodied discourses conform to Bourdieus’s description of embodied capital’s mystifying effects;

It thus manages to combine the prestige of innate property with the merits of acquisition. Because the social conditions of its transmission and acquisition are more disguised than those of economic capital, it is predisposed to function as symbolic capital, i.e., to be unrecognized as capital and recognized as legitimate competence, as authority exerting an effect of (mis)recognition, e.g., in the matrimonial market and in all the markets in which economic capital is not fully recognized. (“The Forms of Capital”)

Removed from his sphere of authority, from the economic realm where his capital is more transparent, Adam yet continues to embody value. And even in the workplace, his value is always already conferred, implicit before he sermonizes. Each subsequent conferral of value is a misrecognition, finding originary, symbolic value in Adam’s person and not simply in the discursive knowledge he deploys.

Adam’s cultural capital, accumulated originally from his father as he learns the trade, increases to its present value through the investment of time and money in Bartle Massey’s school. As Adam indicates observing the school’s current scholars, he has
once possessed less; “Adam felt a momentary stirring of the old fellow-feeling, as he looked at the rough men painfully holding pen or pencil with their cramped hands, or humbly labouring through their reading lesson” (197). Adam, generally lacking sympathy, regains “fellow-feeling” when confronted with the acquisition he has internalized, and so forgotten. As the narrator and most of Adam’s acquaintances find symbolic value in Adam’s person, so does Adam see himself as innately valuable, not remembering that the original conditions of his accumulated value are based within the community and not within himself. Of course, Adam’s conversion to humanized, sympathetic individual must wait for harsher reminders. Nonetheless, the narrative reminds the reader of the source of Adam’s value as he leaves the school. Bartle Massey, observing Adam leave, mutters “‘there you go, stalking along – stalking along; but you wouldn’t have been what you are if you hadn’t a bit of old lame Bartle inside you. The strongest calf must have something to suck at. There’s plenty of these big, lumbering fellows ‘ud never have known their ABC, if it hadn’t been for Bartle Massey’” (209).

Cultural capital thus circulates between individuals, conferring value as it circulates. The novel’s laborers are not merely the static, inarticulate “hands”; knowledge and authority circulates through Hayslope in the interrelated, constitutive society and economy. But if that value is mistaken for an innate, individualized possession, its communal sources are obscured, thus transgressing the “organic” community.

As others have noted, the novel depicts Adam as too hard, too utilitarian; he must learn to be sympathetic. Eagleton finds that Adam must be “humanized by his trials to the point where he is now spiritually prepared to wed the ‘higher’ working-class girl, Dinah Morris” (178). But his “humanization,” dependent on “fellow-feeling,” immediately relates him not so much to Dinah as to his community. The utilitarian effects of the novel’s humanizing vision are seen in microcosm in Mr. Irwine. As opposed to his doctrinaire successor, he is an effective embodiment of religion because he is less doctrinaire, more communal. As the narrator describes, “however ill he harmonized with sound theories of the clerical office, he somehow harmonized extremely well with that peaceful landscape” (61). Thus, the narrator, speaking for Irvine since he is inarticulate in all matters of doctrine, suggests that “If he had been in the habit of
speaking theoretically, he would have perhaps said that the only healthy form religion could take in such minds was that of certain dim but strong emotions, suffusing themselves as a hallowing influence over the family affections and neighborly duties” (60). As effective religious authority, he circulates the unperceived symbolic good through his community; indeed, his “hallowing influence” seems to be the authoritative guarantee of communal sympathy. Adam lacks sympathy because he adheres too dogmatically to his utilitarian knowledge. As such, he must become more other-oriented to “harmonize with the landscape.” But, as indicated in the above pejorative description of the community’s “minds,” the possibility of sympathy depends on sensibility. The novel indicates tension in the community’s probable sensibility, navigating the higher class’s exclusive claim. Adam’s humanization depends on his potential to occupy a habitus that might well be beyond him. If the novel’s representation of its lower class’s intelligence finds them bearers of useful, productive knowledge, it is less certain about their status as consumers.

During Arthur Donnithorne’s birthday feast, the novel’s gentry view the lower class through ideological lenses. Wiry Ben’s dance is comic or offensive to the watching crowd, but to Mr. Poyser and the apologetic narrator, it is a serious display of talent. Thus Mr. Poyser possesses the embodied capital necessary to appreciatively consume Ben’s entertainment. The narrator attempts to provide the necessary information for consumption of Ben’s dance and the accompanying fiddle playing. While Mr. Irwine and his invalid sister leave to escape the perceived offensive sounds, the narrator explains that Joshua the fiddle player “intended to pass to a variety of tunes, by a series of transitions which his good ear really taught him to execute with some skill” (235). While the higher class fails to really appreciate the lower order’s cultural goods, they also impute to them an inability to properly consume what they appreciate. Thus, Mrs. Irwine, observing Hetty, exclaims,

“She’s such a perfect Beauty! I’ve never seen anything so pretty since my young days. What a pity such beauty as that should be thrown away among the farmers, when it’s wanted so terribly among the good families without fortune! I dare-say, now, she’ll marry a man who would have thought her just as pretty if she had had round eyes and red hair.” (232)
Mrs. Irwine finds the farmers unable to appreciate Hetty and hence unable to correctly value her, her beauty a potential source of capital to aristocrats who lack monetary capital. She perceives her laborers as merely capable of consuming objects that relate immediately to their economic station. Thus she awards a “useful and substantial” but ugly gown to the young and vain Bessy Cranage and finds Bessy’s disappointment evidence of transgression (233). Of course, the novel’s moral economy partly supports Mrs. Irwine’s hard-line stance on conspicuous consumption, most visibly through expelling Hetty for her transgressive vanity.

But, Mr. Irwine, who knows the lower class more intimately, tempers his mother’s perspective, theorizing that

“The common people are not so stupid as you imagine. The commonest man, who has his ounce of sense and feeling, is conscious of the difference between a lovely, delicate woman, and a coarse one. Even a dog feels a difference in their presence. The man may be no better able than the dog to explain the influence the more refined beauty has on him, but he feels it.” (232)

Here, in Mr. Irwine’s patronizing perspective, we find the inarticulate laborer to be the inarticulate consumer, lacking the embodied capital to articulately consume aesthetic goods. But the feeling itself is somehow natural, prior to the conscious ability to consume. Naturalizing sensibility, Mr. Irwine also expresses the novel’s view.

Thus, Hetty’s natural, organic beauty is universally, even androgynously, consumed. The utilitarian Mrs. Poyser, “who professed to despise all personal attractions, and intended to be the severest of mentors, continually gazed at Hetty’s charms by the sly, fascinated in spite of herself” (72). Adam’s attraction reveals the inarticulate nature of the commoners’ aesthetic consumption. As the narrator reveals, “Our good Adam had no fine words into which he could put his feeling for Hetty: he could not disguise mystery in this way with the appearance of knowledge; he called his love frankly a mystery” (298). In this instance, the narrator contradicts the position that would find distinguishing value, or cultural capital, in intelligent consumption. But it is clear that Adam must become a more articulately sensible being before the novel’s resolution. We see this most fully through Adam’s and the narrator’s relation to the aesthetic consumption of landscape.
At first, Adam views landscape only in terms of utilitarian knowledge. As the narrator describes, Adam’s two ways of knowing are utilitarian – practical, mathematical – or mystical – “the peace of God which passeth all understanding” (172). As the narrator explicitly states, he had “that mental combination which is at once humble in the region of mystery, and keen in the region of knowledge” (44). Thus, when surveying a sublime landscape he consumes it only with the view of translating it into exchange value. Discussing the various merits of living in flat vs. hill country, Adam states that he “‘likes to go to work by a road that’ll take me up a bit of a hill, and see the fields for miles round me, and a bridge, or a town, or a bit of a steeple here and there. It makes you feel the world’s a big place, and there’s other men working in it with their heads and hands besides yourself’” (103). Stated early in the novel, Adam’s words display a relation to landscape at odds with the Romantic relation between individual and sublime nature. He consumes landscape for its expression of human community, narrowly conceived in a utilitarian, work-oriented discourse.

But his potential for Romantic viewing emerges later, after Mr. Irvine attributes sensibility to all classes. In words that sound much like Mr. Irvine’s, the narrator describes Adam, walking towards his conflict with Arthur Thorne “not lingering to watch the magnificent changes of the light – hardly once thinking of it – yet feeling its presence in a certain calm happy awe which mingled itself with his busy working-day thoughts. How could he help feeling it? The very deer felt it, and were more timid” (249). Thus, sublime nature suffuses itself into Adam’s mind unconsciously, much as Mr. Irvine’s presence suffuses sympathy among his unconscious parishioners. Several paragraphs later, the narrator is more explicit about Adam’s conscious thoughts:

Adam delighted in a fine tree of all things; as the fisherman’s sight is keenest on the sea, so Adam’s perceptions were more at home with trees than with other objects. He kept them in his memory, as a painter does, with all the flecks and knots in their bark, all the curves and angles of their boughs: and had often calculated the height and contents of a trunk to a nicety, as he stood looking at it. (250)

Though compared to a painter’s, Adam’s knowledge here is explicitly related to his carpentry. He consumes the tree through his conscious mathematical epistemology.
The condition of his transition from utilitarian consumer to Romantic consumer, is the condition of his fall from utilitarian innocence, but also the condition of his humanizing. If we understand his first name to allude to the Biblical first man, then Adam’s ejection from Eden is the loss of his ability to perceive the world in a purely utilitarian fashion. Thus, “For the rest of his life he remembered that moment when he was calmly examining the beech, as a man remembers his last glimpse of the home where his youth was passed, before the road turned, and he saw it no more” (250). The suffering that follows prepares him to move from a habitus that values Hetty to a habitus that values Dinah. Towards the end of the novel, the narrator reveals Adam’s ability to articulately consume landscape. Becoming conscious of his regard for Dinah, he walks to the Poyser’s home:

The low westering sun shone right on the shoulders of the Binton Hills, turning the unconscious sheep into bright spots of light; shone on the windows of the cottage too, and made them a-flame with a glory beyond that of amber or amethyst. It was enough to make Adam feel that he was in a great temple, and that the distant chant was a sacred song. (430)

Separated from the inarticulate animals, the “unconscious sheep,” Adam expresses an articulate analogy, without relating the landscape to utilitarian knowledge. And following his landscape consumption, he expresses knowledge of beauty and loss in the face of the sublime, a-near Romantic trope. Adam’s conversion, then, transgresses Mr. Irvine’s discourse on the inarticulate laborer’s consumer capabilities; Adam adopts a kind of bourgeois epistemology, adopting it not through education but naturally.

Raymond Williams, in The Country and the City, explains the political nature of landscape viewing, echoed in Adam’s consumer transformation. The possessor of land, the sensible gentleman “felt that he must divide these observations [of the land] into ‘practical’ and ‘aesthetic’” (121). Such viewing was a validation of the “elevated sensibility,” an attribute of economic and social power. Moreover, it is, like Adam’s alteration, the loss of pure utilitarianism since “this need and position are parts of a social history, in the separation of production and consumption” (121). Adam becomes the unproductive consumer of landscape, wedding utilitarian power and political distinction. But he also becomes what Williams describes in a more positive light, a Romantic
consumer of landscape. The “structure of feeling” Adam expresses is knowledge of loss that produces “the community and charity which are the promptings of nature” (Williams, 131). His articulate thought that produces his articulate landscape consumption is his loss of Dinah (430). His dispossession is the condition of his altered state. These two ways of viewing, one class elevating and one community leveling, exist uneasily in the Adam of the novel’s conclusion. But, we must see both as the precondition of the narrator’s singling him out, distinguishing him in the narrative and with his company, as we see in the periodic conversations between the older Adam and the bourgeois narrator. The other, and ostensibly more important, manifestation of his improved sensibility is his sudden desire for Dinah. As toward the landscape, he must articulate his merely latent, unconscious perception of her value. Learning to consciously discern, and to consume, sympathy humanizes Adam; he becomes less dogmatically utilitarian as he articulates his attraction for Dinah. But first he must overcome his merely consumer desire for Hetty. The conflict between Adam and Arthur is a consumer conflict – their desire for Hetty a bid for a scarce good.

Hetty, herself, is transgressive because she possesses no utilitarian discursive knowledge that relates her to the community. She is literally a self-contained, discursively hermetic commodity. Her use-value as a dairymaid is high, but only because it relates to her exchange value as commodity; “Hetty was particularly clever at making up the butter; it was the one performance of hers that her aunt allowed to pass without severest criticism” (73). And she performs so well because of the value the performance lends her appearance since “they are the prettiest attitudes and movements into which a pretty girl is thrown in making up butter” (73). Otherwise, Hetty is not useful, unmotivated and absentminded.

The narrator makes her unconsciousness particularly clear. She is generally inarticulate, but this inarticulateness depends on her lack of discursive knowledge. She is apathetic toward religious knowledge; as the narrator describes she is no more curious about Dinah “than she cared to know what was meant by the pictures in the ‘Pilgrim’s Progress’ or in the old folio Bible” (121). And her relation to Arthur emerges because she seems to lack the ability to make projections. As the narrator concludes, “Hetty had
never read a novel; if she had ever seen one, I think the words would have been too hard for her: how then could she find a shape for her expectations?” (116). Discursive knowledge is necessary to understand the individual’s connections to the community. Hetty’s relationship with Arthur then emerges in a discursive vacuum. She is “quite uneducated – a simple farmer’s girl to whom a gentleman with a white hand was as dazzling as an Olympian god” (87).

But, even without a discursive relation to the community, Hetty lacks all other-oriented feeling. If Mr. Irvine has expressed the novel’s view that all men have some sympathy, conscious or not, Hetty is the exception to the rule, one of “those cunningly-fashioned instruments called human souls [who] have only a very limited range of music, and will not vibrate in the least under a touch that fills others with tremulous rapture or quivering agony” (84). Objectifying individuals as instruments, the narrator finds that Hetty possesses as yet no sensibility, no potential for sympathy. In succumbing to Arthur’s advances, she is representative of those who “in such pleasant delirium as hers, are as unsympathetic as butterflies sipping nectar; they are isolated from all appeals by a barrier of dreams – by invisible looks and impalpable arms” (87). Hetty possesses no knowledge framework, but also no ability to receive a knowledge framework, to be touched by another’s “appeal.” Hetty is thus a kind of unsympathetic luxury commodity, with no use to the community. Her hermeticism contains the seeds of her ultimate exile.

But Hetty’s value, her appearance, which is her cultural capital on the marriage market, places her between Arthur and Adam, both bearers of valuable embodied cultural capital themselves. On the one hand, Hetty perceives that Adam is “‘something like’ a man” because he is economically useful and the bearer of cultural capital; as she observes, he “wrote a beautiful hand … and could do figures in his head – a degree of accomplishment totally unknown among the richest farmers of that countryside” (84). On the other hand, “Hetty’s dreams were all of luxuries; to sit in a carpeted parlour, and always wear white stockings: to have some large beautiful earrings, such as were all the fashion” (86). Hetty thus prefers conspicuous consumption of objectified capital to Adam’s embodied capital. And the conflict between Arthur and Adam is a consumer conflict over a scarce commodity. Arthur dreams much like Hetty, and attempts to
rationalize the utility of his marriage to Hetty. Adam’s desire for Hetty is, as is Hetty’s for Arthur, nearly inarticulate, a “mystery.”

For all related in the resulting love triangle, their desires are consumer desires. As Colin Campbell explains in The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism, luxury consumption is driven by daydreaming, the attachment of the self to a future possession through self-projection. Especially Hetty and Arthur “manipulate the symbolic meaning of [external] events” (Campbell, 74). Of course, this poses a contradiction in Eliot’s depiction of Hetty. She “has no shape for her expectations” yet she articulates daydreams of luxury commodities. Arthur daydreams of a future, rationalizing his want as simply a utilitarian desire. The wholly utilitarian Adam’s consumer desire is wholly unconscious, sublimated through his inarticulate religious mysticism.

And the condition of Adam’s right to critique Arthur is his embodied capital, his utilitarian value to the community and hence on the marriage market. As the working class must receive cultural capital before entering the world of bourgeois, sympathetic man, through business or social contract, Adam rightfully matches Arthur because of his cultural capital. In a near echo of Adam’s revolutionary confrontation, Mrs. Poyser translates her embodied capital into a violent confrontational critique of Squire Donnithorne, her utilitarian value and wit come to bear on Donnithorne’s community-trangressing tightfistedness. The terms of Adam’s victory are, however, stereotypically class-based since “the delicate-handed gentleman was a match for the workman in everything but strength, and Arthur’s skill enabled him to protract the struggle for some long moments” (254). In Eliot’s tentative reflection of working-class revolution, Adam must be simply the body, brute strength, to Arthur’s “skill.”

Despite Eliot’s class-anxious reversion to class stereotypes, Adam, as bearer of community-based cultural capital, must learn to articulate feelings, to become conscious of his consumer desire. Wholly utilitarian, once his desire becomes conscious, he will recognize the most useful object of desire: Dinah, the articulate embodiment of religious sentiment and communal sympathy. Dinah is valuable, both in Hayslope and the industrial Stonyshire, because of her ability to impart sensibility, to circulate fellow feeling. She possesses a “sympathetic divination” (101). But she also restores fellow
feeling. Thus, she momentarily converts the vain, hyperconsumer Bessy Cranage. She softens the vain self-pity of Lisbeth Bede by sympathetically “bearing her sorrow,” and distracting her from self-centeredness to other-orientedness with a story of her own life. The result, for Elizabeth, is the unconscious sympathy Eliot is willing to impart to her commoners; “poor aged fretful Elizabeth, without grasping any distinct idea, without going through any course of religious emotions, felt a vague sense of goodness and love” (98). Much like Mr. Irvine, Dinah vaguely suffuses sympathy through the community. But, unlike Mr. Irvine, her class, sex and religious orientation allow her to circulate freely outside the Anglican institutional establishment, assisting in private lives and individual afflictions: thus, as Mrs. Poyser observes, Dinah’s utility for a community.

Adam’s consumer desire must be articulated before he becomes conscious of it. His mother performs that service; but once articulated Adam is transformed from unconscious consumer of sympathy to conscious consumer. His desire for Dinah is “like a gold seeker, who sees the strong promise of gold, but sees in the same moment a sickening vision of disappointment” (419). Of course, the novel’s anxiety over Adam’s consumer desire attempts to recast it in less transgressive terms. Upon first meeting Dinah, Adam possesses no consumer desire, as Dinah “impressed him with all the force that belongs to a reality contrasted with a preoccupying fancy” (100). Opposed to his mystical fancy for Hetty, Adam’s appreciation of Dinah is an empirical epistemology, seeing “reality.” And once articulated, Adam’s desire justifies his privileged place in Eliot’s organic community. But the tension between gold seeking and reality, transgressive and utilitarian consumer desire, is the tension between gold’s capital, its mystified representation of value, and Dinah’s practical, communal value. Once Dinah is possessed as gold, contained within the domestic sphere of marriage, her value ceases to freely circulate, her embodied capital devalued.

Adam’s possessing Dinah, however, is laissez-faire capital’s dream of community. The utilitarian individual must perceive – and articulate – communal sympathy. Adam must soften his utilitarian valuation of other individuals. He must recognize the communal source of his embodied cultural capital, thus demystifying it. But, at the same time, he must possess it; embodying it as cultural capital, he rises to preeminence, conversing with the gentleman narrator, becoming representable to Eliot’s
audience: his ability to consume landscape, a sign of class distinction, makes him politically powerful. Thus, he enters civil society as bourgoise and natural man, center and circumference, consumer and community, embodied and communal value.

But, in socio-economic actuality, Adam’s sympathy only extends to Seth and Dinah; they are the extent of his communal investment. It is interesting that Dinah’s visceral preference for Adam over Seth seems based in Adam’s embodiment of utility, his powerful, sexually charged masculinity; “there was something so different in the dark penetrating glance of this strong man so different from the mildness and timidity of his brother” (100): her consumer desire, the nun’s sexual awakening, adding procreative social reproduction to her reproduction of social bonds. The bourgeois family, separate and yet the unit of communal interaction, contains the free circulation of sympathy so that it might enter the utilitarian community. The castrated Seth, bearer of nonutilitarian intelligence, represents a kind of conspicuous leisure for Adam; Adam’s tempered utilitarianism is indicated by his “indulgence to Seth” since “‘he knew ‘th’ lad liked to sit full o’ thoughts he could give no account of; they’d never come t’ anything, but they made him happy’” (406). Outside the utilitarian economy, unproductive and un reproductive, and no preacher like Dinah, Seth becomes the ghost, the uneconomic humanity, in the laissez-faire machine, cultivated within a domestic sphere tending toward bourgeois.

Adam Bede’s society circulates powerful, constitutive representations. Discourses circulate from texts to speech to bodies, between bodies and back to text, belying class distinctions. The utilitarian vision of laissez-faire cultural capital becomes class-oriented however, in the world of the consumer economy. The recognition of sympathy, the power to contain and yet circulate it through the community depends on embodied capital that is class-specific. Containing and exposing self-interested consumer desire, it heals and sanctifies the community. But to enter laissez-faire society, it must become itself an object, hovering liminally between commodity and community, individual possession and common right.
Conclusion
A Moral End: *The Return of the Native’s* Society of Satisfied and Dissatisfied Consumers

The difficulty of perceiving distinctions, and evaluating them, is implicit in Bourdieu’s description of the habitus as both classified and classifying. The evaluative hierarchy of a particular habitus can be distinguished from other evaluative habituses – but this distinction presupposes a further evaluative position, the habitus of the critic, the sociologist, or the historian. Thus, to maintain that there is no utilitarian distinction between various cultures’ symbolic goods – that, for instance, bourgeois high-cultural goods and the gift exchange of pre-capitalist societies all function in similar symbolic fashions, is to betray a habitus that seems all too structuralist. However, to buy uncritically the kinds of symbolic goods that circulate through society merely as signs, and often as signs that veil powerful inequalities, is to betray a dissimilarly indifferent habitus; disseminating cultural artifacts without interrogating the conditions of their past and continuing production and reception, is to pay homage to the easiest and most isolating of consumer dreams. This would seem to be critical theory’s current ontological dilemma: the temptation of an academic rigor that objectifies and levels its subjects or its correlative penance, moral guilt. Thomas Hardy’s *The Return of the Native* will save us from further academic moralizing as it presents an interesting criterion for evaluating cultural distinctions: if it were added to justice, that most irreproachable of moral telos, happiness.

The symbolic distinctions, circulating through the individual bodies and the economy proper of Hardy’s heath country, reveal a sensitivity to cultural difference. Contrasting bourgeois evaluative premises with the heath country’s cultural matrix, *The Return of the Native* critiques the universalizing bourgeois habitus. Clym Yeobright intends to enlighten the heath dwellers by disseminating a bourgeois culture he understands as a prerequisite for stoic contentment. But the novel’s bearers of bourgeois cultivation are selfish and discontented, addicted to Romantic daydreams and vampiric consumption. The heath’s poor, however, if they are clowns, yet circulate their own
economy of symbolic goods, which in turn produce contented individuals and a sociability that only resembles bourgeois sympathy.

Yeobright returns to Egdon Heath with the intention of beginning a school for Egdon’s inhabitants. But his aim is not to produce liberal selves capable of economic power or civic men capable of political enfranchisement; “He had a conviction that the want of most men was knowledge of a sort which brings wisdom rather than affluence” (211). Rather, Yeobright fetishizes bourgeois cultural goods. Like Arnold or Newman, he finds cultivation a prerequisite for full humanity. “Ennoblement” and “culture” are his aims (211; 213). He takes cultivation as his gospel rather than religion. According to Yeobright, cultivation’s symbolic value, masquerading as its use value, is to “‘teach them [the laboring people] how to breast the misery they are born to’” (215). And Yeobright feels the obligation to do so because of sympathy. He “strived for brotherliness with clowns” (211). He “loved his kind” and planned to “do a great deal of good to [his] fellow-creatures” (211; 250). In contrast to Victor Frankenstein, Barton, Dickens and Eliot, bourgeois symbolic goods are not a prerequisite for Yeobright’s class-crossing sympathies.

Yet Yeobright’s plan does depend on cultural misperceptions. On the one hand, if his plan is to disseminate “high knowledge into empty minds” he fails to perceive that the cultural goods circulating through Egdon are both constitutive and morally useful. The heath’s inhabitants produce cultural signs as they circulate music, dance, narrative and household goods. Even the furze that constitutes their native economy constitutes the cultural symbol of a ritual bonfire during an annual holiday. Such cultural goods circulate, effectively constituting both individuals and community. For instance, no one needs to cultivate Grandfer Cantle to “breast the misery” of his life. His own culture is sufficient to produce his exuberance. And as cultural goods circulate, they act to comprise communal fellowship. Feather beds are requisite for newlyweds. Songs and drink circulate as adequate gifts of symbolic exchange. Dances, and even furze-cutting itself, adequately stand in for high culture. Indeed, such symbolic goods would seem to stand in for the discourse of sympathy, which only emerges for Yeobright and between the bourgeois narrator and narratee as they engage in landscape consumption. And, on
the other hand, Yeobright misperceives the negative effects of what he calls “‘high class teaching’” itself (228).

Eustacia Vye and Damon Wildeve represent bourgeois, Romantic cultural consumers. Both are consumers of Romantic poetry. Both desire the distant world of culture. The narrator is most explicit as he describes Wildeve; “To be yearning for the difficult; to care for the remote, to dislike the near . . . . This is the true mark of the man of sentiment. Though Wildeve’s fevered feeling had not been elaborated to real poetical compass, it was of the standard sort. He might have been called the Rousseau of Egdon” (266). Both Wildeve and Eustacia bear the “true mark” of sentimental distinction. And this distinction links them explicitly to the modern consumer mentality as Colin Campbell describes it. They attach their daydreaming to potential commodities, especially to each other, and are disillusioned in the actual consumption. They are addicted to the feelings produced by their consumer daydreaming, and they are especially adept at producing those feelings, at manipulating signs to induce the desired emotion. For instance, Wildeve, as he undertakes what he feels to be a Romantic journey to visit Eustacia, incorporates the knowledge that Diggory Venn follows him into an imagined narrative: “The sense that he was watched, that craft was employed to circumvent his errant tastes, added piquancy to a journey so entirely sentimental, so long as the danger was of no fearful sort” (333). Wildeve manipulates the events of his life into a narrative conducive of Romantic feeling, thus producing Romantic signs.

Of course, such symbolic manipulations fail to extend to sympathetic relations in Hardy’s narrative. Especially as revealed through Eustacia, such tastes are self-centered signs of distinction that depend on an economy of power. Eustacia uses the poor to produce her signs. The bonfire she designs as a ruse to attract Wildeve is sustained through a poor child’s labor. She composes her own romantic narrative subterfuge, contracting with Charley so that she might enter the Yeobright house disguised as a mummer. The distinction produced by Romantic consumerism preempts the possibility of fellow feeling through an economy dependent on hegemony and the pursuit of self-interested tastes.

Yeobright is only marginally distinct from Wildeve and Eustacia. Yeobright accurately perceives Eustacia, bearer of bourgeois embodied capital, as educated and
hence the correct helpmeet. If Diggory “Venn’s eye was not trained” to perceive the “obscurity in Eustacia’s beauty,” Wildeve’s attraction to Eustacia depends on his own internalization of bourgeois Romantic taste; he is “trained” (109). And, perceiving her embodied capital, he misperceives its mystifying symbolic value, thinking she will help him educate Egdon’s laborers, that is, circulate its perceived use value. He is only different, then, in that he distinguishes between luxury goods and what he calls “‘high knowledge’”; he says that he “‘cannot enjoy delicacies’” but he mistakenly differentiates bourgeois high culture from luxury items (216). Indeed, the classes remain fairly distinct in the novel. Despite Yeobright’s claim of fellow feeling, he creates affiliations with other bourgeois cultural consumers, that is, until he enters Egdon culture as a furze cutter, an occupation he finds sufficiently satisfying but that causes his rupture from Eustacia. Yeobright’s project is tragic-ironic, then, because he fails to perceive that he intends to merely disseminate signs of bourgeois distinction. Hardy’s heath culture and economy produce miserable beings only if such beings are, like Shelley’s creature, addicted to bourgeois commodities.

The Return of the Native provides an interesting sociological critique of bourgeois symbolic and cultural capital. Showing that high culture is not only a sign of distinction, but one whose consumer tastes produce dissatisfied and self-centered individuals, Hardy’s critical vision provides a perceptive narrative critique of bourgeois narratives that inscribe non-bourgeois classes into a bourgeois economy of symbolic exchange. Of course, Hardy would later trace the fruits of Yeobright’s intentions in Tess and especially Jude, both cultural consumers whose education produces dissatisfied, daydreaming consumers. In Tess of the D’Urbervilles and Jude the Obscure, education and the circulatory infiltration of a mass culture destabilize distinctions between classes, between town and country, and between high and low culture. But in The Return of the Native the distinctions are most clear, if Hardy’s critical vision is more implicit.

Hardy’s critical vision thus parallels the ideas of the theorists, especially Pierre Bourdieu and Colin Campbell, on whom my preceding chapters have relied. Bourgeois consumer culture, circulating signs of distinction through nineteenth-century England, provides an evaluative system, a habitus, that infiltrates the several social spheres constituting bourgeois civil society. In doing so, it sublimes political and economic
issues within the discourse of sympathy and the symbolic values of bourgeois cultural capital, perceived as universally humanizing. In the texts I have heretofore examined, sympathetic personal interaction, like a moral invisible hand, provides the potential and necessary social leveling. But if such distinctive signs are culture-specific, they reveal interesting historical truths about the political and socio-economic transformation of nineteenth-century England. As we see in Hardy’s last novels, and as cultural historians have argued, a habitus we might identify as specific to the laboring classes becomes subsumed within bourgeois and mass cultural distinctions; even in *The Return of the Native*, Egdon Heath is an anachronism. Bourgeois and modern consumer culture, circulating as high and mass cultural goods, redefine England’s cultural landscape through the end of the nineteenth century.
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