

Another Mediocrity:
Victorian Realism and Local Detachment

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Abstract

What do we mean when we call something “mediocre”? Why do we notice the normality of certain novelists, genres, and people – and why do we then give it a label that sets it apart from other types of literary and cultural convention? This dissertation answers these questions by exploring the work of three “mediocre” Victorian realists: Anthony Trollope, Elizabeth Gaskell, and George Meredith. It argues, in turn, that their “mediocre” engagement with literary and social convention is actually an indication that these authors are rehearsing the norm in subtly unconventional ways. By defining “mediocrity” as a technical term and engaging with recent rationalist discourse around the notion of detachment, I argue that adhering to the rules of cultural form can actually produce “local” spaces of insight and agency. I locate examples of this kind of isolated, un-heroic, even accidental critical space in *The Eustace Diamonds*, *North and South*, and *The Egoist*. And while I admit that “local” detachments cannot rival the “cultivated” forms of rational distance recently theorized by other critics, I argue that learning to recognize them allows us to better appreciate the abnormality within the “everyday.” For the particular novelists I study, it also allows us to grasp the ways in which they participate in the larger, non-representative project of Victorian realism, and it gives us new methods for reading the social and cultural conventions practiced by the many “mediocre” characters who populate their fiction.

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Introduction: Another Theory: Adherence as Insight

It will be said, perhaps, that a man whose work has risen to no higher pitch than mine has attained, has no right to speak of the strains and impulses to which real genius is exposed. I am ready to admit the great variations in brain power which are exhibited by the products of different men, and am not disposed to rank my own very high . . . My novels, whether good or bad, have been as good as I could make them.

– Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography* (121-22)

An ideal of critical distance, itself deriving from the project of Enlightenment, lies behind many Victorian aesthetic and intellectual projects, including the emergent human sciences and allied projects of social reform; various ideals of cosmopolitanism and disinterestedness; literary forms such as omniscient realism and dramatic monologue, and the prevalent project of *Bildung*, or the self-reflexive cultivation of character, which animated much of Victorian ethics and aesthetics, from John Stuart Mill to Matthew Arnold and beyond.

– Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance* (4)

There's no mention of Anthony Trollope in either Amanda Anderson's *The Powers of Distance* or her more recent work *The Way We Argue Now*. The influential Victorianist skips directly from "Trilling, Lionel" to "universalism" in the index to the former and from "Trilling, Lionel" to "truth" in the latter, leaving Trollope and his plethora of popular books out of her arguments about rational detachment and the mid-to-late 19th-century. *The Way We Argue Now* is not an explicitly Victorianist text, but is a methodological one that examines many of the current "debates internal to academic culture" (1). Trollope probably doesn't have much business there, though the book's title is an allusion to one of his most famous novels. *The Powers of Distance*, on the other hand, is an extensive survey

of Victorian literature and culture, which makes it a place we might expect to find this 19th-century British novelist. Trollope still makes it onto syllabi with regularity, and his name pops into the titles of scholarly books and articles at a respectable rate. There are even a few critics interested in formally reviving Trollope, whose many works were finally published in a single collection by Penguin in the 1990s.

The reason we don't find "Trollope" after "Trilling" in *The Powers of Distance* is that Anderson launches her arguments about Victorian self-cultivation by turning to some of the period's most renowned litterateurs and intellectuals. She focuses on authors like George Eliot, Matthew Arnold, and Oscar Wilde in order to defend a set of claims about the "powers" of rational detachment – and Trollope isn't really the kind of author who gets included in this sort of lineup. Although Anderson is concerned with demonstrating "that cultural ideals of rationality or critical distance" are not "the exclusive province of elite groups" (5), she also self-consciously "explore[s] the Victorian topos of detachment by means of . . . exemplary instances" (20). Her selection of preeminent figures helps secure her central point, which continues to be treated skeptically by many literary and cultural critics. In opposition to both poststructuralism and multiculturalism, which generally theorize in terms of social determination, Anderson offers the insights of some of the 19th century's most celebrated authors in order to prove that "individuals and collectivities can and do cultivate habits, dispositions, and attitudes that can in no simple way be attributed to any easily identifiable and limiting sociological determination" (*The Way We Argue Now* 6).

For those invested in recuperating the rationalist tradition, Anderson's analysis has been an important resource, with or without a mention of Trollope.

But what if you *do* want to talk Trollope? What happens if, instead of exploring Eliot's erudite humanism or Arnold's careful aesthetic theorization, you go looking for rational detachment in other, seemingly less-likely places? What happens to our understanding of insight and agency under the watch of a novelist whose books reach "no higher pitch" than the popularity of *The Warden* or the readability of *Framley Parsonage*? Who admittedly writes with limited "brain power" a series of novels that might be either "good or bad"?

I don't ask these questions to catch Anderson or to rebut what I consider to be her very successful reaffirmation of the rationalist tradition. I don't think Trollope is "missing" from *The Powers of Distance*.¹ Anderson carves out a credible space for rational self-reflection in a critical landscape that still tends to read and write under the influence of a strong set of theories we now self-consciously call "the hermeneutics of suspicion." She already has her work cut out for her without having to account for an author like Trollope, who has usually been part of the problem for rationalist critics. This Victorian – famous for his fecundity, lucidity, and comedy, but not his erudition – appears to be as good a place as any to watch hegemony do the work of self-satisfied self-regulation. It's in domestic comedies of manners like *Barchester Towers* or *The Prime Minister* that we seem to see what Anderson calls "the sociological grid" clearly at work and where we watch agency become re-embedded in systems of control and surveillance (*The Way We Argue Now* 6). "What about Trollope?" has been an

invitation to talk about normativity and conventionality, not the difficult work of rational detachment.

In fact, Trollope's fiction has been used regularly to rehearse the kind of Foucauldian arguments that Anderson works against. His novels are filled with all the "tiny, everyday, physical mechanisms" that *Discipline and Punish* first brought to attention as "systems of micro-power" (222). In *The Novel and the Police*, for example, D. A. Miller discusses at length the "imposing principle of social control in what Trollope calls the 'world.'" Using *The Eustace Diamonds*, Miller draws a distinction between "the official police apparatus and its supplementary discipline," and he uses this distinction to emphasize the deterministic forces operating on characters like Lizzie Eustace (14, 15):

Trollope's obvious point in [*The Eustace Diamonds*] about the instability of public opinion (taking up Lizzie to drop her in the end) should not obscure its role as a policing force. Lizzie may fear the legal consequences of her perjury at Carlisle, but what she actually suffers is the social humiliation of its being publicly know. (14)

Miller's analysis of Lizzie's "social humiliation" comes to a sharp point:

"Inobtrusively supplying the place of the police in places where the police cannot be, the mechanisms of discipline seem to entail a relative *relaxation* of policing power [in *The Eustace Diamonds*]. No doubt this manner of passing off the regulation of everyday life is the best manner of passing it on" (16). No doubt, in other words, the unrelenting everydayness of an author like Trollope is an obvious place to go looking for the disciplinary power that makes demonstrating social

determination so straightforward and theorizing rational detachment problematic, even twenty years after the publication of *The Novel and the Police*.

Part of Anderson's project in *The Powers of Distance* is to frame a rebuttal to the kind of Foucauldian readings of the Victorian novel that Miller proposes with a Habermasian reading. Anderson uses George Eliot's intellectual achievements in the Introduction to her text to respond to analyses like Miller's. Before Anderson began articulating her own response to the hermeneutics of suspicion, however, there were other reconsiderations of Foucauldian discipline, many of which looked to the very "turn" in Foucault that Anderson considers in conjunction with Habermas. Though critics such as Mary Ann O'Farrell and Judith Butler restrict their own discussions of subjective agency to the *possibility* of detachment instead of contemplating an outright ethos of critical self-cultivation, both critics' careful reconsiderations of disciplinary power make space for the work that is done in Anderson's later texts. In *Telling Complexions*, the "betwixt and between methodology" that O'Farrell employs – one that "supplements Foucauldian discipline . . . with [a] Barthesian vision of reading as an *ars erotica*" (6-7) – establishes the "blushing body" as simultaneously a "subscription . . . to the code of an extensive social network" and a site of pleasure and "local resistance" (7). In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler speaks influentially of a subject that is "*neither* fully determined by power *nor* fully determining of power (but significantly and partially both)" (17). Her use of the psychoanalytic concept of melancholia to assert the "the possibility of a re-embodiment of the subjectivating norm that can redirect its normativity" may not

be able to stretch itself beyond “possibility,” and it may not be a direct link to the rationalist approach that Anderson takes up, but both Butler’s and O’Farrell’s contributions to our understanding of agency and detachment have added greatly to a growing discourse about a “liberated” liberal subject (99).

For a critic like Anderson, however, the question of rational distance is no longer one of theoretical “possibility.” In *The Way We Argue Now*, she suggests that detachment is an observable phenomenon that cannot be explained away by Foucault, poststructuralism, or the politics of identity:

[T]he cultivation of detachment—which in some sense is only another name for the examined life—is always an ongoing, partial project, whose interrelated ethical and epistemological dimensions promote the reflexive interrogation of norms and the possibility for individual and collective self-determination. (66)

With the support of Habermas and a growing critical consensus that has begun to back away from an era of “high” theory in order to explore more pragmatic approaches, Anderson moves from suggestion to assertion. Detachment is no longer an idea waiting to be properly theorized. It’s a viable critical concept. Even for a critic as invested in the rationalist tradition as Anderson, however, critical distance is still a “possibility” in the sense that it can or cannot be achieved. The “examined life” is attainable, but it comes with appreciable challenges. “[O]ngoing” and incomplete, self-authorization is a task of careful management and critical stewardship, and rational cultivation is a difficult and taxing “project,” even when it is a successful one. The powers of distance may be

a fact, but they are also an anomaly, and they often seem possible only for a select few – what Anderson identifies in her own work as a “core of writers” at one point in her Introduction (4).

It is the supposed rarity and exceptionality of rational detachment that I tackle in this dissertation. I write in the vein of Anderson’s Habermasian pragmatism, and I continue to take agency and self-authorization as observable ontological realities. In fact, I place the arguments of both *The Powers of Distance* and *The Way We Argue Now* at the center of my study of the Victorian novel. However, the question my own examination of rational detachment asks is – what about Trollope? What do we do with that other and very much larger league of novelists and thinkers who appear to be less critical than our best examples of rational self-reflection? How can the rationalist tradition do more than leave the world’s Trollopes out?

The answer that this dissertation offers to these questions is itself another series of questions: What if rational detachment were not simply “possible,” but were an inherent part of social and cultural experience? What if social and cultural determination were not a seamless, rigid, watertight phenomenon that could only be penetrated by deliberate efforts at self-cultivation, but were a porous and flexible experience, one filled with moments of “everyday” denaturalization, detachment, and insight? I use several different novelists and approaches to the question of rational distance in this dissertation to argue that detachment can be re-theorized in a way that includes smaller, un-heroic, even accidental experiences *within* social and cultural systems. I don’t discount

Anderson's theorizing, but I critique its limitations, and I attempt to expand on her work by looking for a different, much subtler, and much more pervasive form of detachment. I call this other kind of detachment "local," and I make it the project of this dissertation to illustrate several of its different modes. The "local" modes of rational distance that I observe in the works of Trollope, Gaskell, and Meredith are fragile, temporary, and isolated. They are restricted insights into particular pieces of "the sociological grid" that don't add up to any lasting stance or consistently non-normative position. However, I argue that these "local" moments are there, and I claim that learning to recognize them allows us to greatly expand our sense of what constitutes detachment. I suggest, in turn, that some of the best evidence for this lies not with the celebrated thinkers that Anderson studies, but with "run-of-the-mill" novelists like Trollope.

The term I give the "run-of-the-mill" in my study is "mediocrity," which I define broadly as the adherence to social and cultural convention – as rule-following, in short. Having given up the sense of exception that underwrites Anderson's theorization, I turn to that subset of conventional engagements that aren't just defined by the rules, but that are defined by their *obedience* to the rules. I ask why we notice the conventionality of certain books, people, and situations. Why do we sometimes notice the norm if it supposedly "just the norm"? What does it mean when we feel compelled to define something not simply as conventional, but as merely "mediocre"? I answer these questions by suggesting that, while "mediocrity" is a sign that the rules are being followed, it can also be a signal that those rules have been momentarily bent, slightly broken,

or accidentally ruptured. I argue that observing an adherence to convention is an indication that there is actually something else going on – that there is a “local” moment of abnormality taking place, one that is able to operate *within* a normal social or cultural experience and bring it into relief.

In order to locate this kind of detachment, besides moving from a study of the “exemplary” to an exploration of the “mediocre,” I also switch methodologies in this dissertation. Anderson, in *The Powers of Distance*, is interested in the kinds of fabric that make up identity, in what we might think of as social and cultural “content.” She studies cosmopolitanism, dandyism, and scientific objectivity and makes arguments about how these phenomena “exceed the sociological grid” – how the positions they represent cannot be successfully explained in terms of determination. I, on the other hand, am not explicitly interested in studying fabrics. I’m interested in the forms that prop those fabrics up, the structures, codes, and machinery – the rules – that embody social and cultural identification. Rather than deciding what does or doesn’t “exceed the sociological grid,” I examine what the grid does and how it does it, which represents a return to the kind of analysis that Foucault performs in *Discipline and Punish*. I rethink all those “tiny, everyday, physical mechanisms” in order to argue that adhering to social and cultural convention can actually generate local spaces of detachment – that even within a predetermined field of experience and understanding, the conventions that substantiate that field can produce moments of denaturalization and self-determination. A Victorian lady may buy into traditional notions of feminine virtue, for example. But I argue that the reification

of that virtue into a conspicuously “mediocre” habit of demure speech also puts that lady into contact with the texture of her conventionality and allows her to enact forms of demureness that are slightly “nonsociological” (Anderson, *The Way We Argue Now* 6). If the lady apologizes in advance for interrupting an interlocutor, I don’t decide that her apology is simply socially complicit. I ask how she knows what kind of apology to use in order to interrupt – and I suggest that her pragmatic experience of generating that particular apology can create a moment of detachment *within* the larger ethos of feminine virtue.

Although the detachments I go looking for are “local,” they are a major revision of Anderson’s work. I’m really looking at a different kind of rational distance altogether, one that borrows from critics like Anderson, but also tweaks many of their basic points. In order to substantiate this revision, therefore, I first turn to a study of literary form in this dissertation. I examine several different features of Victorian realism with a study of three different 19th-century novelists, Trollope, Gaskell, and Meredith. I argue that each novelist follows the genre’s rules of the representation, but also finds opportunities to bend or break them. In turn, I use these examinations of literary form to model the modes of “local” social and cultural detachment that are the real crux of my project.

Victorian realism is the perfect place to theorize “mediocrity” and “local” detachment for at least two reasons. Logistically, realism has the right content. It is an aesthetic movement that took the very ordinariness of existence as its subject, which means it is filled with depictions of social and cultural convention, including the “mediocre” kinds I wish to study. Even more important in terms of

theorizing “local” detachment, however, is that realism itself is still often treated in critical discourse as a “mediocre” genre – one that sets out to follow the rules of representation as closely as possible. While critics such as George Levine, Matthew Beaumont, and Lilian Furst have been observing for quite some time that Victorian realism is, in fact, far more than an inventory of “real life,” the assumption that the genre’s practitioners – especially its “mediocre” practitioners – mistake conventions of representation for the actual observable world has persisted with surprising tenacity. As Beaumont has recently observed, many current analyses of the genre still “impl[y] that all realism is a species of *trompe l’oeil*, an act of representation that, in replicating empirical reality as exactly as possible, dreams of attaining a complete correspondence to it” (4). Much more fond of the non-representational formal experimentation that defines both British Romanticism and Modernism, for example, critics still tend to deprecate realism or use it as a foil for other periods and genres. In the three chapters that follow, however, I use Trollope, Gaskell, and Meredith to thoroughly expose and critique this lingering assumption, and to demonstrate how critics continue to fail to recognize that even “mediocre” novelists participate in the other, larger project of Victorian realism – a project which is often subtly unconventional and non-representative.

Levine’s work on the epistemology of realism is at the core of my approach to the genre. He examines how difficult “the very hard work of trying to reach beyond words to things as they are” necessarily is – even for the most conventionally adherent authors (16):

[R]ealism's effort to stand in for the world can hardly be unself-conscious, naïve, or self-deceived. Realism makes the difficulties of the work of representation inescapably obvious to the writer; it makes inevitable an intense self-consciousness, sometimes explicit, sometimes not. No writer attempting to reach beyond words can fail to be struck by the work words do and cannot do, and therefore no such writer can fail to recognize the degree to which the creation of illusion is essential to the realist process.

(ibid)

My own addition to these succinct observations (and the reason, again, I take Victorian realism as the perfect place to theorize “mediocrity” and “local” detachment) is the argument that the “inevitable” and “intense self-consciousness” of realism also facilitates spaces of detachment for the practitioners of the genre. For example, omniscient narrators often reveal the impossibility of their own absolute knowledge. They tell us what a character “may” be thinking or wonder what might have happened if the story they are telling had gone off in another direction. They adhere to omniscience as a realistic rule, but in certain moments their authors also clearly evince a level of detachment from omniscient narration as a convention of representation. The well-made plot also regularly reveals itself as a convention. The hero and heroine of a novel happen to end up at the same end of the room at the very same party and have just enough time to exchange the one glance that facilitates 600 pages of courtship. A plot that well-made is conventional, but the “work” a novelist’s “words do” to make it well-made also necessitates an awareness of the rules of

representation being adhered to. I find instances like these in each of the novels I study, spaces where its “mediocre” author has been “struck by the work [their] words do and cannot do” – struck by their own obedience to the rules of representation – and I argue that these spaces and moments demonstrate that the devices that define Victorian realism also facilitate detachment from its conventions of representation. Any time we notice a “mediocre” convention of representation, I argue that, in fact, we are noticing its author’s “local” distance from the basic rules of the genre. In turn, I use that authorial detachment not only to explore Trollope, Gaskell, and Meredith as *other* kinds of novelists – novelists who participate in the richer project of Victorian realism – but to model the forms of social and cultural detachment that each of these authors depicts.

The first chapter of this dissertation tackles its unlikely inspiration, Anthony Trollope. By looking carefully in *The Eustace Diamonds* at the narratorial interruptions for which the author is notorious, I provide a clear example of the kind of “local” detachment that is the theoretical backbone of this project. Instead of taking Trollope’s Palliser novel for granted as a realistic parody of sensation fiction (an old hypothesis that takes Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* as the butt of a 750-page joke), I suggest that the text’s intermittent “over-performance” of omniscience is actually evidence of Trollope’s ongoing detachment from the conventions of realistic representation. Trollope may be one of the most fluent realists in the 19th century and is often used as a touchstone for

the genre, but I demonstrate that the great fluency in convention that makes him “mediocre” also turns his adherence to the rules into a little bit of excess.

In the second section of my first chapter I move to an examination of social form and transpose Trollope’s “over-fluency” onto the melodramaticism of his central character. Lizzie Eustace may be a thoroughly satirized figure akin to a Becky Sharp – a bourgeois character fiercely bumbling around in a cultural game she can’t quite get the better of. But I suggest that this social climber’s self-conscious relationship with good manners also becomes a way of detaching herself from the work that manners do in *The Eustace Diamonds*. I argue that Lizzie’s exaggerated, imitative, and mechanical behavior not only creates satire around herself and the high society she is trying to infiltrate, but that her naively “over-performed” sincerity is a symptom of a locally detached sociability. When Lizzie’s adherence to the rules gets saccharinely sweet, I argue that the difference we notice between her behavior and the genuine article registers a level of insight for the character into the social forms of sincerity.

In my second chapter on Gaskell’s *North and South*, I begin with a discussion of two literary features: plot and detail. Plot is, of course, not a feature unique to realistic fiction. Elizabethan tragedies and 21st-century science-fiction novels have plots – sets of events that order themselves into chains of cause and effect. Detail, on the other hand, is one of the 19th century’s specialties. The Victorian novel gets much of its size from its dedicated recitation of detail, which supports an incidental and “realistic” portrait of time, place, and character. It is no coincidence that the combination of plot and detail defines one of our greatest

expectations for realism: plausibility. As critics like Levine have observed, if there is something necessarily artificial about plot, one of the ways that Victorian realism attempts to compensate for this artificiality is with the incidentalness of descriptive detail. An author “register[s] the particulars of the material world” in order to “lessen the sense of manipulation” that a series of well-ordered events generates (18).

In Gaskell’s novel, plot and detail go about their business in the usual way. The marriage plot between Thornton and Margaret – which stands in for the novel’s thematic coming together of North and South, industry and agriculture – is tempered by collections of details and, in being tempered, is absorbed into the ethnography of Gaskell’s “social problem” novel. Many recent critics have stressed how the potentially blemishing “romance” of *North and South* is, in fact, a careful incorporation of passionate feeling into the fabric of realistic representation. In my own analysis, however, I don’t defend Gaskell and simply affirm the plausibility of her novel. I reemphasize the disjunction between Gaskell’s pronounced plot and the ethnographic effort that her details represent. In turn, I suggest that the author’s attempts to level that disjunction make *North and South* conspicuously conventional, or “mediocre.” This approach may contradict many critics’ attempts to recuperate and revitalize Gaskell; however, by defining *North and South* as a “mediocre” text, I suggest that we can observe how its author’s routine combination of plot and detail actually produces some interestingly abnormal variations *within* generic tradition. For Gaskell, I argue

that following the rules becomes a chance to experiment with plausibility, one of Victorian realism's most fundamental devices.

From plot and detail, I move to another routine combination in the second half of my chapter and define a second mode of "local" social detachment. Gaskell's story of socioeconomic compromise is predicated on bringing two things together – "manly" candor and "gentlemanly" affectation. If the "modern" industrial man embodied in Thornton is too self-interested and forward at the beginning of *North and South*, and if the traditional aristocratic lady embodied in the likes of the Hale family is too affected, Gaskell's novel finds a middle ground for past and present in the law of bourgeois reserve, one that is also a solution to class conflict. Honest and opinionated, yet restrained and self-controlled, the ethos of Victorian reserve is both a domestic habit and a social imperative in *North and South*, bringing together laborer and mill owner as well as Margaret and Thornton. Although this emphasis on bourgeois self-control seems to epitomize 19th-century normativity, in my examination, reserve also becomes a highly self-conscious routine – a habit of compensation that frequently produces abnormal variations *within* the ethos of self-restraint. I suggest that "mediocre" characters often experience their adherence to the forms of reserve as encounters with the structures that embody this social rule, and that these encounters produce "local" moments of agency and insight.

In Chapter 3, I examine Meredith's *The Egoist* and generate a new argument about the novelist's infamously "difficult" style. I call Meredith a Victorian realist, which is a departure from the "proto-modern" label most

recuperative critics have tried using. Most recent accounts of Meredith explain his obscure prose by arguing that it indicates that the author is pulling away from the conventions of Victorian realism, but hasn't yet fully formulated the "dense 'textualité'" of the early 20th century (White 2). Meredith is a preview of better, more accomplished experiments with literary form. However, I use *The Egoist* to argue that Meredith's use of conventional features like omniscience and plausibility actually set the stage for this author's dense collection of stylistic abnormalities – that Meredith adheres to realism's rules in order to generate a blueprint *within* which he can use style as a non-representative experiment. By defining Meredith not in relation to the iconoclasm he proceeds, but in conjunction with the literary traditions of his own century, I argue that his "mediocre" fiction becomes a vibrant illustration of the complexity that is often read out of Victorian realism.

After calling Meredith "mediocre," I move on to the characters in his novel and study what the Victorians called "the art of conversation." Most of the men and women in *The Egoist* dutifully follow the everyday conventions of speech in one "mediocre" exchange after another. In their attempts to speak correctly, however, I argue that many characters also find themselves having exchanges that both reinforce and expose the rules of the linguistic game they are playing. In their ongoing encounters with language, I argue that Meredith's characters experience detachment in the spaces between the rules that define "the art of conversation," and that like the author, they experience "local" moments of agency and insight. When Clara Middleton, the novel's heroine, can't find the

words to separate herself from her Egoist fiancé, Willoughby Patterne, I suggest that this loss of language is actually a series of highly self-conscious encounters with the idioms, clichés, and familiar phrases that define her circumstances. As with Trollope and Gaskell, I ultimately use this analysis to argue that Meredith's mode of detachment gives us a reason to rethink rational distance – not simply as a rare, “cultivated” achievement, but as a “local,” everyday experience.

Chapter 1: Another Trollope: Fluency as Over-performance

Amanda Anderson is one of the dominant voices among a group of literary and cultural critics currently investing in the notion of rational detachment. Both *The Powers of Distance* (2001) and *The Way We Argue Now* (2006) construct careful arguments about intersubjective communicativity and agential subjectivity with the theoretical support of Jürgen Habermas, and they do so in a critical landscape that still tends to define the modern liberal subject in terms of its social and cultural determination:

I contest the prevalent skepticism about the possibility or desirability of achieving reflective distance on one's social or cultural positioning. As a result of poststructuralism's insistence on the forms of finitude—linguistic, psychological, and cultural—that limit individual agency, and multiculturalism's insistence on the primacy of ascribed group identity and its accompanying perspectives, the concept of critical distance has been seriously discredited, even as it necessarily informs many of the very accounts that announce its bankruptcy. (*The Way We Argue Now* 1-2)

The rebuttal Anderson forges against such “prevalent skepticism” gives “Habermas a new hearing by showing the ways in which his theories promote an understanding of reflective distance as an achieved and lived practice” (ibid 2). She doesn't contest the logic that formulates “critical distance as an embedded” phenomenon or dispute that “individuals and collectives are necessarily faced with discrete fields of action” (ibid 2, 6). Anderson does claim, however, with the aid of “contemporary pragmatism,” that subjectivity cannot be reduced to a matter

of cultural construction (ibid 6). She asserts that “individuals and collectives” are capable of cultivating rational self-reflection and insists that they can “exceed the sociological grid” in ways that are both observable and worthy of study (ibid). Determination may still be the name of the equation, but the powers of distance weaken the predictive capacity of that equation by making “nonsociological” exceptions possible (ibid).

Anderson defines the “nonsociological” broadly, hoping “to suggest” in a comprehensive way that individuals and groups “can and do cultivate habits, dispositions, and attitudes that can in no simple way be attributed to any easily identifiable and limiting sociological determination” (ibid). She stresses that her arguments are not about a form of detachment available only to “elite groups” (*The Powers of Distance* 5). Despite her resolute inclusivity, however, both Anderson’s monographs work in a fairly restricted way, picking their most significant examples from the kind of “elite groups” from which the author is hoping to disassociate her project. Determined to push back on the skepticism that has dogged many discussions of rational distance, Anderson examines promising cases in order to paint a convincing picture. In *The Powers of Distance* she “explore[s] the Victorian topos of detachment by means of” what she readily identifies as “exemplary instances” – 19th-century intellectual and aesthetic projects that are deeply invested in developing forms of detachment (20). A “core of writers,” including George Eliot, Matthew Arnold, and John Stuart Mill, becomes the backbone for her general claims about the modern liberal subject (4).

In *The Way We Argue Now*, Anderson continues in this kind of vein, turning her attention to “contemporary academic debates” (1).²

In a more recent essay, Anderson begins to move away from the “exemplary.” Less preoccupied with defending rationalism as a legitimate theoretical approach, in “Trollope’s Modernity” Anderson examines one of the 19th century’s most notoriously average authors. She reassess Anthony Trollope’s conventionality and develops a surprisingly complex portrait of this reputedly normal novelist. By parsing “sincerity” as its functions in Trollope’s fiction both as a social discipline and an attempt at individual detachment, Anderson begins to demonstrate the universal potential of “the powers of distance:”

In the context of [the] formal economy between narrator and character, honesty emerges as the crux virtue [in Trollope’s fiction]. It hovers uneasily between traditional individual virtue (it quintessentially defines the “gentleman”) and a kind of impersonal truth-telling or critique that is aligned both with the evaluative diagnoses of the narrative and with specific challenges by characters within the story to the doxa that defines the embedded communities that Trollope seems often to affirm. (512)

Where so many others have only seen “the ethos of gentlemanliness” operating in “an uninterrogated way,” Anderson discovers a “critical form of sincerity,” one that “takes reflective distance [to achieve] and [which] subjects the assumptions of the gentlemanly ethos to a fundamentally liberal critique” (513). In an analysis of both *Barchester Towers* and *The Way We Live Now*, she is able to locate “ordinary” men and women who have been placed in circumstances that prompt

the “cultivation” of detachment,³ which means Anderson begins to move into some of the promising territory she gestured towards in her earlier work (512).

It is, fundamentally, the project of this dissertation to keep moving into this kind of territory. I work in the rationalist tradition in the manner Anderson advises, arguing in the way “We” are supposed to be arguing “Now.” I operate under the same basic Kantian assumptions and rely on a Habermasian sense of rational communicativity. What I hope to add to some of the movement Anderson has made possible, however, is a more expansive sense of what constitutes detachment. I go looking for detachment in places that Anderson has not. I also get to those places by employing a methodology she doesn’t employ. With the luxury of taking for granted some of the things this critic has painstakingly theorized, I push and tweak her logic in ways that both support her basic position and challenges it to reach new conclusions.

My strategy for generating this expansion is to abandon the sense of exceptionality that underlies Anderson’s argument – the sense that rational distance is always “achieved,” “cultivated,” or “aspired to.” As she explains in *The Way We Argue Now*, “[T]he cultivation of detachment . . . is always an ongoing, partial project, whose interrelated ethical and epistemological dimensions promote the reflexive interrogation of norms and the possibility for individual and collective self-determination” (66). I agree with Anderson’s sense that detachment is always a “partial” phenomenon, one that can never reach some objective position “outside” or “beyond” culture. What I would like to question in this dissertation is the notion that it can only occur as a “project” that requires

active “promo[tion]” – that rational self-reflection is a “possibility” made possible either by a deliberate “topos” of detachment or by particularly conducive moments of social or cultural “tension.” When in *The Powers of Distance* Anderson “defend[s] the progressive potentiality of those modern practices that aim to objectify facets of human existence” and defines “the cultivation of detachment” as “the *aspiration* to a distanced view,” she limits her search for self-reflection to purposeful “aims” and sustained “aspirations” (5-6). And in “Trollope’s Modernity” – though her analysis isn’t as dependent on intellectual energy – there is still a sense that detachment occurs at a time when “the tradition of sincerity [has] become especially ambitious and self-reflective—not limited to a constraining version of the social but aspiring to a productive interrelation with new intellectual, political, and aesthetic postures” (516).

I abandon this sense of exception in this dissertation. I don’t look for a distinctive “topos” of detachment or for signs of an enduring struggle. Instead, I study what it means to be *adherent* to the normal, the average, and the everyday. Anderson’s focus is on exceptions that “exceed the sociological grid.” My focus is the obediently unexceptional. Anderson makes arguments about aims and aspirations. I make arguments about moments and spaces *within* the status quo. I define “mediocrity” in a technical way as the adherence to social and cultural convention – as rule-following, in essence. I ask why we sometimes notice normality being normal. Why are some things just conventional, and others “mediocre”? I argue, in turn, that when we observe someone or something following the rules, the fact that we’ve observed it often means that that person,

place, or thing isn't just "mediocre" in the vernacular sense, but is involved in a kind of detachment, insight, and agency that is passed over in theorizing like Anderson's.

In a strictly Foucauldian world, we might call mediocrity "discipline." (Indeed, in some sense we are all "mediocre" if we live in a world of inescapable determination.) In the Habermasian model I employ, however, mediocrity becomes a particular piece of the social and cultural landscape. It is that subset of conventional engagements that aren't simply defined by the rules, but that are defined by their *adherence* to the rules – the books, people, and spaces we notice being conventional. I take such apparently unpromising material as my subject, and I argue that in the midst of the conspicuously "unexceptional" and "average" there are instances of what I call "local" detachment. I use this phrase to denote isolated, fragile, and un-heroic experiences of rational distance *within* cultures – spaces and moments that are not part of habituated practice or sustained tension and which are inevitably reabsorbed into the fabric of the social and cultural norm. These experiences are not examples of "the powers of distance" that Anderson is intent on exploring. They don't add up to any achieved position. However, the most basic claim I make in this dissertation is that critical reflection can actually be an unexceptional, temporary, and even accidental byproduct of the processes that maintain social and cultural identification – that adhering to the norm can, at times, mean being a little bit abnormal.

In order to prove this point, besides switching my focus from acts of "cultivation" to acts of adherence, I also switch methodologies in this dissertation.

Anderson is focused on what we might call the cultural, political, intellectual, and ethical “content” of social theories and practices. She is interested in the kinds of fabric that make up identity, in “the constrained ways in which nonsociological understandings of identity make their presence felt” (*The Way We Argue Now* 6). I, on the other hand, am not explicitly interested in a study of differing fabrics. I’m interested in the grid itself, the forms that embody and reify identity. This means that instead of figuring out what does or doesn’t qualify as “exceed[ing] the sociological grid” – cosmopolitanism, dandyism, scientific objectivity – I look more closely at what the grid does and how it does it. Without pretending that there is a definitive separation between social “content” and “form,” I’d like to explore questions of determination and detachment by emphasizing the formal dimensions of convention – the machinery, processes, and procedures that make up Anderson’s “grid.”

In this first chapter, I find my initial example of “local” detachment in *The Eustace Diamonds*, one of Anthony Trollope’s most avidly read novels. I choose this text in order to give myself an opportunity to reread Anderson’s reading of Trollopian “sincerity” and to switch methodologies in the way I describe above. Rather than make a study of “sincerity” per se and parse the difference between the “traditional individual virtue” and “impersonal truth-telling” that Anderson’s identifies, I turn my attention to the forms that “sincerity” takes in Trollope’s novel and argue that obeying the rules that maintain this ethos often produces “local” space of detachment. In doing so, I return to the normativity this novelist is famous for – because I think defining Trollopian detachment can’t be a case of

hunting for “cultivated” exceptions in an oeuvre that is infamously unexceptional. I look at instances where “traditional individual virtue” operates in a “mediocre” way, where someone refuses to give the lie, or where someone else makes fine distinctions between “untruths” and “lies.” I explore the texture of these social forms, and I argue, in turn, that even in the “mediocre” behavior of Trollope’s “mediocre” characters we can decipher instances of insight and agency.

The “mediocre” behavior I analyze in *The Eustace Diamonds* is primarily performed by the novel’s central figure, Lizzie Eustace. This character has often been read as an anti-Trollopian anti-heroine, and her bourgeois imitations of proper etiquette are usually taken for a satirical condemnation of social climbing that reasserts the pressures of conventional sincerity. Lizzie isn’t interested in developing detachment from the ethos of traditional virtue, but makes achieving the norm her explicit preoccupation. She enacts a series of exaggerated performances of good manners in order to exhibit convincingly sociable signs of “love and friendship and benevolence and tenderness” (I: 127). In my own examination, however, I argue that this character’s mechanical over-performance of sincerity also becomes a vehicle for experiencing brief moments of insight *within* the conventions that Lizzie is trying to imitate. The little excesses of this protagonist’s manners are, in fact, momentary fissures in the very rules that Lizzie is trying to follow.

This analysis of *The Eustace Diamonds* is, in essence, a formal reading of a particular set of Victorian manners. In order to ground this analysis, I first turn to a consideration of literary form in this chapter and the two that follow, and I

offer the conventions of Victorian realism as a template for my claims about social form.

Well into the 20th century, realism was still derided by critics as an unreflective and “mediocre” genre. It was considered “an act of representation that, in replicating empirical reality as exactly as possible, dreams of attaining a complete correspondence to it” (Beaumont 4). In the last several decades, this reputation has been slowly revised. Victorian realism is now generally understood to “exhibit and examine the formal limits that shape it,” and its practitioners are understood to be participating in a project that goes far beyond the representation of “real life” (ibid). As George Levine puts it in his early “reconsideration” of the genre,

Realism makes the difficulties of the work of representation inescapably obvious to the writer; it makes inevitable an intense self-consciousness, sometimes explicit, sometime not. No writer attempting to reach beyond words can fail to be struck by the work words do and cannot do, and therefore no such writer can fail to recognize the degree to which the creation of illusion is essential to the realist process. (16)

In a sense, Levine took what was “obvious” and “inevitable” about writing realism and made it obvious and inevitable to those criticizing the genre. In this dissertation, however, I demonstrate that while Victorian realism has been thoroughly debunked as a simple inventory of “real life,” it is still often implicitly treated in critical discourse as a merely representative – and “mediocre” – genre, one that follows the rules of representation as closely as possible. I use authors

like Trollope to expose and critique this assumption, and to demonstrate how critics continue to fail to recognize that even the most traditional employments of realistic convention necessarily participate in the genre's richer, non-representative project. Even "mediocre" employments of the conventions of representation are always defined against an author's unconventional and non-representative "work," I argue.⁴ Novels like *The Eustace Diamonds* may be efforts to make words represent, but they are also examples of how the rules of representation cannot be followed without embedding an author's self-conscious, non-representational choices into the fabric of a realistic novel.

I emphasize the non-representational and unconventional aspects of Victorian realism in order to explore the underappreciated complexity of each "mediocre" author that I study. Trollope, Gaskell, and Meredith are all examined as *another* kind of novelist. As previously mentioned, however, I also use a study of "the work words do" to model what I am calling "local" detachment. If Levine can ask, "Who, among novel readers, does not know he or she is reading a novel?" I ask who, in turn, doesn't take up the rules of social convention and get "struck" by the cultural forms in which they are embedded (19-20)? If the features that define realism generate noticeable moments of detachment *within* the conventions of representation, I suggest that an adherence to social form can generate something similar. This something may not be an elaborate "habit, disposition, or attitude." It may be contained within normal, everyday experiences. But I suggest that, in the same way that "mediocre" realism is populated with unconventional and non-representative spaces, so too is

“mediocre” social form populated with “local” experiences of social and cultural detachment.

In Chapter 1, I use *The Eustace Diamonds* specifically to examine Trollope’s omniscient narrator.⁵ Anderson begins to defend the “intermittent clubbiness” of the novelist’s “chronicler” in her more recent work, questioning what has often been “derided as [Trollope’s] intrusive frame-breaking” (512). Her study doesn’t explore the narrator’s relationship with omniscience in an extended way, however.⁶ I take a closer look at Trollope’s storyteller and suggest that his “frame-breaking” occurs as a result of what I call generic “over-fluency.” By “over-fluent” I mean too-well practiced or familiar – not in a highly intellectual sense, but in the mechanical one for which Trollope is notorious.⁷ I suggest that this prolific author employs realistic forms almost automatically, and, in doing so, that his adherence to convention often produces a little bit of excess. As if writing were so much dotting of “i’s” and crossing of “t’s,” form gets produced for the sake of form in *The Eustace Diamonds*, and I argue that this perfunctory performance produces moments of omniscience that are over-informative and over-omniscient – that are more than representative and a little bit abnormal. In turn, I push back on a critical tradition that has long assumed that *The Eustace Diamonds* is a rather over-extended, realistic parody of Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone*. Though Trollope has appeared to many to be writing a novel that distinguishes between the narratorial practices of sensationalism and realism, I suggest that tracing “local” detachments in *The Eustace Diamonds*

reveals *another* kind of Trollope – one whose narrator is actually telling a semi-sensational story.

A little too transparent

The story of Lizzie Eustace, in which a penniless admiral's daughter marries a Lord, steals her own diamonds, and escapes from legal accusations of perjury, is a unique story for Trollope. In comparison to the author's many other "plotless," character-driven tales, this novel is heavily plotted. Many of its twists and turns are the direct result of another feature unique to Trollope's fiction – the intertextuality of *The Eustace Diamonds*. Since its initial serialization in 1869, Trollope's novel has had a clear resemblance to Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*, which was published in 1868. Generations of readers have drawn the line between Lizzie Eustace and Rachel Verinder, Detective Bunift and Sergeant Cuff, and the Eustace Diamonds and the Moonstone that is there to be drawn, and such lines don't often get drawn either into or out of Trollope's fiction. This intertextuality has, in turn, been reinforced by a narrator who is even more interruptive than the novelist's "chroniclers" usually tend to be. Eager as ever to point out how his omniscience works, Trollope's narrator not only pops into and out of *The Eustace Diamonds* in order to call his story a story and to address his reader as the reader of a novel, but he frequently steps into his tale to differentiate his kind of story-telling from the secrecy of Collins's first-person sensationalism. He explains, for example, that, unlike the reader of the suspense-driven

Moonstone, “the reader” of his novel “has been told without reserve . . . every secret” and “every tittle” of Lizzie’s adventure (II:144).

Despite these uncharacteristic features, *The Eustace Diamonds* has never really raised any critical eyebrows. The novel has been taken as a solid example of realistic storytelling. D.A. Miller, for example, in *The Novel and the Police*, confidently refers to the story of Lizzie Eustace as “an example of high-realist fiction” (11). Ayelet Ben-Yishai has also argued recently about “the highly conventional form of Trollope’s realist narration” in *The Eustace Diamonds*. He uses the text’s “epistemological certainty to reflect and comment on realism more generally” (89). Though Lizzie’s story of theft, duplicity, and betrayal may be quite unlike the predictable kind of Trollope we have come to expect, the novel’s uniqueness has always been interpreted as a symptom of the author’s own generic self-satisfaction. Its ongoing flirtations with the tropes of sensation fiction have been interpreted as a straightforward critique of those tropes.

No one knows realism like Trollope, of course, or relies on its devices to the extent that Trollope does. This novelist’s contentment with the conventions of the genre is borne out in the prolificacy that got *The Eustace Diamonds* and 46 other novels published. That being said, I think our confidence in this author as a realist touchstone and Trollope’s own humble self-characterizations as a pedestrian novelist have dulled our receptiveness to the subtle, unconventional nuances in his fiction. This other kind of Trollope is never more evident than in the story of Lizzie Eustace, and I think that paying attention to his presence really changes the way this “mediocre” novel gets read.⁸

By putting Trollope's pesky narrator at the center of my analysis and taking the time to illustrate the many narratorial interruptions in *The Eustace Diamonds* as over-performances of this device, I'd like to demonstrate 1) how these slightly abnormal moments act as spaces of generic detachment in Trollope's novel and 2) how those spaces turn what looks like a parodic differentiation between realism and sensationalism into a semi-sensational text.⁹ Trollope doesn't just set out to represent "reality," in other words, and he also doesn't just ironize the aesthetic conventions of his day in a self-conscious way. This author occasionally gets "struck" by the "work" his words do, and he participates in realism's non-representative project.

The most important example of this in *The Eustace Diamonds* comes after the attempted theft of the diamonds at the Carlisle Inn. Towards the end of Chapter XLIV, "A Midnight Adventure," the narrator addresses the reader in what might first look like nothing more than an effort to make his story transparent:

The enterprising adventurers had, indeed, stolen the iron case [that often held Lizzie's diamonds], but they had stolen nothing else. The reader must not suppose that because Lizzie had preserved her jewels, she was therefore a consenting party to the abstraction of the box. The theft had been a genuine theft, planned with great skill, carried out with much ingenuity, one in the perpetration of which money had been spent,—a theft which for a while baffled the police of England, and which was supposed to be very creditable to those who had been engaged in it. But

the box, and nothing but the box, had fallen into the hands of the thieves.

(II:45)

This explanation of Lizzie's "midnight adventure" appears just over a page after the attempted robbery, which means the reader is certainly given a transparent view of certain facts – the central one being that this theft isn't really a theft at all. In order to secure the transparency so important to realism, Trollope's omniscient narrator makes a point of presenting "the whole story." This careful conventionality is reiterated at least twice more in the chapters that follow. The narrator promises when the investigator Mr. Bunfit comes to search Lady Eustace's private rooms that "He who recounts these details has scorned to have a secret between himself and his readers. The diamonds were at this moment locked up within Lizzie's desk" (II:78-9). Forty pages later, after what is the second, successful robbery of Lizzie's diamonds, we are again reminded that the narrator has "scorn[ed] to keep from his reader any secret that is known to himself" when he describes in great detail their location after this other heist (II:117): "the Eustace diamonds were locked up in a small safe fixed into the wall at the back of a small cellar beneath the establishment of Messrs. Harter and Benjamin, in Minto Lane, in the City" (ibid).

However perfunctory Trollope's omniscience may be in these moments, his conspicuous interruptions are also generic winks in this text – though they don't appear to have ever been read that way.¹⁰ Unconcerned about exposing the "reality" of his fiction with a little peek behind the curtain, Trollope's faithful fluency quickly becomes a self-conscious joke that turns an adherence to the rules

of omniscience into a device as heavy-handed as sensational secrecy. What looks like a parody of Collins becomes a realistic self-parody, one that shows omniscient narration to be a craft as crafty as the multi-perspectivalism of *The Moonstone*'s series of first-person narrators. In the passage after the diamonds are stolen, Trollope's narrator isn't just omniscient. He tells us far more than we need to know. We read that 1) Lizzie was not "a consenting party to the abstraction of the box." We then read that 2) "The theft had been a genuine theft," that 3) the theft had been "planned with great skill," that 4) it had been "carried out with much ingenuity," and that 5) it was a theft "in the perpetration of which money had been spent." We are told that 6) it was a theft "which for a while baffled the police of England," a theft 7) "which was supposed to be very creditable to those who had been engaged in it." Finally, we read that 8) it was a theft in which "the box, and nothing but the box, had fallen into the hands of the thieves." All such details are there to assure the reader that they are in the realistic know. But they are also details that simply reiterate and reemphasize what Trollope's narrator has already made clear: that Lizzie is not a thief because her diamonds haven't actually been stolen. This over-omniscience surfaces again when the reader is told where the diamonds are hidden after the successful heist: nine prepositional phrases describe a precise location "in the City" that is only significant insofar as it is *not* a location known to Lizzie, which means that the second robbery is, in fact, a robbery.

Do these little excesses of omniscience support the "reality" of Trollope's realistic novel? Yes, they do. They are omniscient narration. They follow the

rules of representation. Are they reducible to their obedience to the rules? No, I don't think they are. If Trollope's narrator is being transparent about the circumstances surrounding the night at the Carlisle Inn, his decision to relate extraneous details as part of this narration means that he also zooms in much farther than transparency necessitates. How does knowing that "money had been spent" on this theft support the novel's disclosure that the diamonds are still safely underneath Lizzie's pillow? I don't think we would notice that the narrative had been "interrupted" here in the first place if all Trollope's narrator was doing was being omniscient as usual. Is this series of omniscient details self-consciously ironic? Yes, it is. Is it simply self-conscious and ironic? No. To say that all Trollope does is register his own awareness of aesthetic convention is to ignore his particular use of convention. It ignores the way that Trollope's omniscience reveals the extraneous and inconsequential. Being over-omniscient *is* being omniscient in one sense. But it is also using the forms that maintain omniscience in a way that becomes a little bit abnormal. The difference between telling the reader that Lizzie still has her diamonds after the first "robbery" and over-telling them is the space in which Trollope evinces a level of local detachment *within* generic convention, I'd suggest. This may be an isolated moment in an otherwise "mediocre" novel. But disregarding it is disregarding the subtlety of Trollope's use of the conventions of representation.

What makes the above a particularly good place to observe Trollope's detachment is that in addition to over-articulating his omniscience in these few asides, the narrator of *The Eustace Diamonds* actually misrepresents it. Despite

his thorough candidness with regards to the whereabouts of Lizzie's diamonds, Trollope's narrator hasn't actually revealed every secret in his story. We don't yet know, for example, who exactly *has* tried to steal Lizzie's diamonds: her maid, Patience Crabstick. We also don't know that she is in cahoots with two professional robbers, Mr. Smiler and Billy Cann.¹¹ These are elisions Trollope is certainly aware of. Much of the interest of the following chapters rests on the slow revelation of who-did-what-when that night at the Carlisle Inn. When Trollope "scorns" secrecy in the midst of his own series of secrets, then, his omniscience is doing more than being conventional. It is really cross-examining the "reality" that omniscience purports to represent. Without engaging with the conventions of realistic representation in a systematic or even a particularly analytic manner, Trollope's adherence to the rules goes a little bit beyond convention and reveals that omniscience has much more in common with the mysteries of sensation fiction than it might want to admit.¹²

Jenny Bourne Taylor has recently observed in her discussion of "Trollope and the sensation novel" that the author's reputation for writing "The Novel as Usual"¹³ is in fact more complicated than critical tradition would have it: "His use of [the] contrasts [between realism and sensationalism] is primarily rhetorical," she states; "throughout his writing career, Trollope increasingly draws on 'sensational' techniques" (85):

. . . Trollope's brand of realism was [as] hybrid [as the conglomeration of gothic romance, melodrama, and domestic realism that made up 19th-century sensation fiction], combining overt authorial intervention with the

detailed ethnographic representation of the minutiae of daily life and the investigation of consciousness and subjectivity, and also drawing on Gothic and melodramatic modes. (88)

This reevaluation of the novelist's relationship with genre is well over-due and corroborates my reading of *The Eustace Diamonds*. Taylor's notion of generic hybridity is a better assessment of Trollope's relationship with genre, and it helps clarify how self-consciously tropological the novelist's often blasé accounts of "real life" really are. What I would like to add to Taylor's observations is that Trollope's "use of 'sensational' technique[s]" also demonstrates the difference between conventional realism in general and a local, detached use of a particular narrative device (97). Reducing Trollope to a "mediocre" account of "the work words do" allows us to read past fleeting abnormalities in the novelist's "brand of realism," in other words – which means that we actually read Trollopian fiction more conventionally than Trollope wrote it.

A little too sincere

Trollope's narrator isn't the only "mediocre" literary mechanic in *The Eustace Diamonds*. There is also Lizzie Eustace, whose attempts to appear socially refined and "poetic" generate several hilarious scenes in the novel. As early as Chapter II we read that Lizzie has a close – if illegitimate – relationship with literary form:

[Lizzie] did like reading, and especially the reading of poetry,—though even in this she was false and pretentious, skipping, pretending to have

read, lying about books, and making up her market of literature for outside admiration at the easiest possible cost of trouble. And she had some dream of being in love, and would take delight even in building castles in the air, which she would people with friends and lovers whom she would make happy with the most open-hearted benevolence. (I:13)

Lizzie's heavily satirized poetic streak and the habit of "building castles in the air" that it engenders are not just incidental pieces of comedy in the novel, but from the very beginning are important symptoms of this Becky-Sharp-like¹⁴ character's manipulative insincerity. Knowing poetry – or at least looking like you know it – is part of the larger performance that Lady Eustace puts on in an effort to make her way up the social ladder. It is, in fact, what originally enables this orphaned admiral's daughter to become a lady in the first place. In Chapter I we are told that Lizzie secures her first husband – the foolish and conveniently convalescent Sir Florian Eustace – by feigning an intricate familiarity with the mysteries of poetry: "Lizzie read poetry well, and she read verses to [Sir Florian],—sitting very near to him, almost in the dark, with a shaded lamp throwing its light on her book" (I:7). Without really knowing a thing about Shelley or Byron – the two poets she relies on the most – Lizzie's marriage comes together in a matter of a few pages with the help of a mellifluous voice and some romantic lighting. We are told that, after concocting scenes so "clever" and "poetic" for the benefit of her sickly lover, "Of course the engagement was then a thing accomplished" (I:8). And "Of course she married him in September," just

two months after the proposal, in order to make sure that this dying Lord didn't wither away before Lizzie's proverbial lip could reach the matrimonial cup (ibid).

In a much lengthier scene in Chapter XXI, the reader is given an extended look at the "mediocre" literary habits of Lady Eustace, who, "[O]n the first morning of her arrival [at her castle in Scotland, takes] a little volume in her pocket, containing Shelley's 'Queen Mab,'¹⁵ and essay[s] to go down upon the rocks" (I:195):

She began her reading, resolved that she would enjoy her poetry in spite of the narrow seat [on a knob of rock]. She had often talked of 'Queen Mab,' and perhaps she thought she had read it. This, however, was in truth her first attempt at the work. 'How wonderful is Death! Death and his brother, Sleep!' Then she half-closed the volume, and thought that she enjoyed the idea. Death,—and his brother Sleep! She did not know why they should be more wonderful than Action, Life, or Thought;—but the words were of a nature which would enable her to remember them, and they would be good for quoting. 'Sudden arose Ianthe's soul; it stood all-beautiful in naked purity.' The name of Ianthe suited her exactly. And the antithesis conveyed to her mind by naked purity struck her strongly, and she determined to learn the passage by heart. (I: 197)

After taking us through a few additional lines of Shelley's poem and giving the reader an opportunity to watch Lizzie memorize them with a series of naïve misinterpretations, our narrator tells us that

Lizzie felt that she had devoted her hour to poetry in a quite rapturous manner. At any rate she had a bit to quote; and though in truth she did not understand the exact bearing of the image [of Ianthe's soul arising], she had so studied her gestures, and so modulated her voice, that she knew that she could be effective. (I: 198)

Being "effective" here means having a superficial-enough familiarity with Shelley's words in order to pass for an emotionally sensitized reader of poetry. Knowing which allusions to make is the name of the game for Lizzie, and appearing conversant with and enlivened by poetic form is clearly a piece of cultural currency the character plans to capitalize on.

Lady Eustace doesn't fool anyone in *The Eustace Diamonds*, however – at least not anyone but her quickly deceased first husband. When her companion, Miss Macnulty, sits at the castle window with her Ladyship the evening after Lizzie's hour with "Queen Mab," we are told that this domestic dependent with "no actual cleverness" and "no cultivated tastes" is "unable to pretend to believe Lizzie's rhapsodies" (I: 198-99). For all her efforts, Lizzie's poetic affectation is immediately detected, even by an individual as low on the cultural scale as her own toady.

There is, of course, hardly anything as easily detectable and cringingly "mediocre" as naïve imitation – which is what Lady Eustace is doing. Repeating a few scattered lines of a poem like "Queen Mab" (Lizzie only bothers to read to line 139) and doing so without any sense of what they mean is about the most "mediocre" kind of cultural engagement there is. It's a blind, mechanical,

unknowing adherence to poetic convention. Misrepresenting your knowledge of something as high on the literary scale as “Queen Mab” makes the gap between your actual taste-level and the one you claim for yourself blatant, and it puts a dark shade of dishonesty across your project of self-cultivation. Trollope’s narrator is poised not only to profit from the comedy generated from a sparkling piece of satire, but to remind us in the process about the importance of taking the proper path to social and cultural cultivation.

Despite all of the spoofing and mockery that take place around Lizzie’s reading of poetry, however, I think Lady Eustace, like the novel she stars in, is a little more than “mediocre.” Lizzie’s “rhapsodies” have something in common with the narrator’s “clubbiness” in *The Eustace Diamonds* – a penchant for over-performance that I think can be read not only as ironic or cunningly self-aware, but as detached in a “local” way from the conventions that Lizzie is imitating. Even if she doesn’t actively “cultivate” a distanced position from the “poetic” form she has her heart set on, the one thing we can say about Lizzie’s reading of “Queen Mab” is that it is a self-conscious adherence to poetic convention. The character’s notion that she can “be effective” after spending some time with the poem makes that clear. I would like to push this point and claim that Lizzie’s imitations evince a use of “poetic” form that is a little bit excessive, abnormal, and detached. Can Lizzie be straightforwardly stupid or naïve, after all, if she is able to make cultural capital out of a poem she doesn’t understand? Intrinsic to Trollope’s joke is the notion that Lady Eustace out-Shelleys Shelley, not that she simply doesn’t comprehend his poetry. She doesn’t just “mak[e] up her market of

literature for outside admiration” by committing lines of poetry to memory. She also takes the “bits” she has “for quoting” and amplifies their formal properties. Exploiting Shelley’s language in this way isn’t just naively normal, I’d suggest, but is actually conspicuously “mediocre” and, in turn, “locally” detached. I think we and other characters in *The Eustace Diamonds* notice Lizzie’s use of poetic convention because it is, in fact, a little unconventional.

We never actually see Lizzie out-Shelley Shelley and put “Queen Mab” to work. But we are told of the melodramatic streak which this character’s reading of poetry inspires:

There were some who said that she was almost snake-like in her rapid bendings and the almost too easy gestures of her body; for she was much given to action, and to the expression of her thought by the motion of her limbs. She might certainly have made her way as an actress, had fortune called upon her to earn her bread in that fashion. And her voice suited the stage . . . she could raise it to a pitch of indignant wrath befitting a Lady Macbeth when [Sir Florian had] ventured to rebuke her. And her ear was quite correct in modulating these tones. She knew,—and it must have been by instinct, for her culture in such matters was small,—how to use her voice so that neither its tenderness nor its wrath should be misapplied. There were pieces in verse that she could read,—things not wondrously good in themselves,—so that she would ravish you . . . (I: 16-7)

This character’s imitations of poetry may be the worst kind of “mediocrity” there is, and Lizzie may be the butt of an ongoing and enjoyable joke in the novel, but

it's clear that her attempts to go through the proper "poetic" motions are "effective" in the way she way intends.

In fact, Lady Eustace consistently capitalizes on her vacuous sophistication. She may simply repeat lines of poetry *as* lines of poetry. But as we can see above, this blunt and mechanical memorization of a few lines from "Queen Mab" also means that Lizzie is particularly able to conceive of literary form as a set of relative cultural signs that can be staged and made to do the work of cultural exchange. If Lady Eustace is perfectly aware that she has only memorized a few lines of Shelley's poem (which of course she is), *The Eustace Diamonds* makes clear that this ironic cultural derivative is in an acutely self-conscious relationship with poetic form. Without a real understanding of Shelley – the kind of understanding you can only get from a careful process of disciplined acquisition (or at least by actually reading the poem) – Lizzie's relationship with literary form can only ever know itself *as* a relationship with form. When we read, for instance, that "Lizzie felt that she had devoted her hour to poetry in quite a rapturous manner" only to learn in the next sentence that "At any rate she had a bit to quote," the contradiction in Trollope's prose is not simply satirical, but reflects this character's self-conscious participation in the game of cultural currency. Lizzie's "motion," "expression," and "voice" are all parts of a "poetic" illusion that knows it's playing a part, and I would argue that her "bendings" wouldn't be so "rapid" and her "gestures" wouldn't be "too easy" – that her performance of "poetic" form wouldn't be an over-performance – if they didn't

also evince a level of self-authorship *within* the character's over-use of convention.

Of course, Lady Eustace's melodramatic poetic form is not identical to the Trollopian narrator's over-omniscience. Lizzie is a consumer of culture, not a producer. Unlike Trollope and his narrator, Lizzie takes up literary convention in an unknowing way. That being said, I think Trollope's over-fluency in *The Eustace Diamonds* has much more in common with this character's melodramatic imitations than it may appear to have at first glance, and I would like to use Lizzie's relationship with poetry to illustrate the coextension of literary and social form that will be so important to the arguments of this dissertation. As we can see in the passages above, this character's engagements with poetry are thoroughly conflated with her over-pronounced social behavior. Too much misinterpreted Shelley is what leads to all those "rapid bendings" and "too easy gestures." I think this conflation is a useful point of entry into the relationship between this novelist's "local" detachment and the detachment from traditional sincerity experienced by Lady Eustace. I also think that once the literary and the social are successfully aligned in this way that much of what might seem simply "mediocre" about Lizzie's manners becomes legible as a subtly savvy engagement with the conventions of Victorian sincerity.

Kent Puckett has recently redirected critical attention to the many important links between literary and social form with a study of the social mistake: "To understand literary form is," for Puckett, "to understand how it is both generally and at particular moments coincident with or identical to social

form,” and bad form in particular “works to produce coherence in social and textual systems” (9, 15):

Bad form is . . . inextricably linked with formal literary developments—the “round” character, narrative desire, omniscient narration—that come to full flower in [the 19th-century European novel] and that find different but related expression in self-consciously novelistic scenes of a bourgeois sociability increasingly and popularly discussed in terms of its own good and bad form in types of writing proximate to the novel (etiquette books, burlesques, periodical literature, popular science, etc.). (16)

Manners and taste are not simply parallel systems of hegemony in this analysis, but are coextensive systems that become synonymous in the 19th century.

Speaking to a gentleman or lady in the hope of evoking an “effect” is the social replicate of sensationalism for Puckett, and over-doing your fashionability is akin to narratorial over-description.

In his own arguments about “the social force of literary form” Puckett primarily draws links between the diegetic and extra-diegetic levels of 19th-century texts, between the representations omniscient narrators make of social blunders and the narratorial habits of those omniscient narrators (9). This connection between realistic representation and narration will also be my primary concern in this chapter. For the moment, however, I think it is useful for the purposes of my own argument to think about the conflation of social and literary form that Trollope’s novel illustrates strictly within the diegetic level of *The Eustace Diamonds*. For Lizzie, the aesthetic of her over-performed etiquette is

pulled so directly from her imitation of a literary aesthetic, it clearly affirms Puckett's theorizing. Lizzie's "bad form" certainly is "inextricably linked" with her own "formal literary development." More to the point, I would like to argue that the detachment that this character exhibits in relation to literary form is actually transferable to a detachment from social form along these same theoretical lines. In *lady Eustace*, I suggest these two kinds of agency are made identical: her distance from the form of Shelley's poem *is* her distance from the forms of 19th-century etiquette and the ethos of sincerity they support.

We see in Lizzie an on-going admission of the faux sincerity embedded in her compulsively "poetic" behavior:

[S]he was always shamming love and friendship and benevolence and tenderness. She could tell you, with words most appropriate to the subject, how horrible were all shams, and in saying so would be not altogether insincere;—yet she knew that she herself was ever shamming, and she satisfied herself with shams. (I: 127)

The "local" detachment that I have suggested that this character experiences in relation to literary form can be rearticulated as social detachment in light of this kind of passage. This character is satisfied with literary shams ("words most appropriate to the subject") that are also social deceptions: there is an echo here of the "Action, Life, or Thought" that Lizzie ponders in Shelley's poem when she shams "love and friendship and benevolence and tenderness." In a very real sense, Lizzie's exaggerated Shelley is a use and abuse of good manners. The character sets out to follow the normal rules of social decorum and yet also, in the

process of following them, develops a self-conscious over-performance of sincere “love” and honest “friendship.”

If Lizzie’s characterization is a place where we can see the connection between literary and social form in a general way, I would also argue that it is a license to discuss the ways in which Trollope’s over-performance of omniscient narration is related to this text’s depiction of this character. After using Lady Eustace above to reformulate Puckett’s examination of the relationship between literary form and the social mistake in order to include my own theory of “local” detachment, in other words, I’d like to suggest that the extra-diegetic detachment from the conventions of representation evident in Trollope’s narrator is not only at times a match for the “bad manners” of its leading lady, but that they are a match that this text uses to push back on the normativity that calls such things “bad form.” This novel doesn’t just reinforce bad social form with bad literary form, but exhibits a form of “local” detachment from Victorian sincerity that is bound up with its own detachment from the conventions of representation.

Stated more simply, I think that the narrator’s over-performance of omniscience in *The Eustace Diamonds* can alert us to Lady Eustace’s over-performances as detached peaks behind the curtain of social form. Satirized as it may be, I would suggest that the constant recourse to melodramatic deception that this character makes is not just condemned by Trollope’s novel as a moral fault, but becomes an opportunity for the character to use her own adherence to the rules to create some unconventional experiences within the ethos of Victorian sincerity – that set of social forms that traffics in embarrassment and validation,

but not in higher realms like ethics. As Puckett has explained in his own discussion of social form, “If good manners worked at earlier moments as a humanist or ethical buffer between different status groups, they become for the etiquette book, which appears rather suddenly as an autonomous genre in the 1830s, a cheerfully amoral set of conventions mastered in order to ‘get on’ in the world” (11). “[C]heerfully amoral” seems to be a better way to describe Trollope’s depiction of Lizzie than “immoral.” It’s true that *The Eustace Diamonds* makes no bones about the nature of this character. We are told repeatedly by our narrator that the woman is a “liar” and a “cheat,” and we have that notion reiterated to us by almost every other character in the novel. Trollope’s narrative is invested in a normalizing understanding of honesty in the same way that it is invested in the conventions of realistic representation: it goes through the motions to go through the motions. But the story of Lizzie Eustace is also an essentially comic one, and Trollope’s book hardly punishes this upstart for her crimes in a way that might validate a moralistic analysis¹⁶: not only does Lady Eustace escape charges of perjury on a technicality and win the battle over the ownership of the Eustace diamonds by default (as the necklace is stolen, she isn’t forced to admit defeat and surrender them to the Eustace family), but Lizzie also marries at the end of the novel, which is the happy ending that she had been hoping for all along.

What all this means, I think, is that Trollope’s novel is not concerned about Lizzie’s lying (it even lets its ironic heroine off the hook for lying under oath – twice). What it does seem to question in terms of both literary and social

form is a social form that gets developed around lying in the 19th-century – what was in polite company referred to as “giving the lie:” asserting to someone’s face that they are telling an untruth. I think this particular social form can be used as the best example of Lizzie’s behavior – the concrete illustration of her relationship with social form that Trollope generalizes throughout as a series of “poetic” shams.

Anderson, in “Trollope’s Modernity,” identifies the compulsion to give someone the lie as a moment of “heightened” tension, where unassuming characters begin to cultivate a critique of “the code of gentlemanliness” (512). She also identifies Lizzie Eustace as one of the more obvious catalysts for this kind of occurrence. I would like to suggest, however, that the tension Anderson identifies in such moments is not always working in the way she suggests, but can also be understood as a byproduct of a “mediocre” application of the forms of “traditional individual virtue.” Without aspiring to a form of “critical sincerity” – with an active investment in convention, in fact – I think Lizzie experiences detachment from “the sociological grid” because the habit of refraining from giving the lie generates ongoing moments of exaggeration, abnormality, and insight. This character may not develop a counterpoint to traditional “sincerity.” After all, she is never the one grappling with the decision to give the lie, but is the one doing the lying. But I would argue nonetheless that this character’s mechanical adherence to the forms that reify Victorian sincerity engenders rational distance in these moments, and I use the over-performance that Lizzie and the Trollopan narrator have in common to help substantiate this claim.^{17, 18}

We read in several different places in *The Eustace Diamonds* about the impropriety of giving the lie. Trollope makes a redundant theme of this gentlemanly rule. His “chronicler” explains at one moment, for example, that “in accordance with all rules of good breeding,” a well-mannered person “should abstain from asserting that [a gentleman or lady] ha[s] spoken an untruth” (I:246 *sic*). One of the best examples of the execution of this rule comes in a scene with the hapless Miss Macnulty, who seems condemned to play a part in the melodramatic performances of Lizzie’s career as a socialite. In Chapter X, we find Lady Eustace making claims about her new fiancé, Lord Fawn, which test the impropriety of giving the lie to its absolute limit:

‘ . . . I don’t mean to give up my income. I don’t suppose [Lord Fawn will] venture to suggest such a thing.’ And then again she grumbled. ‘It’s all very well being in the Cabinet—!’

‘Is Lord Fawn in the Cabinet?’ asked Miss Macnulty, who in such matters was not altogether ignorant.

‘Of course he is,’ said Lizzie, with an angry gesture. It may seem unjust to accuse her of being stupidly unacquainted with circumstances and a liar at the same time; but she was both. She said that Lord Fawn was in the Cabinet because she had heard some one speak of him as not being a Cabinet Minister, and in so speaking appear to slight his political position. Lizzie did not know how much her companion knew, and Miss Macnulty did not comprehend the depth of the ignorance of her patroness. Thus the lies which Lizzie told were amazing to Miss Macnulty. To say

that Lord Fawn was in the Cabinet, when all the world knew that he was an Under-Secretary! What good could a woman get from an assertion so plainly, so manifestly false? But Lizzie knew nothing of Under-Secretaries. Lord Fawn was a lord, and even Commoners were in the Cabinet. ‘Of course he is, said Lizzie; ‘but I sha’n’t have my drawing-room made a Cabinet. They sha’n’t come here.’ (I: 87-8)

The “lies which Lizzie [tells]” in this little exchange certainly are “amazing.” As our narrator can’t help but point out, Lizzie is somehow both “stupidly” ignorant and dishonest in the dialogue above. However, the real crux of this scene isn’t the amazing extent of Lizzie’s lying. We’ve seen this character lie dozens of times already, and the lies that she tells about the Eustace Diamonds are far more consequential and “amazing.” The core of this scene is that Miss Macnulty refrains from pointing this whopper of a lie out to her patroness. The closest she gets is putting her skepticism in the form of a question: “‘Is Lord Fawn in the Cabinet?’” Lizzie knows she’s lying; Miss Macnulty knows; they both know that they know; and yet the impropriety of admitting the obvious is able to counter the facts of the case.¹⁹

Lizzie is absolutely invested in a conventional understanding of sincerity in her exchange with Macnulty. Without that ethos, she doesn’t have a leg to stand on. Her uncanny ability to be “stupidly unacquainted with circumstances and a liar at the same time” typifies the imitative quality of her behavior. This is normativity by rote, a lesson in Victorian sincerity learned through an obedience to its forms. And yet, this uninformed and mechanical exaggeration of the forms

of sincerity also facilitates what I take to be a palpable moment of “local” detachment for both Lizzie and Macnulty. Lady Eustace is unknowing here – doesn’t even really know what the Cabinet is and where it sits. She also isn’t really clear about why she is able to get away with a lie concerning who is in it. What she does know very thoroughly is that she *will* get away with it. What she knows is that you aren’t supposed to call a lady a liar, and her mechanical employment of that knowledge in this scene – besides being scheming and defiant – is a way of over-doing “traditional individual virtue.” Leaning heavily on the forms of sincerity isn’t just conspicuously “mediocre,” but is a way of pushing the practices that support an understanding of sincerity.

After all, Miss Macnulty isn’t just forced by Lizzie to refrain from giving the lie in this scene. She is forced to let an obvious, shared fiction pass for a sincere truth. If refraining from giving the lie is about not implicating a gentleman or lady in a falsehood, Macnulty doesn’t just expressly avoid implicating Lady Eustace. She also tacitly implicates herself in Lizzie’s lie. She agrees not to deny that Lord Fawn is in the Cabinet even though both women know that this is not the case – and even though both know that they both know. In doing so she lies implicitly about her own understanding of the facts, even while, explicitly, she asserts that understanding with a rhetorical question: ““Is Lord Fawn in the Cabinet?”” This is more than being polite – it is adhering in a conspicuous way to the rules of Victorian sincerity. I think it is also more than a dependent refraining from offending her benefactress. Real refraining would be

silence, not self-conscious self-implication. Macnulty may be bullied here by Lizzie, but she isn't simply a victim of her own social standing.

This exchange between Lizzie and Macnulty is also more than irony. Trollope's narrator may be ironizing the impropriety of giving the lie in this moment, but I don't think that irony is responsible for the extent of Lizzie's manipulation or the heavy-handedness of Macnulty's response to that manipulation. Lizzie's cynical self-awareness doesn't explain her ability to employ the forms of sincerity in such an "amazing" way, and it doesn't account for her toady's ability to negotiate her own amazement. To the contrary, I would argue that Lizzie and Macnulty both experience detachment *within* the conventions of "traditional individual virtue."

Reading *The Eustace Diamonds* this meticulously may seem to give too much credit to characters that generations of critics have been comfortable assessing as quintessentially conventional. Do we really want to claim that Lizzie and Macnulty exercise a form of rationalism above? Doesn't this over-determine the apparent simplicity of the Trollopian world-view? Although these characters are not cultural critics or even "chroniclers" as socially attuned as Trollope's narrator, as representations of Victorian women, Lizzie and Macnulty emblemize a society that turned on a ubiquitous expertise in sincerity – an expertise that I would suggest often took rational self-reflection to enact. John Kucich makes a book-length study of this phenomenon in *The Power of Lies*, which argues that much of the everyday "flatness and homogeneity" that appears to characterize middle-class sincerity in 19th-century England is in fact

underwritten by an “internal complexity” that goes far beyond the duality of truth-telling and lying (3). Kucich’s suggests that the “social and historical forces that placed such an unusual premium on truth-telling forced Victorian culture to think about—and within—the structural interrelationships of honesty and dishonesty,” and I think we can see that suggestion clearly at work in the “mediocre” exchange between Lizzie and Macnulty (15). Just by keeping up appearances these two women are forced to reflect on the appearances they are keeping up. As Kucich explains,

Rather than being simply the dark under-side of official ethics, lying came to have an enormous range of positive cultural values for the Victorians and was crucial to Victorian thinking about the nature of power in a number of different areas. Lying was seen, variously, as a fundamental form of resistance to social control, as a way to deepen norms of subjective development, as a way to recognize the presence and the force of desire, and . . . as a way to rethink the distribution of power across line of social or sexual difference. (ibid)

Kucich’s claims are less contentious than my own. He is not referencing Lizzie Eustace above as an example of “positive cultural values,” though in his chapter on Trollope he is determined to trouble the binary so often used to divide the author’s characters into “good” and “bad,” honest and dishonest. However, I would still like to take advantage of this critic’s emphasis on the “interrelationships of honesty and dishonesty” that Victorian culture was “forced” to “think about.” In turn, I hope to suggest that my emphasis on social form is a

way to push the kind of claims that are made in a text like *The Power of Lies*. By unpacking the “symbolic logic of transgression” central to Kucich’s analysis in terms of the social form that substantiates it (3), I think we can look at an exchange like the one above between Lizzie and Macnulty not just an example of the “fundamental” paradoxes that define middle-class truth-telling, but as evidence of particular types of “resistance to social control” that are genuinely (if locally) detached from the ethos of Victorian sincerity. If we consider not only how Lizzie and Macnulty “think,” but also how they act and how the social forms that structure their actions affect how they think, these characters become agents capable of rational distance.

The “local” detachment that I claim for Lizzie and her toady above is very different from the critical “powers” that Anderson is interested in defending. However, I think the reading of social form that I offer can also be confirmed as a powerful critique to Anderson’s rationalist approach if we turn back quickly to Trollope’s conventional realism and give his narrator’s over-performance of omniscience its other socially inflected name: lying. It might feel a little rude to say so at first, but when you get down to it, this narrator’s ongoing declarations of omniscience just don’t add up in this semi-sensational text. They are as misleading as any of Lizzie’s claims to an understanding of “Queen Mab” or the Cabinet. His supposedly realistic “scorn” at having hidden any secret from the reader when he is actually keeping in his back pocket a revelation about Patience Crabstick is as insincere as Lady Eustace’s familiarity with the Romantic poets. In a very real sense, Trollope is putting his reader in the same position as the

many culture-bound characters that come into contact with Lady Eustace: they're tacitly-tempted-yet-expressly-forbidden to give the author the lie. And they also have the opportunity to experience a moment of detachment from the conventions of representation in Trollope's novel. Like Macnulty, it isn't just that we know we are being lied to and that we dutifully refrain from pointing that out. When the Trollopian narrator swears that he is being completely transparent while withholding key pieces of information, it isn't that a discerning reader can detect the falsehood and yet refrain from openly acknowledging it. The narrator knows he's lying. We know it. He knows that we know it. And we know that he knows that we know it. Like Macnulty, when we read that "every tittle of this story has been told without reserve, and every secret unfolded," we ask, "*Has* every tittle been told, and has every secret been unfolded?" (II: 144). We become detached *within* the conventions of omniscience.

Although, again, I use this parallel primarily as a theoretical model and recognize that there are many differences between Trollope's "chronicler" and ironic leading lady, I would like to suggest that the things they have in common are not coincidental, but represent a comparable experience of literary and social form. Being asked to step out of the "reality" of Trollope's realism by one of the formal features that is supposed to be busy supporting it is a disjunctive experience. A reader takes the step, however – even if they turn the page and immediately return to the tale they are being told as if it were an unmediated look at an actual piece of the empirical world. This same kind of experience can be transferred to Lady Eustace, whose nuts-and-bolts approach to virtue gives other

characters constant opportunities to refrain from giving her the lie. Forced continuously to “think about” honesty and dishonesty, Lizzie experiences detachment from conventional sincerity even while she works within its forms and follows its rules. Neither Trollope nor Lizzie do much more than put the parts together in a mechanical way, but both his realism and her virtue manage to be a little bit excessive and unconventional.

I have tried to demonstrate in this chapter that both the author of *The Eustace Diamonds* and the novel’s anti-heroine provide evidence for an expanded theory of rational detachment. Before I leave *The Eustace Diamonds* and Trollopian “mediocrity,” I would like to offer one final illustration of “local” detachment in order to emphasize the benefits and assurances that the rationalist tradition might enjoy if it expanded its search for the “nonsociological.”

The one person who cuts through Lizzie’s illusion is Lucy Morris, the un presupposing star of *The Eustace Diamonds*’ subplot. Lucy is about as “mediocre” as it gets. From a decent family but orphaned, she is middleclass and very contentedly conventional. As the governess for the Fawn family, she is treated and loved with something that is almost social equality. We are told by our narrator that Lucy “was a sweetly social, genial little human being whose presence in the house was ever felt to be like sunshine” (I: 23). She seems to have every reason to be happily determined by the social position in which Trollope has placed her and is obediently conventional from the beginning to the end of the novel. Lucy actively appreciates her determination for the greater good. When

Lady Fawn insists that though her lover, Frank Greystock, has seemed to admire Lucy for several years, it would be an inappropriate match, Lucy agrees with the assessment of her own prospects and social responsibilities: “Lady Fawn, [Lucy] thought, was right. A governess should make up her mind to do without a lover. She had given away her heart, and yet she would do without a lover” (I:27). Like many of Trollope’s fan-favorites, this love-object is a clear anchor for traditional notions of honesty and sincerity.

We might learn with surprise, then, that this love-struck governess is also capable of distinguishing her part in the social mechanics of the Victorian era *as* mechanics quite distinctly. She is willing to play the part she has been assigned, but can also be critical about the terms of that assignment. One afternoon, when Lord Fawn – the son of Lady Fawn who is also the head of that household – comes to visit his mother and sisters, he cannot help but criticize the behavior of Frank Greystock. Frank has been helping Lady Eustace, Lord Fawn’s fiancé, retain the diamond necklace, which Lord Fawn would like the Lady to surrender to the Eustace family. Frank hasn’t been a gentleman in his dealings with Lizzie’s betrothed, and the Lord can’t help but say so in front of Lucy:

‘ . . . [N]othing on earth shall ever induce me to speak again to a man who is so little like a gentleman.’ . . . ‘He has never forgiven me,’ continued Lord Fawn, ‘because he was so ridiculously wrong about the Sawab.’

‘I am sure that had nothing to do with it,’ said Lucy.

‘Miss Morris, I shall venture to hold my own opinion,’ said Lord Fawn.

‘And I shall how hold mine,’ said Lucy bravely. ‘The Sawab of Mygawb had nothing to do with what Mr. Greystock may have said or done about his cousin. I am quite sure of it.’

‘Lucy, you are forgetting yourself,’ said Lady Fawn.

‘Lucy, dear, you shouldn’t contradict my brother,’ said Augusta.

(I: 245)

The Sawab of Mygawb is a fictional Indian prince in whose defense Frank has recently ridiculed Lord Fawn in the House of Commons. The Sawab is the beginning of a dispute between Greystock and Fawn, one we see come to a point in their arguments over Lizzie’s right to her diamond necklace and which puts Lucy Morris in a fairly tight spot. Lucy loves the Fawns, her dear friends and employers, but she also loves her lover. This is what leads her to defend him by giving the lie to Lord Fawn above, denying that Frank’s behavior actually has anything to do with the mysterious prince. It is also what, in the coming pages, gives her the courage to give Lord Fawn the lie again when he asserts that Frank is not a gentleman: “‘Mr. Greystock is a gentleman. If you say that he is not a gentleman, it is not true’” (I:245). These are the assertions which bring Georgia, “the fourth [Fawn] daughter,” to remind Lucy (and the reader) that “‘. . . people never accuse each other of untruths. No lady should use such a word to a gentleman’” (I:246). All of which takes place in a chapter Trollope entitles “Lucy Morris Misbehaves.”

Lucy not only “misbehaves” in *The Eustace Diamonds*, but two chapters after her confrontation with Lord Fawn, she ponders lying and propriety at great length:

[Lucy] did not quite understand the usages of the world in the matter; but she did know that the one offense which a gentleman is supposed never to commit is that of speaking an untruth. The offense may be one committed oftener than any other by gentlemen,—as also by all other people; but, nevertheless, it is regarded by the usages of society as being the one thing which a gentleman never does. Of all this Lucy understood something. The word ‘lie’ she knew to be utterly abominable. That Lizzie was a little liar had been acknowledged between herself and the Fawn girls very often,—but to have told Lady Eustace that any word spoken by her was a lie, would have been a worse crime than the lie itself. (I: 261)

Her train of thought continues down the page:

Was there any difference between a lie and an untruth [the Fawn family’s term for Lord Fawn’s pronouncement on Frank]? That one must be, and that the other need not be, intentional, she did feel; but she felt also that the less offensive word had come to mean the lie,—the world having been driven to use it because the world did not dare to talk about lies; and this word, bearing such a meaning in common parlance, she had twice applied to Lord Fawn. (ibid)

Besides making a direct reference to the woman who gives the reader of *The Eustace Diamonds* its greatest opportunity to think about giving the lie, this

passage shows us one of the novel's most conventional and socially determined characters reflecting on the forms and assumptions of Victorian sincerity.

In "Trollope's Modernity," Anderson briefly mentions Lucy Morris and suggests that the rumination above is good example of the critical form of sincerity frequently perceivable in Trollope's characters. Lucy's private deliberation is an intensive turning-over of sincerity that cultivates rational detachment. Just to play devil's advocate, however, and put the rationalist tradition back on trial, we might also ask Anderson to consider that Lucy's critique never moves beyond the terms she has been given: "untruth" and "lie." Lucy dissects the former using the latter, but doesn't move beyond that. She is circumscribed in tangible way, which seems to put definitive limits on her "cultivation." "The world" gets assessed as "the world" and "common parlance" gets called "common," but does that really mean that this otherwise normative character isn't determined by the social forces in which she is embedded?

Anderson has answers for these kinds of questions which I find convincing. In a Habermasian system that acknowledges the potential of rational communicativity, Lucy's aspiration to a distanced view is not reducible to the forces that determine her identity. If, from a poststructuralist or multiculturalist vantage, these theoretical arguments seem unpersuasive, however, I think we can also turn to a reading of the practices that reify Lucy's normativity and in doing so supplement, support, and tweak Anderson's argument. If we take away the need for cultivating any non-normative "content" and think about how the forms that embody Lucy's determination might generate detachment *within* convention

itself – often in ways that are eventually satisfied with the consequences of normalization – I think it becomes clear that a “mediocre” character like Lucy experiences detachment as a local byproduct of adhering to social form. This “ordinary” woman may recommit in an unexamined way to a cultural understanding of sincerity and go faithfully through the motions that that understanding entails, but this doesn’t mean that such perpetual motion doesn’t also produce a moment of detachment in the passage above. Lucy takes up concepts like “lie” and “untruth” without breaking from the normative assumptions they help structure, but she also turns over these words *as* words. If, when Lucy returns to the “real world” where “lying” means lying and where she has to apologize to Lord Fawn for her behavior (which she does), I don’t think that can erase the moment of insight she has alone above.

Chapter 2: Another Gaskell: Routine as Variation

In Chapter 1, I began my study of “mediocrity” and “local” detachment with an analysis of Anthony Trollope’s *The Eustace Diamonds*.²⁰ I took a closer look at some of the subtle abnormalities of this infamously normal novelist, and I argued that, paradoxically, it is Trollope’s great fluency in convention that generates spaces of literary and social detachment in his novel. In this second chapter, I’m going to continue exploring forms of embedded, everyday insight by examining a second normal novelist and second mode of local detachment.

Elizabeth Gaskell, like Trollope, is fully fluent in literary and social convention. Her second “Manchester novel,” *North and South*, takes up the elements of Victorian realism with precision so that it can paint a faithful portrait of mid-century manufacturing life, and the novel makes an unambiguous virtue of its characters’ traditional bourgeois values. In this chapter, however, I’m going to suggest that what makes *North and South* really “mediocre” is its adherence to a set of well-established routines, one literary, the other social.

In terms of literary form, Gaskell is careful to obey the conventions of realistic plausibility. A plausible story requires a variety of different devices to work together for the duration of a novel. Each event in the plot has to be possible; those events have to be set in a familiar time and place; characters have to be round and believably motivated; and, especially in the case of Victorian realism, a plausible narrative needs to be presented with enough contextualizing detail in order to ensure that a synthetic storyline can feel spontaneous, unpremeditated, and organic. This routine combination of devices is particularly

important to Gaskell's "social problem" novel, which not only aims to be believable, but attempts to accurately represent "the factory-people in Manchester" so that it can illustrate the class conflicts that developed in the wake of mid-century industrialization (*Mary Barton* 4).

North and South's literary routine is reinforced by a social routine that is carefully observed by Gaskell's characters: that combination of personal freedom and social restraint the Victorians called "reserve." In *North and South*, elaborate excuses and preemptive apologies are a normal part of everyday life. They are the routine gestures used to maintain an ethos of self-control. The novel's many moments of debate, conflict, and emotionality make obeying these conventions especially important. As characters argue over the rights and responsibilities of manufacturers and laborers, gestures of reserve become a method for sharing strong, conflicting opinions in a way that works towards compromise and moderation. The routine of reserve is, in other words, as much a moral imperative as it is a social nicety in *North and South*. It is, for Gaskell, the set of concrete rules that holds bourgeois society together.

Despite *North and South*'s "mediocre" adherence to these two conventional routines, there are also subtle moments of literary and social abnormality throughout the novel. Gaskell never abandons plausibility or reserve, but her text is filled with spaces that feel a little less than routine. Margaret and Thornton's union at the close of *North and South* is one of the more conspicuous examples. On the final pages of the novel, Gaskell can't seem to decide whether her story should come to a dramatic climax or if it needs to end in a less

improbable way. And the couple's behavior during the episode is also strangely uncoordinated, an embarrassed blend of passion and propriety:

[Margaret] was most anxious to have [the financial assistance she had agreed to give Thornton's failing mill] looked upon in the light of a mere business arrangement, in which the principal advantage would be on her side. While she sought for [the necessary documents], her very heart-pulse was arrested by the tone in which Mr. Thornton spoke. His voice was hoarse, and trembling with tender passion, as he said:—

‘Margaret!’

For an instant she looked up; and then sought to veil her luminous eyes by dropping her forehead on her hands. Again, stepping nearer, he besought her with another tremulous eager call upon her name.

‘Margaret!’

Still lower went the head; more closely hidden was the face, almost resting on the table before her. He came close to her. He knelt by her side, to bring his face to a level with her ear; and whispered—panted out the words:—

‘Take care.—If you do not speak—I shall claim you as my own in some strange presumptuous way.—Send me away at once, if I must go;—Margaret!—’

At that third call she turned her face, still covered with her small white hands, towards him, and laid it on his shoulder, hiding it even there; and it was too delicious to feel her soft cheek against his, for him to wish

to see either deep blushes or loving eyes. He clasped her close. But they both kept silence. (435)

This exchange of feeling famously culminates with Margaret gazing into her lover's face with a look of "beautiful shame" – a phrase which has long puzzled critics and seems to epitomize the episode's series of incongruities (436). Is *North and South* coming to a climax, or, for the sake of plausibility, is it trying to avoid one? Why is there no actual marriage proposal? And why does Margaret compensate so thoroughly for Thornton's behavior instead of reciprocating in the way we might expect? This young Victorian woman is trying to keep an emotional moment within the bounds of 19th-century decorum, but her modesty has almost the opposite effect. If there is nothing unusual about marriage and an air of reserve in a Victorian novel, why do these things feel slightly skewed at the end of *North and South*?

This chapter is an attempt to answer these kinds of questions – to think about how and why routines go awry and what it means for our understanding of agency and insight. By looking closely at moments like the one above where regular patterns and habituated behaviors get slightly skewed, I argue that an adherence to conventional routines can actually generate unconventional experiences – that routines are, in fact, inevitably marked by the internal variations they produce. In this way, I reinforce and expand upon the arguments that I make in Chapter 1 with Trollope. Routine becomes a second opportunity to explore "mediocrity" and "local" detachment, and a second chance to suggest that there are forms of rational distance *within* cultures that have gone largely

unconsidered. I argue, in turn, that what we often think of as the restrictive and constraining quality of routine is, in fact, an ongoing opportunity for moments of incremental upheaval and revolt.

Plausibility and Detachment

North and South has always been recognized as a realistic novel.

Gaskell's desire to "write truthfully" and to represent "the factory-people in Manchester" is spelled out in the Preface to her first industrial novel, *Mary Barton*, and in both *Mary Barton* and *North and South* the novelist uses elements like descriptive detail, omniscience, and round characterization with precision (4). For most critics, however, there has also always been an issue at the center of Gaskell's text – its marriage plot. While this device is fundamental to Victorian realism, just as fundamental in the 19th century is the expectation that a marriage plot won't draw unnecessary attention to itself. It is supposed to unfold in a plausible way, disappearing into the fabric of realistic representation. But *North and South*'s marriage plot often steps conspicuously into the foreground. Margaret and Thornton are thrown together in the middle of the novel's dramatic strike scene, for example. And as we've already seen, their union is secured on the final pages of the book as a schematic solution to a collection of public and private conflicts.

Gaskell's too-pointed marriage plot was a chief concern for critics in the mid-19th century²¹, and it is the main issue recuperative critics have worked to resolve ever since.²² With great effort, the author's reputation slowly shifted from

writer of “industrial romance” to “domestic” novelist until, in the mid-to-late 20th century, Gaskell finally became a truly ethnographic author, one whom feminist and Marxist critics could use to discuss the social and economic forces operating in Victorian England. For over a hundred years, reviving Gaskell was an exercise in finding new ways to reaffirm that a book like *North and South* was the realistic novel its author claimed it to be. Critics fought hard to get past their “annoyance over the novel’s heroine and marriage plot,” to prove that the story was a plausible, ethnographic representation of industrial life, not an unlikely and unrealistic romance (Schor 120).²³

Unfortunately, getting past the annoyance over Gaskell’s marriage plot didn’t really make it go away. It was still there feeling a little out of place in the midst of a hundred years’ worth of recuperative interpretations. That is why, more recently, several critics have attempted to describe Margaret and Thornton’s courtship as its own patently ethnographic feature. In order to counter lingering devaluations of *North and South* that continue to read the text as a piece of too-romantically plotted realism, Jill Matus defends the novel’s “melodramaticism” as an extension of Gaskell’s “social representation . . . an insistence on the connectedness, if not inseparability, of inner and outer worlds” (“*Mary Barton* and *North and South*” 28). For Matus, moments of strong emotional experience in *North and South* become additional evidence of Gaskell’s ethnographic commitment:

Far from being mere melodramatic effects, the novel’s crises of inner life and consciousness are an integral part of Gaskell’s attempt to chart the

social transformations of mid-century England and understand the forces of feeling and unconscious life that jolt the individual into self-scrutiny and renewed engagement with the outside world. (ibid 44)

Using this assessment, Matus goes on to argue that *North and South* generates an “implicit critique . . . of emotional control,” one that “suggests that the social injunction to keep strong feeling in check is a class convention” (ibid 37). Far from being romantic, in Matus’s analysis Gaskell is a deliberate employer of realistic convention who uses ethnographic representation to generate a sophisticated cultural critique.

Despite the benefits this kind of analysis affords *North and South*, Matus’s argument also illustrates the real limitations of recuperating Gaskell along strictly ethnographic lines. Insisting on the representivity of *North and South* defines the text as an unselfconsciously normative work in terms of genre. It flattens Gaskell’s book into earnest mimesis²⁴, proving that the author is a social critic by assuming she is completely committed to Victorian realism’s conventions of representation – that she attempts “to chart the social transformations of mid-century England” even in what appear to be her most “melodramatic” moments (Introduction 2). What we gain in social criticism, we lose in authorial self-consciousness and sophistication.

Therefore, without denying that Gaskell seeks to be socially representative, I would argue that ethnographic readings of *North and South*’s marriage plot have greatly oversimplified the author’s relationship with genre. In particular, they ignore the many moments in Gaskell’s text where the plausibility

of her marriage plot is, in fact, not so perfectly plausible. Ethnographic readings frequently downplay the episodes of Margaret and Thornton's courtship and focus on other features, especially the inventory of representative details that Gaskell uses to distinguish between her characters' different socioeconomic classes – the clothes they wear, the homes they inhabit, and the dialects they speak.²⁵ These kinds of readings stem from a critical tradition rooted in Ian Watt's seminal text, *The Rise of the Novel*, which first theorized that 18th- and 19th-century novelists began to include a “wealth of minutely described . . . detail” in order to generate an “air of everyday reality” (153). The quantity of details pushed into realistic novels has suggested to many critics that Gaskell not only perceives detail to be purely representative in its own right, but that she takes for granted that her marriage plot can also be made purely representative if infused with enough detail.^{26, 27}

I don't disagree that Gaskell's attention to detail is part of an ethnographic effort. But I'd like to suggest that, as part of the combination of devices that work to make *North and South* plausible, Gaskell's use of detail is also far from unselfconscious. To the contrary, I'm going to argue that her conventional combination of plot and detail actually produces spaces of “local” generic detachment in *North and South*.²⁸ Plausibility may make Gaskell's novel “mediocre” in the technical sense I employ throughout this dissertation: adhering to its routine means obeying convention in a conspicuous way. We notice Gaskell's routine combination of plot and detail because there is particular tension between *North and South*'s series of schematic causes and effects and the novel's

survey of ethnographic detail. However, I'd suggest that Gaskell's plausibility also creates abnormal variations *within* this normal routine, and I think that observing those internal variations better explains the disjunction between ethnographic representation and schematic storytelling that many critics have oversimplified in attempts to recuperate Gaskell's fiction.²⁹ Instead of being earnestly mimetic, I'm going to suggest that Gaskell is *another* kind of novelist – one who experiments subtly with different variations of realistic plausibility.

Gaskell's combination of detail and plot is observable throughout *North and South*. Even in its most dramatic moment during the strike, which sees Thornton huddled over an injured and semi-conscious Margaret declaring his undying love, the novel clearly “register[s] the particulars of the material world” in an attempt to maintain a sense of plausibility (Levine 18).³⁰ Although Margaret's arrival at the mill just ahead of the rioters, her wound by a “sharp pebble” intended for the mill owner, and Thornton's announcement that Margaret is “. . . the only woman I ever loved! . . .” are incidents strung together with improbable rapidity, Gaskell is careful to frame the scene's dramatic speed with mitigating details (179-80). These include, for instance, an explanation that the “distant clank of . . . soldiers” breaks up the mob “just five minutes too late” (181).

One of Gaskell's less routine attempts at plausibility comes in the second chapter of volume two, which sees Margaret and Thornton coming together for the second time after the strike. Thornton has proposed and been refused by Margaret just a few pages earlier. But instead of emphasizing the character's

distress in a way that would underscore the marriage plot beginning to take shape, Gaskell tells us that the industrialist goes “straight and clear into all the interests of the following day” (212). He deals with “a slight demand for finished goods” and sees to “all the requisite steps” that need to be taken after the millworkers’ riot (ibid). The mill owner also runs into Dr. Donaldson, who off-handedly mentions that his new patient, Margaret’s mother, has only a few weeks left to live. The one thing that can be done, says the doctor, is to provide Mrs. Hale with the comfort of jargonelle pears. Thornton deliberates for a moment. Then he quickly decides to provide fruit for the ailing woman. He arrives at Margaret’s house on the next page of the chapter:

[Speaking to Mrs. Hale,] ‘I met Dr. Donaldson, ma’am, and as he said fruit would be good for you, I have taken the liberty—the great liberty—of bringing you some that seems to me fine.’ Mrs. Hale was excessively surprised; excessively pleased; quite in a tremble of eagerness. Mr. Hale with fewer words expressed a deeper gratitude.

‘Fetch a plate, Margaret—a basket—anything.’ Margaret stood up by the table, half afraid of moving or making any noise to arouse Mr. Thornton into a consciousness of her being in the room. She thought it would be awkward for both to be brought into conscious collision; and fancied that, from her being on a low seat at first, and now standing behind her father, he had overlooked her in his haste. As if he did not feel the consciousness of her presence all over, though his eyes had never rested on her!

‘I must go,’ said he, ‘I cannot stay. If you will forgive this liberty,— my rough ways,—too abrupt, I fear—but I will be more gentle next time. You will allow me the pleasure of bringing you some fruit again, if I should see any that is tempting. Good afternoon, Mr. Hale. Good-bye, ma’am.

He was gone. Not one word: not one look to Margaret. She believed that he had not seen her. (215)

This scene is supposedly about pears and Mrs. Hale, but is, of course, primarily about the developing relationship between Thornton and Margaret. This is the confirmation the reader gets that a marriage plot is actually underway, but the reader is also asked to believe that the episode is about providing fruit to Mrs. Hale. The narrator mentions that “Mrs. Hale was excessively surprised,” and goes on to tell us that she is “excessively pleased” and “quite in a tremble of eagerness” – as if Mrs. Hale’s reaction to being given jargonelle pears were key to our understanding. Gaskell’s narrator also tells us that “Mr. Hale with fewer words expressed a deeper gratitude” – as if Mr. Hale’s reaction to the fruit were as relevant to *North and South*’s storyline as Margaret’s reaction to Thornton. What is important in terms of plot is that these lovers have just initiated a two-hundred page dance of restraint and avoidance. But at the surface the novel seems equally concerned with the details of daily living – with pears, with sitting on “a low seat at first” and then standing, with thank-yous and good-byes and good-days.

My point isn’t that this scene is *implausible*. A young man could bring fruit to a dying woman out of concern for her health, and that dying woman could

happen to be the mother of the young lady to whom he had made a proposal of marriage a few days earlier. However, I think it is meaningful that we suddenly notice the plausibility of this scene. We notice the routine balance of plot and detail that Gaskell is adhering to, and a reader actually feels drawn into the plot that Gaskell's details are supposed to be mitigating. Her decision to have Thornton run into a Dr. Donaldson at the beginning of the chapter and hear of Mrs. Hale's illness, along with the pleasantries exchanged between himself and Margaret's parents – these things don't draw our attention away from Gaskell's marriage plot, but towards it. Additionally, although Margaret doesn't want "to be brought into conscious collision" with her lover, we feel this description emphasizing the marriage plot in the scene, not allaying it.

Again, I'm not suggesting that *North and South* is implausible or un-routine. Gaskell isn't critiquing or problematizing the rules she is following in a comprehensive way. I would argue, however, that the novel's plausibility is slightly skewed in this kind of moment and that its author is demonstrating detachment in a "local" way from the conventions that generate plausibility. *Within* the combination of plot and detail in this scene, Gaskell has created some abnormal variations. For example, in several places Gaskell advances her marriage plot by feigning to do the opposite: "He was gone. Not one word: not one look to Margaret." These three details supposedly negate the underlying action in this episode, and yet all the reader can think is "What has he left? What word didn't he speak? What would it have meant if he had looked at Margaret?"³¹ Gaskell also puts Margaret in the background of this scene. She

doesn't say a word. She is literally standing behind her father. And yet there is clear tension in Margaret's placement at the periphery. The details of the scene put her to one side, while Gaskell's plot wants to move the character towards the center. While this tension doesn't make the scene completely implausible and unconventional, I would argue that its presence gives the plausibility of this scene an edge and creates a little bit of variation in an otherwise "mediocre" scene.

Turning back to the closing pages of *North and South*, we can locate this same kind of internal variation. Gaskell goes to great lengths to make the scene of Margaret and Thornton's final union plausible. Most interestingly, although these characters come together at the very last minute, Gaskell's marriage plot doesn't end at the altar. It doesn't end in an actual proposal of marriage either. Instead, at Thornton's "third call," Margaret "turn[s] her face, still covered with her small white hands, towards him, and la[ys] it on his shoulder, hiding it even there" (435): "it was too delicious to feel her soft cheek against his, for him to wish to see either deep blushes or loving eyes;" Thornton simply "clasp[s] her close" and "they both ke[ep] silence" (ibid). In effect, Gaskell eliminates the final events of her marriage plot and replaces them with details. There is no proposal, not even a closing piece of exposition that confirms when and where Margaret and Thornton were married. Instead, these events are subtly supplanted by a description of an intimate gesture between the characters. Margaret hides her face behind her "small white" hands and then turns into Thornton's broad shoulder. Her cheek is "soft" and filled with "blushes," while Thornton "clasp[s] her close." This complete replacement of plot with detail is, on the one hand, a preservation

of realistic plausibility. The marriage is observed in a kind of microcosmic exchange, and the details that build that microcosm temper the schematic ending of *North and South* in a conventional way. But taking the conventional combination of detail and plot to its logical limit is also a little abnormal. We notice Gaskell adhering to convention, and yet also experience something else in the closing pages of her novel – something that isn't completely determined by the rules of representation.

The interpretive potential of Gaskell's novel expands significantly if we examine her literary convention in this localized way. In Chapter 1, I use Trollope to illustrate that Victorian realism's conventions of representation are, in fact, always defined against the unconventional and non-representative forms unique to each author – that we notice the “reality” of a realistic novel like *The Eustace Diamonds* while we experience the “realism” of its author. I use this point to critique the lingering critical assumption that Victorian realism is reducible to a matter of representation – to expose that, while critics have long admitted the non-representative aspects of realism, they continue frequently to treat the genre as if it were merely a set of rules about representation. *North and South* not only reinforces this point, I think, but escalates it. For while Trollope's fluency in *The Eustace Diamonds* may occasionally bubble into non-representative over-fluency and excess, the non-representative aspects of Gaskell's storytelling are engrained throughout *North and South*: what Trollope's narrator playfully reveals at one moment or another, Gaskell's plausibility weaves into the full fabric of her text. In fact, if we keep *North and South*'s local

variations in the foreground, I would suggest that the novel establishes itself as an ongoing, subtle experiment with realistic plausibility, one that rivals the kinds of experiments with literary form that have been identified in several of her other works.

In both *Cranford* and *Ruth*, for example, aesthetic oddities that once seemed to derail the novelist's attempts to paint ethnographic portraits have been turned by critics into fascinating examples of the ways in which this author consciously "sets [her work] outside the realm of conventional realist fiction" (Matus, Introduction 4). Audrey Jaffe has recently suggested that many of Gaskell's apparent "generic peculiarities" in these two novels are actually designed to encourage "an awareness of the artificiality of social structures, including literary ones" (57). She argues that Gaskell is frequently "concerned with the detachment of characters, especially female character" in *Cranford* and *Ruth* (47):

[*Cranford* and *Ruth* both] take up a Victorian female stereotype (*Cranford*, the spinster; *Ruth*, the fallen woman); each seeks to raise questions about that figure by proposing (more or less explicitly) the replacement of the male-dominated culture that produce it with a culture dominated by women and/or an alternative, feminine sensibility.

Emphasizing the harshness and destructiveness . . . of male-dominated society, these texts thus propose the exchange of one set of societal rules for another. (47 *sic*)

Although Jaffe is careful to qualify Gaskell's social critique by explaining that "a male-dominated structure is reflected in the derivative and fantastical quality of the [author's] oppositional worlds," she reiterates that "within what seems to be an inescapable binary model, [*Cranford* and *Ruth*] suggest that the granting of a dominant role to women is imaginable" (ibid). In these non-industrial works, Gaskell is much more than a writer of ethnographic novels. Her fiction demonstrates signs of literary experimentation that are generically detached and culturally critical.

North and South is, of course, generically normative in ways that *Cranford* and *Ruth* are not. However, I would argue that Gaskell's "mediocre" social problem novel also actively experiments with literary form when its adherence to the rules that define plausibility creates variations *within* this realistic convention. These variations produce their own kind of "generic peculiarity," I would suggest, and are a method of experimenting squarely with one of realism's most fundamental features. This experiment isn't simply an incorporation of the "inner life" of characters into the empiric fabric of realism in the way that Matus suggests. Instead, the novelist performs the operations of plausibility even while she subtly questions those operations. What counts as plausible? Can any event be made realistic if given enough time and attention? The encounters between Margret and Thornton in *North and South* may be smaller or weaker experiments than those identified in some of Gaskell's other works, but their subtle pervasiveness throughout the novel makes them no less an experiment. In fact, I would suggest that this reading of Gaskell's fiction allows

for a flexibility of interpretation that is currently missing from analyses of the author's Manchester novels and which is critical to the continued growth of Gaskell studies.

The best way to observe the interpretive impact of Gaskell's "local" experiments is to focus on the novelist's details, which are frequently as self-referential as they are referential. Thornton's pears simultaneously advance a marriage plot and observe the incidental-ness of detailed description, for example. Margaret's position in the room behind her father has an identical effect: her location actually heightens the tension of a scene it is supposedly trying to neutralize. This is a form of ambiguation that Mary Ann O'Farrell has identified in her work on "Gaskell's Blunders," which she at one point calls the novelist's "as ifs" in reference to *North and South*:

Gaskell's as ifs, not always of much local significance, signify more largely a refusal to conviction, a resistance to fiction, the habituation of a crisis of signification. Writing endlessly "as if," Gaskell is always a little withholding, a little self-conscious, a little uncommitted, a little anxious always to be seen to call a sign a sign. If fiction is discursively dependent on an unspoken as if, that dependence itself rests on a reliance that the as if remain unspoken. (79)

Though O'Farrell does not make her examination of Gaskell's ambiguated signs a discussion of genre, I think this critic's sense that the novelist is "a little anxious always . . . to call a sign a sign" is applicable to an analysis of *North and South*'s realistic plausibility, which is about the interplay between the indexicality of plot

and the incidentalness of detail. I would amend O'Farrell's description of this author as "uncommitted," however. Far from being an indication of any apprehensiveness, Gaskell's "crisis of signification" seems better characterized as a locally detached adherence to the generic norm. Her jargonelle pearls aren't a hesitant sign, but are simultaneously a frank piece of plot and a mitigating detail. They are a self-conscious combination of realistic devices that takes more – not less – self-assertion to execute. Maybe this means that *North and South* isn't simply the ethnographic novel a hundred years' worth of recuperative critics have wanted it to be. But recognizing Gaskell's "mediocre" pursuit of plausibility as an opportunity to experiment with convention allows us to appreciate a level of formal sophistication that seems to have gotten lost in our concerns with recuperating the author's reputation.

Men, Gentlemen, and "the trick of good manners"

While Gaskell works at the extra-diegetic level combining literary features and making *North and South* plausible, at the diegetic level her characters are also busy with combinations. Northern tradesman and Southern gentleman, mill owners and hands, men and women, social duties and individual rights – all these opposites merge in Gaskell's novel. *North and South* not only stages a solution for the mid-19th century's industrial unrest by bringing opposites together, but it underscores the necessity of socioeconomic cooperation with a symbolic marriage between Margaret and Thornton, who stand in for the interests of laborer and manufacturer respectively. As an alternative to class conflict, Gaskell imagines a

process of conciliation fashioned from the same principles of self-control that are eventually observed by its protagonists, whose reciprocal education in Victorian sociality produces a “natural” combination of freedom and restraint by the end of the novel. As Margaret, who was raised among lords and ladies, learns to admire the unaffected candor of Thornton, and as the mill owner comes to appreciate the collaborative effects of gentlemanly behavior, so too are impoverished hand and indifferent industrialist gradually brought together by means of a moralized middle ground anchored in self-discipline. This conflation of public and private life has been well appreciated by critics since the novel was first published in 1854.

The term that best encapsulates Gaskell’s vision of socioeconomic amelioration is “reserve,” which for cultural critics is clearly tied to systems of social determination. *North and South* is, in many respects, a study of modern discipline, one that promises its readers greater autonomy if they will only commit to an ethos of self-control and self-regulation. There are many explicitly normalizing moments of social pedagogy in the novel, in fact. The narrator emphasizes in one of the final chapters, for example, that the polite “intercourse” newly secured between Thornton and his millworkers will “enable both master and man to look upon each other with far more charity and sympathy, and bear with each other more patiently and kindly” (420). Reserve becomes a vital social routine in this way, as it makes Gaskell’s peaceful combination of opposites possible at both the domestic and industrial level.

Marxist and feminist scholars have been especially invested in Gaskell's conflation of public and private life in *North and South*. Catherine Gallagher, Hilary Schor, and many others have examined the novel as a deeply felt "response to the social, cultural, and intellectual transformations of the period," and see the lessons of reserve Gaskell teaches as the backbone of the novel (Matus, Introduction 2). In launching this kind of defense, however, critics have also persisted in interpreting *North and South* as an inescapably normalizing work. As Alan Shelston has recently observed, "The persistent image of Gaskell is . . . that her fiction reflects her basically bourgeois values" (4). While these values are developed in ways that can be appreciated for their richness and sophistication, they also foster "an image" of the novelist that "all of us working on her have struggled to dispel" (ibid).

In light of the limitations of these kind of readings, therefore, I'd like to examine Gaskell's social pedagogy in *North and South* a little differently. Instead of grappling with the novelist's "basically bourgeois values" as a limited achievement – one that grants Gaskell a compelling social conscience, but also makes her a product of her time – I want to suggest that the novelist's imperative for a culture of self-control is, at times, a little uncontrolled itself. However normalized *North and South's* lessons of reserve become, there are plenty of places in the novel where Gaskell's bourgeois values go a little bit awry. Her characters' routine combination of traditional manners and modern candor doesn't simply disappear into the fabric of Victorian reserve, but suddenly, inexplicably – and sometimes awkwardly – sticks out. Margaret adamantly disagrees with a

point raised during an argument, only to immediately apologize for her impetuosity. Or the laborer Higgins, in an effort to head off an insult, excuses an unflattering epithet in advance. In these kinds of moments – moments where the right pieces are clearly coming together, but where a skewed effect is produced – I’m going to argue that Gaskell’s representations of “mediocre” social form establish “local” spaces of variation and detachment *within* the novel’s “basically bourgeois values.” When not only Margaret and Higgins, but Thornton and Mr. Hale exhibit what one contemporary critic called a “mixture of rudeness and of reverence,” I suggest these characters demonstrate that obeying the rules of reserve can also produce internal abnormalities that are a form of everyday insight (Chorely 331).

If you somehow didn’t know before you started reading *North and South* that it was important to be reserved – especially during an argument – you would certainly know it by the time you finished the novel. Gaskell is constantly bringing diametrically opposed points of view into contact while expounding the lessons of self-control. One of the first examples comes early on, when Thornton visits the Hale family home. In the scene, Mr. Hale begins to speak about the strike then taking place in Milton, which quickly leads him into a more-or-less friendly debate with Thornton over the rights and duties of masters and men. Unable to keep silent, Margaret quickly turns her occasional interjections into an established part of their argument. When the mill owner speaks of the necessity for a “wise despotism” among employers, Margaret calls for the enlightenment of employees and a sense of interdependence between owner and hand that stretches

beyond “the payment of weekly wages” (120,122). Tempers begin to flare, and Thornton “hastily” replies to a quip of Margaret’s with an accusation that she is “just like all strangers who don’t understand the working of our system” (123). This is followed by another particularly blunt exchange, in which she “coldly” struggles “‘. . . to reconcile [Thornton’s] admiration of despotism with [his] respect for other men’s independence of character’” (124):

[Thornton] did not speak again for a minute, he was too much vexed. But he shook it off, and bade Mr. and Mrs. Hale good night. Then, drawing near to Margaret, he said in a lower voice—

‘I spoke rudely to you once this evening, and I am afraid, rather rudely. But you know I am but an uncouth Milton manufacture; will you forgive me?’

‘Certainly,’ she said, smiling up in his face . . . But she did not put out her hand to him, and again he felt the omission, and set it down to pride. (ibid)

Thornton’s apology for his earlier assertiveness is conventional and reparative, a gesture designed to make up for a previous discourtesy and to signify to Margaret that the tradesman is aware of the reserve he let lapse during their dispute. However, we also notice what is supposed to be routine in this exchange. What does noticing what is supposed to be an everyday apology mean for our understanding of that apology?

For most critics, the counterbalancing Thornton performs in the above epitomizes the character’s social determination. This scene is the beginning of

what Rafaella Antinucci has identified as “Thornton’s genteel-ization,” which centers “the Victorian negotiation of aristocratic and bourgeois demands” in the character as a reformulation of “the ‘Victorian compromise’” (133, 131):

[*North and South*] offers an ideal model [of the Victorian gentleman] in progress in a double sense: on the one hand, Thornton’s “gentlemanliness” is shown in its development, whilst on the other, his inner features transpire through the looking-glass of other masculinities; that is, by means of the progressive demolition of pre-arranged polarities. (132)

Antinucci’s analysis is not dissimilar to my own in certain respects. Thornton’s “development” as a gentleman is offset by the character’s “manly” candor in a way that “demolishes” certain predetermined categories and conventions. In fact, this critic emphasizes “Gaskell’s awareness of the cultural nature of [the] topological associations and conflicting dualities” that structure her novel (133). But Antinucci’s argument about the formation of an “industrial gentleman” also keeps the novelist’s cultural “awareness” firmly enmeshed in a system of binary oppositions, however demolished their respective “poles” become. Thornton counters his growing gentlemanliness with “other masculinities” that Victorian culture has taught him to value, but this means his challenge to the norm is contained within a predetermined frame.

But what about the fact that what is supposed to be an “ordinary” routine has suddenly become cumbersome compensation? Does this character’s combination of candor and apology really produce a perfectly social solution – one that fits neatly within the “pre-arranged polarities” that a critic like

Antinucci identifies? I don't think it does. Thornton's apology doesn't just rearrange a set of cultural pieces; it picks them up and plays one off of the other. The mill owner doesn't serve two different kinds of discipline in an act of seamless, coordinated self-control, but maintains reserve in a subtly abnormal act of re-compliance: "I spoke rudely to you once this evening, and I am afraid, rather rudely . . ." It isn't enough for the character to simply apologize; he has to apologize twice, and he ups the ante of the gesture along the way. ". . . But you know I am but an uncouth Milton manufacture; will you forgive me?" Thornton doesn't stop at a restorative admission of guilt; he becomes pointedly self-deprecating, which underscores his act of contrition as a gesture. I would argue that this means the character is detached in a "local" way from the reserve he is maintaining in the scene. By retroactively incorporating his initial hot-headedness into an act of self-control with an especially strong apology, Thornton follows the rules and combines modern candor with traditional gentlemanly behavior. But the large dose of each ingredient that he uses is also abnormal – an internal variation *within* the routine of reserve.

The detachment within this moment of self-control is made even more compelling by the other minor abnormality at the end of the scene, the omitted handshake. This uncomfortable omission has occurred once before between Margaret and Thornton. The handshake is, for the mill owner, a routine gesture of introduction or leave-taking. It is a sign of mutual respect that eventually gets taken up as a suitably egalitarian gesture by Margaret towards the close of *North and South*. However, at this early stage, our narrator is careful to inform us that

this social gesture is a “frank familiar custom” to Margaret, one she “was not prepared” to comprehend (86). Her more traditional upbringing in London, surrounded as she was by the bows and curtsies of lords and ladies, hasn’t accustomed Margaret to the apparent informality of Milton’s everyday gesture. Gaskell uses this miscommunication as a kind of leitmotif in the novel, one that typifies the disjunction of manners between Margaret and Thornton. When these two are thrust together in an incidental first encounter, we are told that the Southern lady “could not help her looks” and “always gave strangers the impression of haughtiness” (62): “Her quiet coldness of demeanor” is interpreted by the mill owner as “contemptuousness” (ibid). And Thornton, to her, is “. . . not quite a gentleman . . .” himself: “. . . I should not like to have to bargain with him; he looks very inflexible . . .” she tells her father (64-5).

To end the previously quoted scene of reconciliation between Thornton and Margaret with the awkward miscommunication that defines their original biased assessment of one another is richly ironic. We watch the habit of self-control succeed as a set of “natural” classless gestures only to watch another normalized egalitarian act go immediately awry. It is as if two different “mediocre” routines mis-communicate, as if two different degrees of reserve pass each other by. In this way *North and South* highlights not only its dualistic treatment of social form (traditional affectation versus modern candor), but it underscores reserve itself as a relative and flexible concept. The omitted handshake helps us learn that Margaret and Thornton learn that a rude assertion, an overdone apology, even something as innocuous as a handshake is so much

cultural signification, and that there are variations available within this cultural routine. The mill owner's self-restraint is emphasized as an awkwardly learned lesson and a mediated middle ground, one that can be affected at a local level even while it determines the terms of a debate.

The reason Thornton can experience detachment within his own apology is that the forms that define this character's adherence to the norm also create experiences that aren't fully determined by convention. This is the fundamental assumption that I offer in this dissertation, the discrepancy between a theory of rational distance like Amanda Anderson's and my own.³² Not insignificantly, I think this same assumption can also be teased out of many of the scenes in *North and South* that appear to be socially didactic. If we unpack the novel's "basically bourgeois" lessons in relation to the local social gestures that characters employ, much of what first appears to be patently normative also looks slightly abnormal.

A good example of this occurs in a chapter titled "Men and Gentlemen," in which Gaskell's pedagogy of self-control is spelled out plainly in a discussion between Margaret and Thornton. Margaret is attending a dinner hosted at Thornton's home, and the conversation among the guests quickly turns into a "warmly contested" debate about trade and manufacturing (162). At least part of this debate concerns the dubious behavior of a Mr. Morison, a tradesman not in attendance at the dinner. We aren't told the particulars by the narrator, but we are told that during the argument Margaret admires her host's "whole manner" as he condemns Mr. Morison's behavior: "so straightforward, yet simple and modest, as to be thoroughly dignified" (ibid). She watches Thornton and the other men as

they “talk in desperate earnest,—not in the used-up style that wearied her so in the old London parties” (163 *sic*): “It might be rather rampant in its display,” she thinks, “but still they seemed to defy the old limits of possibility” (*ibid*). Lost in considerations of “manly” candor, Margaret is then approached by Thornton, who asks her opinion of the debate. The question quickly develops into a tête-à-tête about whether Mr. Morison is a “man” or a “gentleman:”

‘I could see you were on our side in our discussion at dinner,—were you not, Miss Hale?’

‘Certainly. But then I know so little about it. I was surprised, however, to find from what Mr. Horsfall said, that there were others who thought in so diametrically opposite a manner, as the Mr. Morison he spoke about. He cannot be a gentleman—is he?’

‘I am not quite the person to decide on another’s gentlemanliness, Miss Hale. I mean, I don’t quite understand your application of the word. But I should say that this Morison is no true man. I don’t know who he is; I merely judge him from Mr. Horsfall’s account.’

‘I suspect my “gentleman” includes your “true man.”’

‘And a great deal more, you would imply. I differ from you. A man is to me a higher and a completer being than a gentleman.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Margaret. ‘We must understand the words differently.’

‘I take it that “gentleman” is a term that only describes a person in his relation to others; but when we speak of him as “a man,” we consider

him not merely with regard to his fellow-men, but in relation to himself,—
to life—to time—to eternity. . . I am rather weary of this word
“gentlemanly,” which seems to me to be often inappropriately used, and
often, too, with such exaggerated distortion of meaning, while the full
simplicity of the noun “man,” and the adjective “manly” are
unacknowledged—that I am induced to class it with the cant of the day.’
(164)

We never find out what Margaret’s opinion on this terminological matter is, as Thornton is quickly “called away by some eager manufacturers” still in the thick of debate (ibid). The mill owner’s definition of a “gentleman” and a “man” obviously make an impression, however, as Margaret admits to her father at the beginning of the following chapter that she has started to like the tradesman for his “demonstrative nature” (166).

These two characters are well on their way to a sympathetic and socially complicit reciprocation of ideas. They are getting a lesson in reserve thanks to Mr. Morison. The mill owner adopts Gaskell’s ongoing dialectic – in fact he is determined to work with the words “gentlemanly” and “manly.” Both characters adhere strictly to a normative understanding of Victorian sociality, one that can use words like “gentleman” and “man” with a definitive sense of what they mean. Despite the social certainty that develops in this episode, however, I think Thornton and Margaret’s “mediocre” efforts to meet in the middle and to come up with common terminological ground are also informed by a logic of “local” detachment. If we read the general discussion that develops between them back

into the specific example from which it arose, we can see these characters developing their “basically bourgeois” conclusions in a highly self-conscious way. This self-consciousness pushes Gaskell’s ethos of reserve even as her characters attempt to pin it down.

The above conversation begins because Margaret and Thornton can’t decide how to label Mr. Morison. The debate isn’t ever a question of content – they both condemn the man. The question is one of form, of the best way to think and talk about people. Is Mr. Morison “unmanly” or “ungentlemanly”? Since Margaret and Thornton can’t seem to agree on how these two words relate to one another – Does “gentleman” subsume “man” or vice versa? – they quickly reach the conclusion that they actually “understand the words differently.” What they need is some common ground that will help them express the agreement they already share. In order to get there, Margaret and Thornton do what Gaskell’s characters always do: they compromise. Despite his own distaste for the word “gentleman,” Thornton doesn’t throw out Margaret’s term. He makes a place for it by developing a narrower definition: the word “gentleman” specifically “describes a person in his relation to others.” In direct line with Gaskell’s usage, the mill owner decides that a gentleman is a “gentleman” because he adopts a set of traditional social interactions. In turn, the term “man” is pared down to denote a complementary idea: someone “in relation to himself,—to life—to time—to eternity.” A “true man” is the honest opinions and unconcerned judgments of a solitary person, a definition which is, again, in line with Gaskell’s.

In terms of what actually gets said by these characters, adhering to *North and South*'s "bourgeois values" produces a normalizing, "mediocre" discourse. In terms of *how* these characters say what they say, participating in that discourse also develops into a highly self-conscious employment of the terms "man" and "gentleman." Reaching a compromise makes these words a little contrived and artificial. It makes using "man" and "gentleman" an exercise – one that immediately feels and tries to push the limitations of the routine it is establishing. After all, do we really think that by claiming that Mr. Morison is "no true man" Thornton has just argued that this hypothetical person has no legitimate relationship with himself, life, time, or eternity? Does his definition somehow avoid running into its own limits when it gets applied to a specific person? If Margaret spoke up and insisted that Mr. Morison was not a "gentleman," would that mean that she had actually claimed that Mr. Morison has no "relation to others"? By using Mr. Morison as an example Thornton and Margaret continue to invoke a conventional social paradigm and pursue reserve as an ethos, but I would argue that the activity of defining these paradigms and of imagining them taking shape also produces some non-normative friction which we hear in Thornton and Margaret's belabored use of these words *as* words.

This gives us a different way to read the reserve that is delineated constantly in *North and South*. When Mr. Hale is determined to discover whether or not his daughter is aware that Thornton is in love with her, he "blushes as he put[s the] question" to her and excuses the directness of his inquiry (340). How does his blush and awkward excuse not only adhere to the law of bourgeois self-

control, but bend it to the point that Mr. Hale can get a straight answer to a sensitive question? When Mrs. Thornton warns Margaret that her recent appearance at the train station late at night with a young gentleman has been improper, how does her uncomfortably protracted preamble to “Miss Hale” about the “duty” she swore to perform to the girl’s dying mother push apology into self-assertion?: “. . . I promised your poor mother that, as far as my poor judgment went, I would not allow you to act in any way wrongly, or (she softened her speech down a little here) inadvertently, without remonstrating; at least, without offering advice, whether you took it or not” (315). Mrs. Thornton appears to need all the “poor judgment” and “softened” speech available in order to excuse her too-candid appraisal of Margaret’s behavior. But she also takes up these gestures in a strangely self-conscious moment that permits her to level an ill-mannered accusation. In this way characters follows the routines of reserve consistently in *North and South*, but I would argue that they also play with those rules and discover variations that aren’t just “basically bourgeois.”

Claiming that Gaskell’s characters experience local forms of rational distance might not seem to be a very contentious argument. What good is a moment of insight? What does it do to our understanding of Gaskell’s “basically bourgeois values” except reemphasize that they are, in fact, *basically* bourgeois? I’d suggest that at least one thing that routines gone awry can do for Gaskell’s text is demonstrate that, beneath what appears to be an almost oppressively moderate socioeconomic message, there exists a radical agenda of cultural change. *North and South* may ultimately be a story of concession and negotiation, compromise

and amelioration. But its series of conciliations between men and women, employers and employees does more than maintain the status quo. In fact, one of the things that goes awry in the “local” moments I have been highlighting is the imbalance of power between men and women, mill owners and hands. The ethos of reserve that Gaskell is advocating for throughout her novel clearly reinforces the hierarchies that exist among differing classes of people in the 19th century. Demure demeanors keep women subservient to men, and polite intercourse keeps the strong objections of the socioeconomically disenfranchised in check. But “local” detachment also allows us to appreciate the ways in which the “mediocre” characters in Gaskell’s text are frequently enabled to trouble these imbalances. Things go awry over and over again in *North and South*, and within these experiences there are radical re-imaginings of conventional power relations.

This occurs most powerfully in the closing pages of *North and South*. Although the first reading of Margaret and Thornton’s coming together might seem to be one of social and economic dominance for the latter, in many ways Margaret’s marriage is signaled to be an arrangement of equality. Her insistence that her meeting with Thornton should be “looked upon in the light of a mere business” transaction frames the scene as the beginning of a financial contract for which she is the controlling party (435). Whatever degree of dramatic irony the reader enjoys knowing that Margaret is on her way to a marriage proposal, Margaret herself steps into the final pages of *North and South* not just to compromise, but to maintain her power over Thornton. Even if, upon her marriage, the mill owner takes control of Margaret’s fortune according to the

property laws that governed mid-century England, this eventual dominance doesn't negate Margaret's initial economic authority. It doesn't keep the character from briefly imagining a relationship with Thornton that is one of socioeconomic superiority. In turn, I would suggest that *North and South* briefly posits a thematic solution to the 19th-century's industrial growing pains that involves the equal distribution of power between employee and employer, whom Margaret and Thornton stand in for. Both the compromise of Margaret's marriage and the conciliation between hand and mill owner eventually produce a balance of opposing forces that reinforces the usual imbalance of power. But this doesn't deny Margaret or the reader the ability to imagine a radically altered relationship.³³

These "local" forms of radicalism also occur in many of the exchanges that take place in *North and South*'s series of socioeconomic debates. As we have already seen, Thornton, Mr. Hale, and Margaret discuss early on in the novel the relationship between employer and employee, and their discussion involves several abnormal moments. One of the most heavy-handed depictions of reserve in *North and South* is staged between Mr. Hale and Higgins towards the close of the novel. These characters epitomize conventional manners and indecorous candor respectively, and they have a carefully composed conversation with one another. But their "mediocre" debate is also peppered with slightly skewed pauses and recoveries:

In the first place, the decorous, kind-hearted, simple, old-fashioned gentleman [Mr. Hale], had unconsciously called out, by his own

refinement and courteousness of manner, all the latent courtesy in the other [Higgins].

Mr. Hale treated all his fellow-creatures alike: it never entered into his head to make any difference because of their rank. He placed a chair for Nicholas; stood up till he, at Mr. Hale's request, took a seat; and called him, invariably, 'Mr. Higgins,' instead of the curt 'Nicholas' or 'Higgins,' to which the 'drunken infidel weaver' had been accustomed. . . .

Margaret was little surprised, and very much pleased, when she found her father and Higgins in earnest conversation—each speaking with gentle politeness to the other, however their opinions might clash. Nicholas—clean, tidied (if only at the pump-trough), and quiet spoken—was a new creature to her, who had only seen him in the rough independence of his own hearthstone. . . . [T]here he sat, enforcing some opinion on her father, with a strong Darkshire accent, it is true, but with a lowered voice, and a good, earnest composure on his face. Her father, too, was interested in what his companion was saying. He looked round as she came in, smiled, and quietly gave her his chair, and then sat down afresh as quickly as possible, and with a little bow of apology to his guest for the interruption. Higgins nodded to her as a sign of greeting; and she softly adjusted her working materials on the table, and prepared to listen. (225-26)

North and South goes to great lengths in this scene to put its “genteel” southern gentleman and “rough” northern hand into a reserved conversation with one

another. When the discussion turns to religion, for example, Higgins at one point speaks hypothetically of Mr. Hale as ““a knave [of] a parson . . . ’ ” – one he would think a “fool” if he spoke of religion in a way that ““ . . . didn’t concern all men”” (227). He quickly follows up this only hypothetical epithet with an apology: ““No offense, I hope, sir”” (ibid). Mr. Hale responds obligingly, taking no offense at all, and even encourages an exchange of differing opinions with a declaration that they should both ““ . . . know each other, and speak freely to each other about these things”” (ibid).

These two characters are clearly self-conscious about their behavior. Not only is the list of frank assertions and apologetic niceties provided by the narrator a long one, but it is a list that is reinforced by Margaret’s outside observation. Clearly, too, the balanced behavior they enact recapitulates the imbalanced power dynamic between them: “Mr. Hale treat[s] all his fellow-creatures alike” not because they are all actually alike, but because social niceties can make an inherent “difference” in “rank” less of an obstacle to productive communication. The “difference” between Mr. Hale and Higgins may seem less different when both characters behave in a reserved way, but that mutually reserved behavior is also a way of preserving their socioeconomic difference.

All that being admitted, many of the gestures Higgins uses to maintain his reserved behavior also briefly trouble the power imbalance in play. The insult he hypothetically applies to Mr. Hale and then immediately retracts – this highly rhetorical gesture allows Higgins to deny the social superiority of the southern gentleman in a way that imagines his own supremacy and the equality of “all

men:" the hand grants Mr. Hale the implicit imbalance of power between them, but he also signals that that imbalance is predicated on conditions first set by himself. In turn, Mr. Hale grants Higgins his terms by taking no offense at all to an epithet that, like all good epithets, should generate a sense of insult. This reversal of power may be momentary and imaginary, but I would argue that it also means that the compromise and moderation delineated in this scene is hardly the static, unreflective occurrence it might first appear to be. In fact, reading *North and South* as an ongoing study of "local" detachment means discovering that this "mediocre" social problem novel is constantly pushed by its own terms of socioeconomic compromise into radically questioning the ethos it has set out to establish. If Gaskell's novel is "basically bourgeois," it also illustrates that bourgeois behavior can be the root of revolutionary change.

I'd like to offer one final example of detachment in *North and South*, an unlikely variation of reserve that can help underscore the kinds of contributions that "local" forms of insight can make to the rationalist tradition.

Mr. Bell is a humorous figure who enters the novel relatively late in order to play an important role as Margaret's financial benefactor. In a scene towards the conclusion of the novel, Mr. Bell is offered the hospitality of the Lennox family in London. Captain Lennox has married Margaret's cousin Edith in the opening chapters of *North and South*, and Mr. Bell is brought into contact with the family when his beneficiary chooses to stay with them after the unexpected

death of her father. Though the Lennoxes are a wealthy and more than respectable family, Mr. Bell refuses their hospitality:

‘Thank you. I am much obliged to you. You would only think me a churl if you had [a bed for me], for I should decline it, I believe, in spite of all the temptation of such agreeable company,’ said Mr. Bell, bowing all round, and secretly congratulating himself on the neat turn he had given to his sentence, which, if put into plain language, would have been more to this effect: ‘I couldn’t stand the restraints of such a proper-behaved and civil-spoken set of people as these are: it would be like meat without salt. I’m thankful they haven’t a bed. And how well I rounded my sentence! I am absolutely catching the trick of good manners.’ (379)

This rare moment of comedy is something of a curiosity in an otherwise solemn and sentimental novel. It is also something of a detour, seeing as the narrator of *North and South* rarely takes the time to illustrate an incidental character’s reaction to a scene. The reason the narrator takes the time to record this particular private joke is that Gaskell is underscoring the distance between Margaret’s opening and closing perspectives on genteel behavior, which the upper-class Lennox family stands in for. Margaret’s initial education in southern gentility takes place during the years she is raised by the Lennoxes alongside her cousin. Her original notion of “gentlemanliness” is derived from this part of her back-story and is the thing she learns to combine with Milton’s northern “manliness” throughout the course of the novel. Mr. Bell is pulled into the closing pages of the narrative and put into contact with the Lennox family in order to emphasize

the change in the protagonist that makes her permanent placement with them unfeasible. The revelation to the reader that Mr. Bell is able to turn “plain language” into a “trick of good manners” isn’t just a joke, but is indicative of the novel’s general shift as a *Bildungsroman*.

It is also one of the novel’s most interesting illustrations of reserve gone awry. In this scene, Mr. Bell’s dialogue is the clumsy midpoint between his own candid, unspoken sentiments and the traditional gentility of the Lennox family. The “trick of good manners” that he thinks he gets away with combines candor and gentility in a way that the narrator underscores as inept not only by calling it a “neat turn,” but by juxtaposing the character’s actions and thoughts so closely. This is about as “mediocre” an example of reserve as this novel has to offer – adherence to convention at its most conspicuous and least capable. Mr. Bell’s pompous speech and exaggerated bow compensate for “plain language” so straightforward it would amount to an insult if uttered aloud, and they do it in a way that is self-deceiving.

However, even if Mr. Bell’s “mediocrity” is awkward enough to be a joke in this scene, I don’t think the “trick” he makes of reserve is entirely reducible to a matter of cultural routine. The way this bumbling interlocutor maneuvers the forms of reserve is clearly a little abnormal. The character combines a frank refusal with an elaborate apology, and I would argue that he can only create this kind of variation by standing back from the forms that define reserve in a detached way – one that turns self-control into a “local” moment of comedy. Mr. Bell’s handling of reserve may be naive, in other words, but he still experiences

the texture of a social routine as an opportunity for a little bit of self-determination. He's reserved on terms that are uniquely his own.

Recognizing the “mediocrity” of this kind of character as an opportunity for rational distance is significant, I suggest, because it can help deflect a criticism that has been frequently leveled against the rationalist tradition: the charge of elitism. As Anderson explains in *The Way We Argue Now*, “Recent scholarly trends have tended to treat ideals of critical detachment as illusory, elitist, and dangerous, invested in unattainable perspectives and disregarding of embodied existence and the experience of differently situated, and differently enfranchised, social groups” (7). Anderson has several different retorts to these kinds of charges, which she considers a misreading of Jürgen Habermas’ work on communicative rationality. I am not sure, however, that any deflection she can muster can be nearly as effective as a redefinition of detachment itself – one that gets away from exclusive notions of deliberate “cultivation.” Instead of predicating rational distance on a sense of exceptionality that will always remain the province of “social groups” that have the time, space, energy, and resources to nurture “nonsociological” insight, I think turning to Mr. Bell – who is certainly not “elitist” – can expand theories of detachment in a way that gets away from these kinds of critiques. If “cultivation” is a form of de facto elitism, I don’t think detachment has to be one. And I think one way of getting away from this reputation is to go looking for another kind of rational distance that lives in less likely places like Mr. Bell’s sociological “trick.”

Chapter 3: Another Meredith: Rules as Undefined Space

Thus far, this dissertation has explored subtle abnormalities within the everyday. I've examined the unconventional nuances of two conventional novelists, Trollope and Gaskell, and I've argued that, close up, the very things that make these author's "mediocre" are also their sources of insight and agency. For Trollope, I've argued that fluency becomes over-fluency, an opportunity to turn convention into a little bit of excess. For Gaskell, I've suggested that routine becomes variation, a chance to play with the parts that make up patterns and habituated behaviors. In this last chapter, I'm going to continue exploring obedience and rule-following in this way, as engines for "local" forms of insight and awareness. But I'm also going to alter my approach and examine a less conventional novelist.

George Meredith isn't an author who has been defined by a strict adherence to convention. Unlike Trollope and Gaskell, Meredith isn't "mediocre" because he so clearly follows the rules. He's "mediocre" because his attempts to break the rules have seemed ineffectual. Meredith writes with an uncommonly high degree of grammatical and syntactic irregularity, but he does so without being convincingly iconoclastic or sophisticated. Critics past and present have complained that the novelist's "difficult" writing is unaccountably obscure, impenetrable, and convoluted.³⁴ As Jamie Bartlett recently put it, Meredith is "a canonical writer generally agreed to be bad at writing" (547). While his style makes him less conventional than Trollope or Gaskell, Meredith is less

conventional in the wrong way. He is defined by his inability to genuinely escape literary tradition.

In this last chapter, however, I'm going to reconsider Meredith's "mediocrity" and reexamine the relationship between his style and the more conventional features that structure his fiction. While many analyses of the author's most well-known novel, *The Egoist*, put Meredith's prose in tension with his use of realistic convention, I argue that the author's adherence to generic rules like omniscience and plausibility actually sets the stage for his dense collection of stylistic abnormalities. For Meredith, I suggest, the rules of representation create a framework *within* which style can function in non-normative ways. His "difficult" writing may not be able to formulate a comprehensive break with generic tradition, but I argue that Meredith uses realism's rules as a blueprint in *The Egoist* and an opportunity to explore the small, undefined spaces that exist between conventions. In a manner that is actually not so different from Trollope or Gaskell – but which is executed on a far greater scale – Meredith's adherence to the norm creates "local" forms of distance and detachment.³⁵ In fact, I argue that this author proves that taking full advantage of the gaps, cracks, and crevices between conventions can turn an otherwise normal novel into a remarkably unconventional text.

After exploring Meredith's style, in the second section of this chapter I transpose the author's literary detachment onto a social phenomenon. Most of the men and women in *The Egoist* make a point obeying the rules that define "the art of conversation" in 19th century England. They follow the everyday conventions

of language in one “mediocre” exchange after another. However, in their attempts to signal to one another that they are speaking correctly, many characters also find themselves having conversations *about* conversation in *The Egoist* – exchanges that both reinforce and expose the rules of the cultural game they are playing. In these ongoing encounters with language, I argue that Meredith’s “mediocre” men and women experience detachment in the spaces they discover between conversational conventions – that, like the author, they develop agency and insight *within* the norm. In doing so, I suggest that Meredith’s characters prove that local forms of distance – while less exciting or impactful than radical endeavors – still play a key role in shaping a culture’s self-understanding, and that they often supply its members with the pragmatic steps necessary for alteration and evolution.

Style and Detachment

Meredith’s style is difficult. It is difficult to read and even more difficult to describe. Many have called Meredith “obscure” or “convoluted,” but only a few have tried dissecting his prose in terms of the author’s actual grammar and syntax. Margaret Conrow’s summary is perhaps the most useful, although it is also far from exhaustive:

[Meredith’s prose] is generally non-periodic and deliberately abrupt in rhythm, made complex by isolated and sometimes incompatible images, by a lack of connectives and an emphasis on abstract and startling nouns. It is more particularly characterized by a peculiar use of articles . . . by a

great fondness for prepositions . . . and by a tendency to use adjectives as nouns and occasionally to use transitive verbs intransitively. (194-95)

This collection of stylistic habits is irregular, especially in combination.

Meredith's prose often seems to do the opposite of what we expect, employing an "abrupt" rhythm where something smooth might do, using an adjective as a noun or a definite article where the indefinite seems more appropriate. While there are a number of baroque stylists in the 19th century and many challenging stylists at the turn of the century and after, Meredith's prose has a level of opposition and non sequitur that is distinct and uncommon. Moreover, unlike most of his peers, Meredith's "difficulty" often doesn't seem to support much convincingly sophisticated substance. Each sentence feels like a high-investment project with a low rate of return, as if the author were being "difficult" just to be difficult.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, critics usually addressed Meredith's style by simply paraphrasing it out of existence. More recently, however, recuperative critics have re-engaged with Meredith by calling his difficulty "proto-modern." Most haven't been willing to argue that the author's style is a decisively radical effort, but critics like Allon White and Neil Roberts have re-framed it as a preview of the great literary experiments of the early 20th century. White argues, for example, that Meredith "[pries] apart the deep identification of truth with fluency" in the Victorian era and that works like *The Egoist* represent a form of "early modernism" (94). The novelist is said to pull away from realism's "desire for referential fixity and clarity" without having fully formulated Modernism's "dense 'textualité' of metaphor, obscure syntax, broken narrative and anomic

subjectivism” (2). Roberts uses Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia to make similar claims about Meredith’s development of an “art of stylization” that is, “at its best, a brilliant orchestration of the ‘interaction of social forces’” (10).

Calling Meredith “proto-modern” has kept the novelist on the edge of the literary canon. Unfortunately, it has also been a fairly self-defeating form of recuperative criticism. It puts Meredith on the map by explaining that he is a little bit lost, neither here nor there in terms of period and aesthetic. He becomes the pre-James, pre-Conrad, or pre-Joyce. More significantly, the label also makes a strict dichotomy of “realism” and “Modernism,” and then it invests in an untenably naïve faith in mimetic representation on the part of the Victorian realist. Any fledgling fits of insight into the illusions of realistic representation are taken as signs that Meredith has begun to step into the 20th century. As Matthew Beaumont has recently reminded both Modernist and realist critics, however, the “familiar opposition between realism and modernism” is, of course, a generic “unreliability” (6): “It is important not to fall into the trap of congratulating a realist novel, or painting, or photograph . . . for being proto-modernist or proto-postmodernist, largely on the grounds that it has demonstrated an intuitive, if ultimately dim-witted understanding of its own limitations” (ibid).³⁶

What happens, then, if we stop trying to recuperate Meredith as a stylistic innovator? When critics call Meredith “proto-modern,” they are synthesizing his catalogue of grammatical and syntactic habits. The author’s style becomes one “difficult,” semi-sophisticated feature in tension with the realistic tradition. I propose examining Meredith’s prose much more locally, however, in order to

reflect the fact that the author is actually quite differently difficult from sentence to sentence. The irregularities of Meredith's grammar and syntax shift rapidly, often without concern for what has come before or what will come after. We need to analyze Meredith's style in a manner that takes this variability into account, I suggest, even if it means abandoning a more comprehensive sense of recovery for the author. I also suggest that Meredith's prose needs to be examined in conjunction with all the conventional elements that structure *The Egoist*, not in opposition to them. This author's use of omniscience, free indirect discourse, plausibility, and round characterization are described by most recuperative critics as being in tension with his style. But I'd like to demonstrate that Meredith's abnormal grammar and syntax are actually rooted in his "mediocre" adherence to realistic convention. Instead of a "proto-modern" Meredith, I want to explore *another* kind of novelist, one who exposes and explodes the gaps within the realistic tradition and becomes a striking catalogue of all the non-representational choices available in this representational genre.

Take a lengthy description of Clara Middleton's face towards the beginning of *The Egoist*. Like many other 19th-century realistic novels, Meredith's pauses to illustrate both the physical features and personality of its heroine:

She had the mouth that smiles in repose. The lips met full on the centre of the bow and thinned along to a lifting dimple; the eyelids also lifted slightly at the outer corners, and seemed, like the lip into the limpid cheek, quickening up the temples, as with a run of light, or the ascension

indicated off a shoot of colour. . . . Aspens imaged in water, waiting for the breeze, would offer a susceptible lover some suggestion of her face Her eyes were brown, set well between mild lids, often shadowed, not wakeful. Her hair of lighter brown, swelling above her temples on the sweep to the knot, imposed the triangle of the fabulous wild woodland visage from brow to mouth and chin, evidently in agreement with her taste; and the triangle suited her; but her face was not significant of tameless wildness or of weakness . . . (74-5)

Meredith's description of Clara is a little "difficult" here, but it's still a recognizable and representative portrait. There are a number of regular realistic features operating in the passage. Clara is delineated as a complex, round character, for example, despite the novelist's assurance in the Prelude that he only depicts "example and types" (35). She is also described by an omniscient narrator, one who employs free indirect discourse in order to provide insight into another character's perspective. Mrs Mountstuart, a wealthy socialite and friend of Patterne Hall, focalizes this scene, and as she meets Clara for first time, she examines Sir Willoughby's fiancé to determine whether she will make a suitable wife. This scene is also part of a narrative that has a plausible plot and a contemporary setting. *The Egoist* has no unlikely twists or turns for almost 500 pages, but is carefully laid out in the English countryside as a series of believable causes and effects.

As for the actual portrait of Clara, Meredith has written a recognizably physiognomic description, a conventional illustration of his heroine's face

whereby her personality and ethic are revealed in a catalogue of external features that correspond with internal traits. Her mouth is said to “smile in repose;” her brown eyes are “often shadowed, not wakeful;” and her hair has an air of “studious concentration.” The reader gets a good sense of what the character looks like and of who she is – as they would in many other introductions to many other characters in other realistic novels.

Meredith’s grammatical and syntactic “difficulty” might simply seem to get in the way of a reader’s comprehension of this passage. Or, according to White or Roberts, his style could be pulling the novel away from the solidity of Victorian realism into the “textualité” of Modernist abstraction. I would argue, however, that Meredith’s prose actually has a much more localized, integrated, and interesting relationship with the other features in the passage. Instead of hovering collectively over *The Egoist*, Meredith’s stylistic irregularities are embedded in the various generic conventions that he is adhering to, and they do some subtly non-normative work. As if the author were making a rubbing of his novel, style brings convention into relief, and it also uses its exposure to create some unconventional effects in spaces that aren’t so strictly defined by the rules of representation.

For example, we read that “Aspens imaged in water, waiting for the breeze, would offer a susceptible lover some suggestion of [Clara’s] face.” There is nothing revolutionary about this image, but Meredith is playing with the syntax of his sentence. He introduces the vehicle of his simile (“Aspens”) before he reveals its tenor (“[Clara’s] face”). While Meredith obeys the rule that says a

simile describes something by comparing it to something else, his syntax underscores that a comparison is being made. Then, after drawing some attention to the fact that he is following the rule, Meredith finds some leeway within that rule: he extends his simile with an additional figuration – the personification of the aspens “waiting for the breeze.” He also puts a condition on the comparison he is making: only a “susceptible lover” would recognize the similarity between Clara’s face and the aspens, and even then it would only “offer . . . *some* suggestion.” Where this leaves the reader, who is presumably not a susceptible lover, is an open question. Is Meredith’s simile only there to emphasize the fact that we are not in a position to know the character very well – a kind of anti-description in the middle of Clara’s portrait? Such stylistic choices draw attention to the fact that Meredith is using a simile *as* a simile and that he is using a simile as part of a conventional physiognomic description. They are the reason we notice the conventionality of the passage. However, I would argue that these choices also take advantage of the slight, undefined spaces internal to Meredith’s simile and create the subtly non-normative effects I have highlighted. They are why the sentence strikes us being a little “difficult” in the first place, and I would suggest that manufacturing that “difficulty” takes at least a certain amount of “local” detachment in order to achieve.

Further down in the passage there is a different example of Meredith’s style at work. The narrator tells us that Clara’s “hair of lighter brown, swelling above her temples on the sweep to the knot, imposed the triangle of the fabulous wild woodland visage from brow to mouth and chin.” Meredith tells us the literal

color and shape of his heroine's hair. Even here, however, the novelist uses convention as a frame for the unconventional. The adjective "lighter" raises the question: how light is Clara's hair? The definite article in the phrase "*the* fabulous wild woodland visage" also leaves a little room to wonder: is there some fabulous wild woodland visage that we should, but haven't heard of? Clara's hair is still light brown, and it is still in the shape of a triangle. But Meredith's prose exposes the fact that a literal description is taking place, and then it makes that literal description ask less literal questions that it wouldn't usually ask. The author doesn't break the rules of realistic representation, but I'd suggest that the stylistic choices he makes find some undetermined space to play with.

Charles Altieri's description of style and "expressivist agency" is, I think, a good account of what is happening in a novel like *The Egoist*. For Altieri, style may be "Shaped by history, by biology, and by the contours of the emotions [authors] want to express . . . but [writers] also always have the opportunity to locate agency in the specific internal relations [they] weave out of [their] heritage" (60). The "knowing sel[f]" is realized "through the work of articulation" (6):

Style allows us to attribute identity over time to a series of intentional acts while reducing our reliance on problematic notions of narrative self-construction, and it enables us to capture the rich blend of the somatic, the symptomatic, and the purposive that is basic to individuating persons. If style is not quite the man, or the woman, it is the index that attention to

how something is done will engage us in the forces requiring hypotheses about identity and identification. (17)

The “something” that Meredith is doing with his style is local and is embedded in an otherwise generically normative text. *The Egoist* is still populated with complex characters, a plausible plot, and an omniscient narrator. However, Meredith is nothing if he isn’t an example of how “the work of articulation” can produce “agency in the specific internal relations” between these kinds of conventions. The novelist may not develop a coherently critical or rigorously iconoclastic position in relation to realism, one that exceeds the conventions he is employing in a comprehensive way. But he is clearly engaged in ongoing “hypotheses about identity and identification.” His “difficulty” is the index to that work and to the agency Meredith is able to generate both because of and despite his adherence to literary tradition.

This kind of “local” detachment is very different from the rarified achievements that have been theorized by critics like Amanda Anderson. In both *The Powers of Distance* and *The Way We Argue Now*, Anderson studies authors whose work appears to exceed the social and cultural norm with painstaking effort. She argues that, with great exertion, “individuals and collectivities . . . [can] cultivate habits, dispositions, and attitudes that [cannot] be attributed to any . . . limiting sociological determination” (*The Way We Argue Now* 6). While I don’t think that Meredith’s style “cultivates” detachment in this way, I would argue that he becomes a clear example of the extent to which “mediocre” “individuals and collectivities” can also participate in non-deterministic

experiences, and how studies like Anderson's have limited our understanding of agency and insight. "Mediocrity," as I define it in this dissertation, is obeying the rules. It's adhering to social and cultural form without making an attempt to "cultivate" distance or exceed the norm. But Meredith's "mediocre" use of realistic convention is, I think, a remarkable illustration of how rich a conventional blueprint can become, and of how much local, non-determined space there is between conventions – even in a genre as supposedly straightforward as Victorian realism.

In fact, *The Egoist* makes clear that there is much more non-determined space between realistic conventions than there is space that gets determined by them. In Chapters 1 and 2, I use Trollope and Gaskell to expose and critique the lingering critical assumption that Victorian realism is reducible to a matter of representation. In the wake of structuralism and poststructuralism, the genre has been thoroughly debunked as a simple inventory of "real life," but I use these two "mediocre" realists to demonstrate that realism is still often treated in critical discourse as a straightforward set of rules for representation. I argue, in turn, that this treatment fails to recognize that even the most traditional employments of the conventions of representation are necessarily defined against the unconventional and non-representative forms unique to each author. "Mediocre" novels like *The Eustace Diamonds* and *North and South* are efforts to make words do representational work, on the one hand, but they are also examples of how the "work [that] words do" cannot be done without embedding an author's intensely self-conscious, non-representational choices into the fabric of a realistic novel

(Levin 16). Trollope's narrator illustrates this point in an occasional way in *The Eustace Diamonds*, and I suggest that Gaskell's use of plausibility illustrates it consistently throughout *North and South*.

Meredith and *The Egoist* take this point even one step further, I think. When we understand this author's fiction not as a form of "proto-modernism," but as an example of the larger, non-representative project of Victorian realism, I suggest we see him engaging in the unconventional "work [that] words do" to the point that it becomes a form of writerliness in the Barthesian sense.³⁷ In *The Egoist*, style prevents any passive, readerly reception of the conventions of realism. Meredith takes advantage of every inch of undetermined space he can find and makes us participants in the production of his novel's conventions of representation. I would argue that instead of simply experiencing the reality effect of *The Egoist*, we are forced to locate it over and over again amidst a sea of idiosyncratic stylistic choices. That recuperative critics have consistently read Meredith's novel out of the realistic tradition demonstrates just how tenacious the assumptions of representation continue to be for this genre. We would rather re-label an author – even a "mediocre" one – than give up on the familiar presumption that realism is ultimately about its blueprint – about representing "real life."

An oft-cited passage from *The Egoist* helps illustrate Meredith's writerliness. When Clara spies her eventual lover, Vernon Whitford, underneath a cherry tree, Meredith develops an elaborate description of her observations:

Coming within gaze of the stem, she beheld Vernon stretched at length, reading, she supposed; asleep, she discovered: his finger in the leaves of a book; and what book? She had a curiosity to know the title of the book he would read beneath these boughs . . . she turned her face to where the load of virginal blossom, whiter than summer–cloud on the sky, showered and drooped and clustered so thick as to claim colour and seem, like higher Alpine snows in noon-sunlight, a flush of white. From some deep to deeper heavens of white, her eyes perched and soared. Wonder lived in her. Happiness in the beauty of the tree pressed to supplant it, and was more mortal and narrower. Reflection came, contracting her vision and weighing her to earth. Her reflection was: ‘He must be good who loves to lie and sleep beneath the branches of this tree!’ She would rather have clung to her first impression: wonder so divine, so unbounded, was like soaring into homes of angel-crowded space, sweeping through folded and on to folded white fountain-bow of wings, in innumerable columns; but the thought of it was not recovery of it; she might as well have striven to be a child. (154-55)

This description is one of the more sophisticated examples of Meredith’s style in *The Egoist*, but that hasn’t kept critics from reading it as a straightforward, readerly passage. Donald Fanger summarizes the scene in his analysis of *The Egoist* with unproblematic concision: “the freshness of nature symbolizes the natural soundness of the recumbent Vernon” (326). Meredith’s style might extend and obfuscate the description of what Clara sees and feels when she finds

Vernon underneath a cherry tree, but a critic like Fanger doesn't argue that that elaboration pushes the reader's reception of the passage beyond convention and into the realm of self-conscious, writerly engagement.

I *would* argue that, however. While the style of this passage may not function outside the conventions of realism in a way that escapes representation and readerliness altogether, I'd suggest that Meredith's style is able to function *within* convention in a writerly way. The irregularities of his prose catalogue all the internal choices available to the author inside the traditions of realism, and that forces the reader to participate again and again in Meredith's non-representative and unconventional work. For example, the author describes that "the load of virginal blossom, whiter than summer-cloud on the sky, showered and drooped and clustered so thick as to claim colour and seem, like higher Alpine snows in noon-sunlight, a flush of white." Vernon is literally lying under a young cherry tree, bowed down by the weight of its very white flowers. And yet this literal picture is presented *as* and exposed *by* a pair of figurations, "summer-cloud" and "Alpine snows." Clara's empiric observation of color is framed by a set of similes. It is also syntactically reinforced with three different past participles: "showered," "drooped," and "clustered." Each descriptor gives the reader more literal information, in one sense, but the triplicate also draws attention to itself as a linguistic device. The less literal side of these stylistic choices actively involves the reader in the conventions of representation in this description, I would argue. They are the author's local choices, and they are packed so tightly that they engage the reader as an interpreter of the passage: the

blossoms are white, but the reader is asked to decide what kind of white blossom is signified by a sentence that uses two different similes and three different past participles.

The angel wings in Meredith's description also develop the writerly in the midst of the readerly. Clara's wonder is described as being "like soaring into homes of angel-crowded space, sweeping through folded and on to folded white fountain-bow of wings, in innumerable columns." Meredith is describing a feeling that his character experiences. He paints a material description of Clara's immaterial "wonder." However, within this representation, the author also makes several unconventional stylistic choices. Clara's wonder feels like "sweeping" both "*through* . . . and *on to* folded white fountain-bow of wings." We could imagine sweeping *through*, then *on to*; we could imagine sweeping *through* and *on to* at the same time; or we could imagine something else. The material picture doesn't simply stand still, but requires active interpretation. There is also a "folded fountain-bow." What *is* a fountain-bow, and into what arrangement does that put Meredith's wings? The image suggests some kind of curve, but leaves the rest to a reader's imagination. Why, too, is the fountain-bow folded? Perhaps that magnifies Clara's sense of wonder, gives it a kind of emotional richness or density. But a folded fountain-bow might also mean that Clara's wonder is restricted in some way, that it is tight, small, unopened. Within the picture Meredith paints of Clara's feeling, these choices force the reader to actively interpret the passage. Without exceeding the traditions of realism or escaping the passive, readerly reception of a picture of youthful Vernon lying underneath a

young cherry tree, Meredith's style generates a local writerliness. This writeliness may not make the author "proto-modern." But I would argue that it illustrates the sophistication of a genre that is still too often reduced to a matter of "mediocre" representation. *The Egoist* demonstrates that much of the non-representative project of Victorian realism is actually located in the local spaces between its conventions of representation, and that defining the genre without these cracks and crevices means mistaking a blueprint for the finished project.

Conversation and Detachment

There were as many rules about the spoken word as there were the written word in Victorian England. "The art of conversation" was, itself, a frequent topic of conversation in the 19th century. Its tenets were available in a plethora of volumes, including J.P. Mahaffay's *The Principles of the Art of Conversation*, as well as John Young's *A Guide to the Manners, Etiquette, and Deportment of the Most Refined Society*.

In *The Egoist*, almost all of Meredith's characters adhere strictly to these rules. Both Sir Willoughby Patterne – Meredith's prototypical gentleman – and Laetitia Dale – the woman who has idolized him since childhood – are described as well-mannered talkers. In a walk across the park early in the novel, Willoughby and Laetitia, along with Clara, discourse freely about "the beauty of various trees, birches, aspens, poplars, beeches, then in their new green" (165): "Miss Dale loved the aspen, Miss Middleton the beech, Sir Willoughby the birch, and pretty things were said by each in praise of the favoured object, particularly

by Miss Dale” (ibid). Willoughby then goes on to express satisfaction with Laetitia’s conversation in order to reaffirm the importance of “the art of dialogue” to his future bride. Clara “had not latterly been brilliant, not even adequate to the ordinary requirements of conversation,” and Willoughby is determined to tutor her (164). He offers an elucidating contrast for the benefit Clara’s comprehension:

[Willoughby:] ‘Nothing seems to teach [Vernon Whitford] the art of dialogue with ladies.’

[Clara:] ‘Are not gentleman shy when they see themselves outshone [by you]?’

‘He hasn’t it, my love: Vernon is deficient in the lady’s tongue.’

‘I respect him for that.’

‘Outshone, you say? I do not know of any shining – save to one, who lights me, path and person!’

The identity of the one [Clara herself] was conveyed to her in a bow and a soft pressure.

‘Not only has he not the lady’s tongue, which I hold to be a man’s proper

accomplishment,’ continued Willoughby, ‘he cannot turn his advantage to his account. . . Old Vernon is a scholar – and a fish.’ (166-67)

The Egoist clearly ironizes Willoughby’s good conversation in this passage.

Meredith’s “Comic Spirit”³⁸ deflates “the art of conversation” on multiple occasions, in fact, as it goes around taking the wind out of Victorian manners in

general. As George Woodcock has succinctly observed, Meredith's great project in *The Egoist* is an examination of the "delicate mechanisms by which social conventions affect individual men and women, shaping their outlooks and perverting their feelings" (11 *sic*). The novel makes no secret that it is out "to illuminate the pretensions of the most powerful class within the very citadel of security which its members have built out of their social conventions" (ibid 11, 11-12).

Despite its clear critical bent, however, Meredithian irony has had few devotees, even among the author's recuperative critics. In both the Prelude to *The Egoist* and the author's "Essay on Comedy," Meredith suggests that his Comic Spirit is far more complex than the exaggeration and deprecation of social satire, and more than a few critics have gone out of their way to squash Meredith's sense of accomplishment.³⁹ While I don't disagree that irony is perhaps the upper limit of the author's theoretical achievement, in what follows I would like to suggest that many of the author's individual representations of conversational etiquette actually succeed where his own broad theoretical position might falter. I put my attention on what characters do at the diegetic level of *The Egoist*, especially characters whose conversation turns into conversation *about* conversation. When talking correctly becomes a matter of finding ways to demonstrate that you are, in fact, adhering to the rules that govern "the art of conversation," I suggest that Meredith's "mediocre" characters experience "local," denaturalizing encounters with the language they are attempting to speak. Although I classify Meredith's characters as "mediocre" for the same reason I classify the novelist that way –

they obey the rules – I argue that, like Meredith, these characters’ use of conventional language often unmask the rules of the cultural game they are playing.

The “mediocre” conversationalist who first grabs the reader’s attention in *The Egoist* is Mrs Mountstuart, “a lady certain to say the remembered, if not the right, thing” (42). Mrs Mountstuart is a socialite who takes “the art of conversation” quite seriously, though her discourse also tends towards uncomfortable ambiguities, for which she repeatedly apologizes. She gives a disconcerting epithet to Clara after first meeting her. Mrs Mountstuart calls Willoughby’s fiancé “a dainty rogue in porcelain,” which Willoughby interrogates her about a few pages later (75):

‘Why rogue?’ he insisted with Mrs. Mountstuart.

‘I said – in porcelain,’ she replied.

‘Rogue perplexes me.’

‘She has the keenest sense of honor.’

‘I am sure she is a paragon of rectitude.’

[Mrs. Mountstuart:] ‘And still she may be a dainty rogue in porcelain.’

‘Are you judging by the mind or the person, ma’am?’

‘Both.’

‘And which is which?’

‘There’s no distinction.’

[Mrs. Mountstuart:] ‘ . . . She is a charming young woman, only she is one of that sort.’

‘Of what sort?’ Sir Willoughby asked, impatiently.

‘Rogues in porcelain.’

‘I am persuaded I shall never comprehend it.’

‘I cannot help you one bit further.’

‘The word rogue!’

‘It was dainty rogue.’

‘Brittle, would you say?’

‘I am quite unable to say.’

‘An innocent naughtiness?’

‘Prettily moulded in a delicate substance.’ (77-9)

Mrs Mountstuart is being a little “difficult” in her dialogue with Sir Willoughby. Her ambiguous epithet isn’t really that ambiguous. She is telling Willoughby that there is streak of something less than ladylike in his fiancé. But when he inquires if she means that Clara is “brittle,” Mrs Mountstuart claims she is “quite unable to say.” When Willoughby tries to simplify Mrs Mountstuart’s language by suggesting that Clara has an “innocent naughtiness,” she immediately metaphorizes his concreter explanation: if “innocent naughtiness” is Clara’s problem, it is innocent naughtiness “Prettily moulded in a delicate substance.” While the crux of their conversation is quite straightforward, Mrs Mountstuart and Willoughby speak in arch and insinuating ways, as if “dainty rogue in porcelain”

were an elaborate and sophisticated description of Clara. Mrs Mountstuart is needling Willoughby, and he's telling her to stop. But both characters speak as if their conversation were more substantial.

What the "difficulty" of this conversation means is that while, at one level, Mrs Mountstuart and Willoughby are simply discussing Clara's independent streak, at another they are playing with rules of "the art of conversation." Mrs Mountstuart politely answers all of Willoughby's questions, for example, but she does so by *not* answering them. She offers clarifications that don't really clarify anything. Her vocabulary is also suitably simple, but somehow not entirely clear. The noun "rogue" is common in the period, but it usually refers to a dishonest or unprincipled man. Does Mrs Mountstuart mean to say that there is something slightly masculine about Clara? There's nothing esoteric about the adjective "dainty" either. It's a firmly feminine adjective in the 19th-century. But how does the combination "dainty rogue" characterize Willoughby's fiancé? While these questions are not even central to Mrs Mountstuart's point about Clara, the gendered connotations of the vocabulary she has chosen slowly turn her epithet into an exchange about epithets. She's speaking with Willoughby about a rebelliousness that she has observed in his fiancé, but her conversation also draws attention to the conventions of language being used.

The back and forth of this exchange also quickly becomes *about* the back and forth of a dialogue. Mrs Mounstuart directs the conversation, but like all good conversationalists, she gives her interlocutor equal space. Willoughby is given an opportunity to parry every thrust, closely matching Mrs Mountstuart

syllable for syllable. This back and forth is ostensibly a way to come to terms with Mrs Mountstuart's description of Clara. But since the actual point about Clara is quite clear already, the back and forth between Willoughby and Mrs Mountstuart really becomes about the rule of sharing equal space. The characters perform this rule for one another, generating language in equal measure well after the substance of the conversation has been exhausted.

In order to have a conversation about "the art of conversation" in this way, I would argue that Mrs Mountstuart and Willoughby have to be exercising a modicum of insight and agency. They take up conventions *as* conventions, and I'd argue that they can only do that by using some of the space between the rules that define their conversation. When Mrs Mountstuart and Willoughby share conversational space, for example, they reformulate the same point over and over again instead of using dialogue to advance the conversation. They also both speak clearly and avoid lexical obscurations, but their simple words and phrases create odd interpretive digressions: what *are* the gendered connotations of a phrase like "dainty rogue"? Neither Mrs Mountstuart and Willoughby completely escape "the art of conversation," but they discover and take advantage of the space between its rules, which means they exhibit a level of local linguistic self-awareness and detachment. Both characters are "mediocre," but they also demonstrate a cognizance of the rules that becomes an opportunity to speak a little less conventionally.

Importantly, what these characters do in this conversation is much more than irony. Meredith may satirize "the art of conversation" in this passage, but his

characters perform individuated acts of articulation. Scenes like the one between Sir Willoughby and Mrs Mountstuart have often been taken for granted by Meredith's critics, who rush by *The Egoist's* obvious ironic attacks on Victorian manners in order to tackle what seem like more critical issues, the most pressing of which has always been the author's style. Even when Meredith's conversationalists have received some coverage in passing, the emphasis has been their *author's* critique of Victorian manners. His characters are consistently described as being trapped in their social and cultural circumstances. Roberts, in his biographical sketch of the novelist, observes that Meredith's own "snobbishly" affected way with words can be explained by his lower-middle class upbringing as the son of a tailor: "[R]eal or apparent snobbery may be a manifestation of intense awareness of linguistic and other codes on the part of a person of insecure or borderline status in a stratified society" (9). This "intense awareness" is transferred to the author's style, but the codes become an inescapable condition for the characters of *The Egoist*. Fanger also thinks through the novelist's style in terms of its conversational roots: "Meredith's chief compulsion was what he would have called "loquency": he could not stop talking, in company or in his books (which are all tours de force of a brilliant talker), even long enough to hear himself. . . . Surfeit is the emblem of Meredith's fiction" (327). This "loquency" isn't connected to the way men and women speak in Meredith's novels, but is assessed by Fanger as an element of Meredith's own "concern with the forces, personal and social, which tend to deny to individuals

the freedom to develop that unity of instinct and native reason which Meredith saw as man's highest goal" (327).

By thinking more locally about what a novel like *The Egoist* represents at the diegetic level, however, I would argue that we discover a rich engagement with the forces operating on Meredith's characters – one that is actually far more intricate than anything the author is able to articulate at the extra-diegetic level. We see characters develop cultural self-understanding *within* the conventions that define the spoken word, and I would suggest that we also see them discovering many small, pragmatic steps that can be taken to gradually alter the everyday.

No one illustrates this better than Clara Middleton, who is the most distressing conversationalist in *The Egoist*. Clara has every reason to escape convention. She spends the entire novel looking for the right words to break her engagement to Willoughby Patterne. But this “middling” character (her maiden name reminds us that she is one) struggles for hundreds of pages in pursuit of enough detachment to wade her way out of Willoughby's stifling conventionality. Clara can't find the language that will allow her to turn her fledgling fits of insights into a comprehensive act of dissociation, and a big part of the problem is that she is unable to surrender her own adherence to the standards of Patterne Hall. Like everyone else in the novel, Clara employs “the art of conversation,” and she takes her own “difficulty” as a sign that the action she is moving towards – jilting Willoughby – is not only socially unacceptable, but is actually unachievable.

Clara's increasing struggles with language are noted frequently by other characters in *The Egoist*. Vernon's pupil, Crossjay, remarks to his tutor mid-way through the novel that, unlike Laetitia Dale, who "when she says a thing, there it is clear . . . Miss Middleton has a lot of meanings" (365). Mrs Mountstuart, during a later conversation the lady strikes up in order to convince Miss Middleton to go through with her engagement, can't make heads or tails of Clara's language. She attempts to repeat the nature of Clara's insight back to her at one point: "And *gradually* you *suddenly* discovered, since you came here, that you did not intend [to marry Willoughby], if you could find a means to avoid it" (429). Clara tries to elucidate her meaning with a simile, but Mrs Mountstuart – very well aware of the hazards of figurative language – cuts her off: "Defer the simile . . . if you hit on a clever one, you will never get the better of it . . ." (ibid).

One of the first full-blown attempts Clara makes to express herself is with Laetitia Dale. At this early stage, however, all she can do is criticize herself in lieu of criticizing Willoughby:

'I will subscribe to any eulogy of [Willoughby],' said Clara, with a penetrating thought as to the possibility of a lady experienced in him like Laetitia taking him for noble. 'He has a noble air. I say it sincerely, that your appreciation of him proves his nobility.' Her feeling of opposition to Sir Willoughby pushed her to this extravagance, gravely perplexing Laetitia. 'And it is,' added Clara, as if to support what she had said, "a withering rebuke to me; I know him less, at least have not had so long an experience of him.'

Laetitia pondered on an obscurity in these words which would have accused her thick intelligence but for a glimmer it threw on another most obscure communication. She feared it might be, strange though it seemed, jealousy, a shade of jealousy affecting Miss Middleton, as had been vaguely intimated by Sir Willoughby when they were waiting in the hall. (202)

Clara can't get herself understood by Laetitia, who mistakes the complexity of Clara's feelings for something much simpler, "jealousy." Even more exasperating for Clara is that in the midst of her own "penetrating thought" about the nature of Willoughby's "nobility" she is "pushed" into eulogizing him. The criticism behind her praise is little more than "an obscurity" to Laetitia as Clara works within the limits of polite conversation.⁴⁰

This internal struggle develops over time and comes to a head in Chapter 41, when Clara is confronted for the last time by Sir Willoughby and her father. After having her explanations for wanting the engagement broken off dismissed as "Chatter! Chatter!" the narrator steps in to illustrate the nature of Clara's distress (490):

Language to express her peculiar repulsion eluded her. She formed the words, and perceived that they would not stand to bear a breath from her father. She perceived too that Willoughby was as ready with his agony of supplication as she with hers. If she had tears for a resource, he had gestures quite as eloquent; and a cry of her loathing of the union would fetch a counter-vailing torrent of the man's love. – What could she say? he

is an Egoist? The epithet has not meaning in such a scene. *Invent!* shrieked the hundred-voiced instinct of dislike within her, and alone with her father, alone with Willoughby, she could have invented some equivalent, to do her heart justice for the injury it sustained in her being unable to name the true immense objection; but the pair in presence paralyzed her. She dramatized them each springing forward by turns, with crushing rejoinders. The activity of her mind revealed in giving them a tongue, but would not do it for herself. (493-94)

Clara's ability to imagine the counter arguments of her father and fiancé stem from her familiarity with the language they have been using against her. Willoughby has declared that she is suffering from "jealousy" of Laetitia, and her father has explained several times that she is simply in the midst of a "lovers' quarrel." Her own explanation – Egoism – never makes its way into conversation, however, even though she has the word at the ready. Clara is "unable to name the true immense objection" not because it is unnamable, but because she is afraid to offer the pair an unconventional expression when their own arguments ring with the veracity of convention. Clara's declarations throughout *The Egoist* that she cannot speak become an escalating protest against her marriage, one that becomes increasingly self-conscious. The character has repeated encounters with the rules of speech, which means she has repeated moments of acknowledgement that there are things she just can't get said using "the art of conversation." As Clara's words become more and more

incomprehensible to those around her, her final strategy is to simply say nothing at all.

Notably, these scenes lack the heavy dose of irony that is usually thought to be the mainstay of Meredith's critique of Victorian sociality. There is nothing satiric about the narrator's treatment of Clara. To the contrary, he goes to great pains to illustrate the gravity of the character's ongoing encounters with language. The "activity of [Clara's] mind" is an un-ironized struggle about how Meredith's protagonist will come to say what she is trying to say – how she can break with convention while still operating within its limits.

I would argue, therefore, that Clara's experience with language is a series of "local" moments that are not only genuinely detached like those of other characters in *The Egoist*, but that develop over time into a set of pragmatic strategies for affecting convention. Clara never finds the words to break off her engagement. But failing to find the words creates many de-familiarizing moments that become an intensifying critique of the words and phrases that define her circumstances. She discovers more and more non-determined space between words like "jealousy," "lovers' quarrel," "love," and "marriage." Clara's struggle to detach herself from these familiar words becomes a 600-page odyssey of dissociation, one in which she slowly obscures and then outright abandons everyday language. Her odyssey may be one of "local" moments that quickly dissolve back into what a critic like Anderson would call "the sociological grid" (*The Way We Argue Now* 6). It isn't as if Clara speaks with "difficulty" for the entire novel in a way that escapes every form of linguistic and social convention.

In fact, Clara's story closes in a marriage to Vernon, which has been a troublingly normative ending for many of Meredith's recuperative critics. However, each time Clara confronts new pieces of her own "mediocre" self-expression and realizes the necessity of "inventing" the language she needs, the character briefly recognizes that her own "difficult" conversation is a way of affecting the conventionality she is encompassed by. Over time, Clara refuses more and more often to engage in conventional conversations about her fiancé and impending marriage.

If Clara is ultimately an example of a "mediocre" individual, then, I would argue that her use of language also slowly evolves into a larger break *within* cultural convention, one that is eventually crystalized in her separation from Willoughby. Like Meredith, Clara may be a conspicuously conventional figure. But I would argue that from moment to moment this "mediocre" character also proves to be a pragmatic and self-authored collection of internal choices, choices that are able to evolve into forms of cultural self-awareness and everyday insight.

I conclude Chapters 1 and 2 by highlighting specific contributions that the study of "mediocrity" can make to the rationalist tradition. In Chapter 1, I use Lucy Morris in Trollope's *The Eustace Diamonds* to demonstrate how the notion of "local" detachment helps rationalism push back on the determinism of both poststructuralism and multiculturalism. While theories of detachment like Anderson's focus on rarified positions that "cultivate" rational distance in *opposition* to the forces of social determination, my own theory suggests that the

mechanics of social form can also *facilitate* passing moments of insight. These “local” moments make rational distance a possibility even for highly conventional characters like Lucy, whom poststructuralists and multiculturalists might assume to be entirely determined by their social positioning. In Chapter 2, I use Mr. Bell in Gaskell’s *North and South* as a solution to the charges of elitism that continue to hamper the rationalist tradition. If, as Anderson notes in *The Way We Argue Now*, “Recent scholarly trends have tended to treat ideals of critical detachment as illusory, elitist, and dangerous,” I suggest that Mr. Bell is an example of “local” detachment that is anything but (7). This “mediocre” character experiences agency and insight as the result of his own awkward efforts to be both the Northern tradesman and the Southern gentleman. He could hardly be accused of trying to attain an exclusive or discriminatory perspective that “disregard[s] . . . the experience of differently situated, and differently enfranchised, social groups” (ibid). At the end this chapter, I would like to offer a final contribution that a study of “mediocrity” can make to the rationalist tradition. This time, however, rather than illustrating a particular benefit of theorizing in terms of “local” detachment, I would like to use the series of unlikely events that conclude *The Egoist* in order to critique an assumption that limits most current rationalist thought: the conflation of detachment and articulateness.

After 600 pages, Clara is finally able to break off her engagement because of a chain of events that are triggered by a character named Crossjay, a young relative and beneficiary of Sir Willoughby’s. Willoughby has had Crossjay tutored by Vernon in order to train him as a gentleman, but it becomes clear early

on in *The Egoist* that Crossjay is not the gentlemanly type. His limitations make Crossjay an unlikely lynchpin for the intricate plot that will finally allow Clara to break from Willoughby, but Meredith puts him at the center of the action.

Clara has already attempted a fairly dramatic escape from Patterne Hall midway through *The Egoist*, but she fails and returns to her fiancé's side. Unnerved by the close call, Willoughby begins to worry that Clara might actually jilt him. In order to avoid that kind of embarrassment (which he has suffered once before in the opening pages of *The Egoist*), Willoughby decides to hedge his bets and proposes to Laetitia late one night in his drawing-room. As luck would have it, Crossjay is sleeping on an ottoman in the drawing-room covered by a blanket. He overhears Willoughby's proposal, which Laetitia refuses. Crossjay's knowledge of this deceitfulness bothers him greatly. The next day, his distress is observed by a guest of the house, Dr Corney. Dr Corney then mentions Crossjay's odd behavior to another guest, Colonel De Cray, who, in a separate conversation with Crossjay, is able to divine what happened late at night in the drawing-room. Colonel De Cray then hints to Clara that Willoughby has secretly proposed to Laetitia. Finally, Clara alludes to the late-night proposal in front of Willoughby and her father. Instead of openly admitting that he has betrayed Clara, Willoughby decides to release her from her engagement. He puts a condition on her release and says she must marry Vernon. Fortunately, Clara is already in love with Vernon, unbeknownst to Willoughby. She happily assents to his term, and the Egoist is forced to admit defeat.

The complexity of this series of events has puzzled and disappointed many of Meredith's critics. Clara's escape from Willoughby is the central idea around which the plot of *The Egoist* turns. Many readers expect to find a climactic speech from Clara at the end of the novel, one in which she finally articulates all the evils of Egoism and breaks off her engagement. Instead, she is freed from her betrothed by what feels like a technicality. Rather than a dramatic monologue, there is a long, anti-climactic game of telephone played by characters who learn of Willoughby's treachery from a series of subtle hints and inferences. Clara doesn't even need to break the rules in the end. She is simply put in a position to use the rules against her fiancé.

The anti-climax of Meredith's denouement is dictated by the nature of Crossjay's original disclosure to Colonel De Cray. Meredith puts his least articulate character in charge of the plot at this pivotal point, which means there is little chance that Willoughby's treachery is ever going to be clearly and openly declared. In fact, over the course of his lengthy conversation with the Colonel, Crossjay hardly says anything at all. It is up to De Cray to make sure that Crossjay gets his own point across:

[Crossjay:] 'I want to talk to Mr Whitford so much,' he said.

[Colonel De Cray:] 'Something to tell him?'

'I don't know what to do: I don't understand it!' The secret wriggled to his mouth. He swallowed it down. 'Yes, I want to talk to Mr Whitford.'

'He's another of Miss Middleton's friends.'

‘I know he is. He’s true steel.’

‘We’re all her friends, Crossjay. . . . How long had you been in the house last night before you ran into me?’

‘I don’t know, sir; I fell asleep for some time, and then I woke . . .’

‘Where did you find yourself?’

‘I was in the drawing-room.’

. . . .

‘I doubt whether Miss Middleton is particularly happy,’ remarked the colonel. ‘Why? Why, you upset her, you know, now and then.’

The boy swelled. ‘I’d do . . . I’d go . . . I wouldn’t have her unhappy . . . It’s that! That’s it! And I don’t know what I ought to do. I wish I could see Mr Whitford.’

. . . .

‘A close shave, was it?’

‘I was under a covering of something silk.’

‘He woke you?’

‘I suppose he did. I heard him.’

‘Talking?’

‘He was talking.’

‘What! Talking to himself?’

‘No.’

The secret threatened Crossjay to be out or suffocate him.

. . . .

[Crossjay:] ‘I heard a lot before I knew what it was. There was poetry!’

‘Still, Crossjay, it was important – was it?’

The boy swelled again, and the colonel asked him, ‘Does Miss Dale know of your having played listener?’

‘She!’ said Crossjay. ‘Oh, I couldn’t tell *her*.’

He breathed thick; then came a threat of tears. ‘She wouldn’t do anything to hurt Miss Middleton. I’m sure of that. It wasn’t her fault.

She – There goes Mr Whitford!’ Crossjay bounded away. (507 – 09)

From this conversation, Colonel De Cray is able to divine that Willoughby has secretly proposed to Laetitia. The Colonel knows that Crossjay admires both Clara and Laetitia. He knows that Crossjay has overheard Willoughby and Laetitia talking late one night. And he knows that Crossjay knows something that would upset Clara, something he wants to talk with Vernon about. But Crossjay never actually says that Willoughby has proposed to Laetitia – which is a fairly large logical jump. How does Colonel De Cray figure it out?

I’d suggest that the Colonel is able to understand Crossjay because he turns the boy’s inarticulateness into a conversation *about* inarticulateness. Colonel De Cray isn’t simply piecing together an untold story and reading between the lines. Crossjay isn’t capable of dropping hints in that way. Instead, the Colonel divines Crossjay’s secret by taking advantage of the fact that the character can’t say what he is trying to say. Crossjay is a devoted disciple of Willoughby’s. He doesn’t have the language to articulate a fault in the Lord of

Patterne Hall. The Colonel picks up on this convention-bound speechlessness, and without breaking any of the rules that define good conversation, he maneuvers in the spaces between them, interpreting the boy's own "mediocre" allegiance to "the art of conversation."

For example, Crossjay politely answers all of the Colonel's questions. He refuses to say anything pejorative about Willoughby. But, guided by De Cray, the character's strict accordance to this rule quickly becomes *about* answering questions politely. The Colonel doesn't force Crossjay to say what Willoughby has done. But by using a series of questions about Crossjay's admiration for Clara and Laetitia as a counterpoint to Willoughby's behavior, he is able to make clear to himself that the Lord of Patterne Hall has misbehaved. Colonel De Cray is also polite enough never to ask directly about what Crossjay has heard or how he has heard it. Instead, he creates openings in the conversation for Crossjay to provide information indirectly. The Colonel gets Crossjay to confirm that it was "a close shave" – not that he was listening to a private conversation. He asks if Crossjay heard Willoughby talking to himself so that the boy can affirm that he was talking with someone else. Being indirect becomes *about* being indirect. The Colonel isn't just politely avoiding frankness, but is using indirection as a mechanism to allow Crossjay to provide details about the impolite exchange he overheard. This kind of conversation passes from one character to another for the next hundred pages, from Crossjay to Dr Corney, from Dr Corney to Colonel De Cray, from Colonel De Cray to Clara, and from Clara to Willoughby and Clara's father. Without ever naming Willoughby's misdeed or speaking rudely,

characters use the rules that define “the art of conversation” in a way that turns inarticulateness into a game of insight and innuendo.

This kind of insight is very different from the types of rational detachment that are the subject of a study like Anderson’s in *The Powers of Distance*.

Anderson theorizes detachment in a way that causes her to examine some of the most articulate writers and intellectuals in the 19th century. In search of definitive acts of “cultivation” and “aspiration,” she uses George Eliot as a theoretical springboard in her Introduction, and she goes on to study writers such as John Stuart Mill and Oscar Wilde. This selection of noted thinkers allows Anderson to present a convincing case for rationalist approaches to literary and cultural criticism. But I would suggest that it also means that articulateness is assumed to be a basic requirement for subjective agency. Someone has to be speaking or writing in a deliberate and compelling way before anyone can achieve a social or cultural insight.

Anderson’s conflation has little consequence in relation to her own theory of detachment. Many of the greatest thinkers are known for being great because they produced great bodies of work that are not only insightful, but facilitate the insights of others. However, I’d suggest that a character like Colonel De Cray is a vital reminder for rationalist critics that articulateness and detachment are distinct. De Cray’s insight is pulled out of a paucity of language. Crossjay’s conversation has almost no substance, and the Colonel doesn’t step in and say anything substantive himself. Instead, De Cray maneuvers and interprets Crossjay’s speechlessness, and then he lets Clara maneuver and interpret his own

speechlessness, and so on until the novel concludes. This unspoken game of telephone reminds us, I think, that language is not the same thing as understanding – and I would argue that it proves that experiences of detachment are not limited to situations where someone is able to find the right words.

“Mediocre” characters can’t facilitate a decisive climax in a novel like *The Egoist*. But they can generate a series of small, unspoken moments that eventually deliver the same outcome. I think this demonstrates that without a better appreciation of “mediocrity” and “local” detachment, rationalist criticism will continue overlooking many experiences that are, in fact, rationally detached. Small moments of insight are less exciting than great leaps of intellect and well-articulated arguments. But without taking everyday awareness into consideration, we will continue underestimating the cumulative effects of all the less conspicuous forms of insight that enrich most normal lives. That means we will continue discounting a great deal of human experience and will limit or own understanding of how people and cultures understand themselves.

Coda: Even More Mediocrity

Part of the project of this dissertation has been to illustrate the plurality of mediocrity. Trollope, Gaskell, and Meredith are all Victorian realists. They all write “mediocre” novels in which “mediocre” characters live “mediocre” lives. But by defining these novelists’ relationship with literary and social form a little differently in each chapter – as a little bit of excess, or a variation in a pattern, or a stylistic experiment within a blueprint – I hope I have been able to convincingly illustrate that “mediocrity” is critical and detached in a variety of different ways. Like genius, expertise, or erudition, “mediocrity” takes on a range of different modes of expression. In this vein, I’d like to conclude this dissertation by suggesting two other places we might go looking for “local” forms of agency and insight.

The first of these spaces are the novels of Victorian authors we don’t usually think of as mediocre: George Eliot, Charles Dickens, Thomas Hardy, etc. Calling Trollope or Meredith “mediocre” is one thing. Calling out the “mediocrity” of more canonical authors is another. But, for example, how is *Middlemarch* “mediocre”? How is both Dorothea and Lydgate’s eventual adherence to social and cultural convention an example not only of compromise and thwarted ambition, but of “local” insight generated by the lived experience of society and culture? How might we frame Eliot’s heavy-handed narrator as “mediocre,” too – as both adamantly omniscient and instructive, but also self-ironizing and critical? The early works of canonical authors also seem primed for this kind of analysis. How might we expand the conceptualization of

“mediocrity” that I have offered in this dissertation with an analysis of *The Pickwick Papers* or *Under the Greenwood Tree*? By looking more thoroughly at the relationship between canonicity and “mediocrity,” I suggest Victorianists could develop a fascinating discourse that allowed the Trollopes, Gaskells, and Merediths of the world to teach us something about the Eliots, Dickenses, and Hardys.

The second space I would suggest applying a theory of “mediocrity” and “local” detachment is the 20th century, with British Modernism. “High modernism” is often defined by its iconoclasm and formal experimentation. But I’d suggest that an analysis of the conventions that this period just couldn’t leave behind could be a very interesting way to turn modernism on its head. What is “mediocre” about *Ulysses*, for instance? For all Joyce’s formal and stylistic experimentation, what did he feel that he had to keep about the 19th-century novel – and how did he feel that he had to keep it in the midst of so much literary abnormality? How and why are character and place and narrator ineluctable, and how does “mediocrity” help us rethink modernism’s relationship with the conventions of representation that it was determined to problematize? How might we define “mediocre” modernism in ways that are both similar to and different from the approach I have taken with Victorian realism?

While “mediocrity” is, I think, a concept that could be expanded in several different directions, I’d suggest these two places as next steps for anyone interested in arguing about detachment, “local” or otherwise. The concepts I have suggested here could not only be successfully applied to canonical examples of

Victorian realism and to British Modernism, I think, but in their application I hope that these ideas would be further revised, expanded upon, and made to do even more interesting critical work.

Notes

Introduction

¹ In fact, Anderson's essay "Trollope's Modernity" begins to address these very questions. As I demonstrate in my first chapter, however, the arguments of "Trollope's Modernity" are essentially an extended application of Anderson's original theorizing, not a revision or addendum. The arguments I present in this dissertation are not just an application of the theorizing presented in *The Powers of Distance*, but are a supplement for and critique of that theorizing.

Chapter 1

² Although, again, Anderson's arguments in *The Way We Argue Now* are about the liberal subject in the broadest sense, her study of the "governing assumptions and styles of argumentation that characterize . . . 'theory' across [the] humanities and social science[s]" necessarily spends the bulk of its time considering rarified forms of discourse (ibid). The "We" in *The Way We Argue Now* is the academy, and Anderson's concern is with how the arguments "We" have with one another have been limited by a limited understanding of the rationalist tradition.

³ In the former, Eleanor Bold "persistently questions the idea of an unquestioned ethos" when she feels compelled to defend the outsider, Mr. Slope (521). And in the latter, Mr. Brehgert – though clearly an example of an "all too palpably embodied Jewishness" – represents "the possibilities of a communicative practice that at once disarms prejudice and privileges the principles of autonomy and respect" (528).

⁴ The evidence I use to illustrate this point – like the evidence I collect in the service of my broader social and cultural claim – is a collection of “mediocre” novelists. Instead of examining writers who, in the midst of achieving an absorbing reality-effect, also energetically examine the formal limitations of the genre, I consider normal novelists like Trollope whom we notice following the rules of realistic representation. Whether they be particularly invested in an ethnographic project, are concerned with skillfully upholding the formal dimensions of the genre, or are seemingly incapable of effectively challenging the aesthetic status quo, these novelists do not “aspire” successfully to any new aesthetic heights. I argue, however, that the “mediocrity” of their realism also fills their novels with spaces of generic insight and invention.

⁵ There are many narratorial interruptions worth citing here. Among Trollope’s 47 novels and several collections of short stories there are literally hundreds of examples of this author breaking into his own realism. One of the most remarkable comes in the first paragraph of the final chapter of *Ayala’s Angel*:

Now we have come to our last chapter, and it may be doubted whether any reader, —unless he be some one specially gifted with a genius for statistics,—will have perceived how very many people have been made happy by matrimony. If marriage be the proper ending for a novel,—the only ending, as this writer takes it to be, which is not discordant,—surely no tale was ever so properly ended, or with so full a concord, as this one. Infinite trouble has been taken not only in arranging

these marriages but in joining like to like,—so that, if not happiness, at any rate sympathetic unhappiness, might be produced. (624)

⁶ There are other reasons for Trollope’s “mediocre” reputation. The novelist has been accused of being a superficial storyteller and a writer more concerned with quantity than quality. In focusing my own discussion around Trollope’s “mediocre” narrator, I don’t mean to ignore these other qualities, which certainly contributed to the valuation of the author’s narrative fiction in the 19th century and continue to do so today. I discuss Trollope’s omniscient narrator exclusively, however, in order to tackle the novelist’s relationship with genre. Trollope’s generic normativity is part of a greater conversation, but I do not attempt to make it stand in for that entire conversation.

⁷ The most infamous reference Trollope makes to himself as a “mechanical genius” occurs in a letter to George Smith concerning the manuscript that would eventually become *The Last Chronicle of Barset*. Smith had written to Trollope asking if he could expand the usual 20 numbers for part publication into 30:

It would not be practicable to divide 20 numbers into 30 equal parts, unless the work be specially done with this intent. I commonly divide a number of 32 pages (such as the numbers of ‘Orley Farm’) into 4 chapters each. If you wish the work to be so arranged as to run either to 20 or 30 numbers, I must work each of the 20 numbers by 6 chapters, taking care that the chapters run so equally, two and two, as to make each four into one equal part or each 6 into one equal part. There will be some trouble in this, but having a mechanical mind I think I can do it. . . . you

will also understand that if your mind be made up either to 30 or to 20,
you need not put my mechanical genius to work. (291-92)

The math here is almost overwhelming, which means the joke is an explicit one:
Trollope's "mechanical genius" is clearly over-performed in the letter.

⁸ Trollope himself made no bones about his enjoyment of the realistic status quo. He famously compares himself to a shoemaker in his *Autobiography*, and he goes on at length at several different moments in the text about his undoubted lack of genius: "I am ready to admit the great variations in brain power which are exhibited by the products of different men, and am not disposed to rank my own very high" (121); "My novels, whether good or bad, have been as good as I could make them" (122). Besides a few "experimental" short stories and one quick venture into science fiction (*The Fixed Period*), Trollope's oeuvre is squarely invested in the realistic tradition. However, even if Trollope was not concerned with stretching or challenging the aesthetic parameters of his day – was content (in D.A. Miller's words) to think, "'Life is like this,' and 'Novels are like this, too'" (108) – I want to underscore that that lack of concern doesn't preclude the possibility of genuine detachment surfacing in Trollope's "highly conventional" fiction. In fact, I'd like to emphasize that if an author can be a "highly conventional" realistic "mechanic" – though he may not have an exceptional relationship with all the parts that he's working with – he does inevitably get a sense of them as parts of a realistic machine. And even the best of machines operated by the happiest of laborers encounter, at some point, the structures of the products they produce.

⁹ Trollope breaks down the distinction between realism and sensationalism

himself in his *Autobiography*. He uses Wilkie Collins in order to do so:

Among English novels of the present day, and among English novelist, a great division is made. There are sensational novels and anti-sensational, sensational novelists and anti-sensational; sensational readers and anti-sensational. The novelists who are considered to be anti-sensational are generally called realistic. I am realistic. My friend Wilkie Collins is generally supposed to be sensational. . . All this is, I think, a mistake,—which mistake arises from the inability of the imperfect artist to be at the same time realistic and sensational. A good novel should be both, and both in the highest degree. If a novel fail in either, there is a failure in Art.
(226-27)

¹⁰ In the early 20th century, the critic Henry James Wye Milley, in a now-ancient but still quite influential article, characterized anything that might strike us as out-of-the-ordinary for Trollope in *The Eustace Diamonds* as a piece of a generic parody:

[Lizzie's] story [becomes], *in part*, a novel of detection somewhat in the manner of Wilkie Collins. But with this difference: in *The Moonstone* the detective element is treated with high seriousness; in *The Eustace Diamonds* it is treated as low comedy. Trollope is here, I suggest, consciously satirizing Collins's method as employed in *The Moonstone*.
(656)

In Milley's analysis, satirizing "Collins's method" includes ridiculing the artifices of sensational secrecy with a narrator who is more omniscient than ever. This parodic apology for the state of *The Eustace Diamonds* was reinforced by later critics. Walter Kendrick, for instance, attempts to remind us in relation to this particular text that "Trollope's fictional world" is always an extension of "the real world" (139). He explains, in an article subtitled "The Truth of Trollope's Fiction," that the many lies told by Lizzie Eustace on her trip up the social ladder are in fact "Trollope's attempt to represent realistically the opposite of realism, to appropriate and condemn a way of using language which is inimical to that of the Trollopien novel" (137). The generic "goal of [Trollope's realistic] expression, unlike [Lizzie's]," Kendrick explains, "is the conveyance of truth, not the achievement of some ulterior aim" (140-41).

¹¹ We also don't know, in the midst of our privileged information about Lizzie's role in the two robberies, if the somewhat mysterious man who helped her transport the Eustace diamonds to the Carlisle Inn, Lord George de Bruce Carruthers, is or isn't a part of the thwarted heist. Lizzie's newest and most inscrutable acquaintances is on the scene when the diamonds are originally "stolen," but our narrator doesn't clear up for a dozen chapters whether this character is a part of the plot or is simply a red herring.

¹² George Levine has observed that both omniscient narration and free indirect discourse – far from being casual or incidental components of 19th-century realism – are in fact inventions intrinsic to the genre. Both narratorial practices help establish the "artless" authenticity of realistic representation. Though

omniscient narration in particular “do[es] not disguise the fact of the presence of a narrator . . . in realism . . . [the] openness about the fact of the presence of a narrator makes a narration more ‘true’” (19). This “truthfulness” is always underpinned by a sense of omniscient narration as a device, however. Victorian realists “worry not at all that the efforts at illusion will be undercut by overt exposures of the devices by which the illusion is being created” because their devices are understood as devices (ibid). Readers aren’t asked to forget a “chronicler” like Trollope’s or to forget that that chronicler is telling his tale *as a* tale from some kind of vantage point.

¹³ See the fourth chapter of Miller’s *The Novel and the Police*: “The Novel as Usual: Trollope’s *Barchester Towers*.”

¹⁴ Trollope makes the potential comparison between *The Eustace Diamonds* and *Vanity Fair* explicit in the opening paragraph of Chapter III: “Although the first two chapters of this new history have been devoted to the fortunes and personal attributes of Lady Eustace, the historian begs his reader not to believe that that opulent and aristocratic Becky Sharp is to assume the dignity of heroine in the forthcoming pages” (I: 19). The following paragraph continues in this vein, explaining that – *a la* Amelia Osborne (née Sedley) – the other female lead in Trollope’s novel, Lucy Morris, will also not be put forward as any kind of heroine. That Lizzie and Lucy are not exact matches for Becky and Amelia is apparent enough, though both critics and general audiences have been particularly attached to the former comparison.

¹⁵ Both the Penguin and Oxford World Classics editions of *The Eustace Diamonds* note that Trollope's choice of "Queen Mab" is meant to underscore the cultural incompetence of Lady Eustace, who is not only unable to dissect this abstract poem, but seems oblivious to Shelley's reputation as a revolutionary and radical. As Hall notes in his *Biography* of Trollope, the novelist was a great admirer of poetry and seems to have read Shelley in his final years (139). Not a revolutionary himself by any means, however, it is likely that Trollope chose "Queen Mab" in order to gently satirize the poet's revolutionary utopianism – a concept his steady political pragmatism was always ready to critique. By the middle of the 19th century, "Queen Mab" had been popularized among the working classes, to whom it spoke as a progressivist text. The poem was well known by the late 1860s when *The Eustace Diamonds* was being serialized, and Trollope's use of it would have registered with many of his readers in the wake of the Chartists movement. It would be reductive to too closely read Lizzie as a figure of naïvely misguided socioeconomic insurrection, one that was being unambiguously satirized by Trollope. She does misinterpret this revolutionary poem. That being said, Trollope seems to synchronize Lizzie's naïve engagement with the poem and what he saw as the over-simplicity of revolutionary change.

¹⁶ Ruth apRoberts, in her influential work, *The Moral Trollope*, was one of the first to point to Trollope's multiperspectivalism as a form of moral relativism:

The ethical ends of Trollope's art appear to be best served by his situation-structure. His concern is always moral, and he is always recommending, by means of his cases, a more flexible morality. His

stance is that of what we now call Situation Ethics, and I propose that he has a corresponding Situation Aesthetics. His ethics and his aesthetics, that is, are functions of each other, both turning on casuistry. The art of it makes us see the uniqueness of character in circumstances, and the end of it is moral perspective. (52)

As a critical insight, moral relativism has since gone out of fashion. (See Anderson's "Trollope's Modernity.") However, thinking about how Lizzie Eustace is a "character in circumstances" instead of an uncomplicated moral vacuum still seems to be efficacious because it is a critical assertion that can redirect our reading of *The Eustace Diamonds* away from the weight of lying and ethics and towards the more lighted-hearted – and yet somehow more critical – issues of social form.

¹⁷ Trollope's own experience with Victorian manners seems to have prompted a sense of detachment from what "the world" called gentlemanly in the 19th century. Although we might not expect it from so "conventional" a figure, this novelist of manners was no priggish sophisticate himself. In fact, despite his evidently civilized and civilizing novels, he was legendarily bad-mannered. As John Hall illustrates in his landmark biography of the novelist, there were "numerous contemporary accounts of Trollope's" unapologetically pugnacious "social behavior" (440):

A man with worse or more offensive manners than Trollope I have rarely met. He was coarse, boorish, rough, noisy, overbearing, insolent; he adopted the Johnsonian tactics of trying to outroar his adversary in

argument; he spluttered and shouted, and glared through his spectacles, and waved his arms about, a sight for gods and men . . . By persons in general society he was regarded with perturbed wonder, as a specimen never before met with [. . .] his roaring bluster and offensive contradiction was ‘only his manner’; but, as Mr. Mantalini says of Ralph Nickleby, it was ‘a demd uncomfortable private-madhouse kind of manner’ all the same. (ibid 391-92)

This is how Edmund Yates described the novelist’s etiquette in 1892 – ten years after his death. And in 1894 George August Sala described Trollope as he appeared at one of George Smith’s well-known *Cornhill* dinners:

Anthony Trollope was very much to the fore, contradicting everybody; afterwards saying kind things to everybody, and occasionally going to sleep on sofas and chairs; or leaning against sideboards, and even somnolent while standing erect on the hearthrug. I never knew a man who could take so many spells of ‘forty winks’ at unexpected moments, and then turn up quite wakeful, alert, and pugnacious, as the author of ‘Barchester Towers,’ who has nothing of the bear but his skin, but whose ursine envelope was assuredly of the most grisly texture. (ibid 200)

Besides being tremendous fun, these two accounts of Trollope in fashionable London also make it clear that this writer of delicate, pristine, well-behaved narrative fiction was hardly mild-mannered himself. No one with an “ursine envelope” probably could be. They also make it clear that he was not afraid to

give the lie, as he was apparently quite accustomed to going around
“contradicting everybody” on a regular basis – at least when he could stay awake.

In addition, in a very under-read and under-studied work of social criticism called *The New Zealander* – a text by a young Anthony Trollope that went unpublished until 1972 and which includes chapters not only on “Literature” and “Society,” but also “Law and Physic,” “The Press,” and “The Church” – this famous novelist-to-be takes issue directly with an unthinking acceptance of social etiquette in order to argue for the necessity of a critically engaged and independently minded middleclass:

[O]ur dinner parties are so insufferably dull and cold that they are, as it were, the periods of confinement with hard work to which the upper classes from time to time condemn themselves; our evening meetings are held that we may scowl at each other with disgust, and show each of us with what power of pride we can outscowl one another; . . . no man addresses a woman unless it is that he does now or may at some future time require a wife, and . . . our ladies with much perseverance reciprocate the custom; . . . in studying how to speak we have forgotten how to talk . . . (152)

The list of social niceties that Trollope objects to in *The New Zealander* grows throughout this chapter on “Society” and offers as its conclusion the fact that “Every man should ask himself whether the society in which he moves is truly and thoroughly to his taste, and every woman also” (152):

It is for every man to judge whether fashions which thus descend through the different grades of society be or be not good for his use. If he hear of a custom which clearly is for his good, let him undoubtedly adopt it. There is no reason why that which suits Lord Palmerston should not suit Mr. Jones; but let Mr. Jones be studious to adopt no custom as his which is recommended only by its suitableness to Lord Palmerston, and not at all by its suitableness to himself. (167)

Trollope also makes a point of clarifying that “It is of . . . the middle ranks, that we specially wish to speak” in *The New Zealander* (168). He seems almost to think that the upper classes are beyond reach of help, so entrenched are they in the rules of good behavior and fashionable etiquette. With regards to the bourgeoisie, the mix here of an acceptance of derivative sociability – “fashions which thus descend through the different grades of society” – with a sense of individual critical reflection – “let Mr. Jones be studious to adopt no custom as his which is recommended only by its suitableness to Lord Palmerston” – is striking. Without the words “hegemony” or “agency” in his vocabulary, this novelist articulates a form of moderation that is quite Habermasian.

¹⁸ In order to locate detachment in some of Trollope’s unlikely-seeming characters, Anderson examines what she calls their “recalcitrant psychology” (510). This recalcitrance is “always putting into question the limits of morality” and challenging 19th-century preconceptions of honesty and integrity (515). Even when characters struggle with the assumptions of “traditional individual virtue,” Anderson emphasizes that the tension manifested in Trollope’s characterological

schema cannot be reduced to a case of determination. She admits that “an awareness of the limits of sincerity in Trollope does not produce an *Aufhebung* into [Modern] authenticity,” but she also insists that it produces “a restless return to critical sincerity,” by which she means “sincerity as critique . . . brought to bear upon sincerity as embedded ethos” (ibid). Recalcitrant psychology is compelling evidence of the cultivation of “nonsociological” insight.

Lady Eustace does not develop a “recalcitrant” psychology in *The Eustace Diamonds*. She may defy several different brands of Victorian authority, but her social ambitions don’t include a critique of “the limits of morality.” She isn’t that kind of character. If “aspiration,” “cultivation,” and “recalcitrance” are the signposts for rational self-reflection, Lizzie doesn’t appear to be detached. If we expand our search for detachment, however, and turn back in a different way to the normativity to which Anderson has been attempting to find exceptions, I think the “unexceptional” practice of refraining from giving the lie – which Lizzie foments over and over again – becomes a catalyst for “local” moments of excess and detachment.

¹⁹ Walter Kendrick, in his assessment of this little scene, uses this lie to prove that Lady Eustace is the anti-Trollopian anti-hero of *The Eustace Diamonds*: “Ignorance and mendacity are Lizzie’s primary characteristics, and between them they account for everything she is and does” (137). He points to Trollope’s carefully articulated paradox – that “It may seem unjust to accuse [Lizzie] of being stupidly unacquainted with circumstances and a liar at the same time; but she was both” – and does so to confirm a double fault in this character which

makes her the ultimate target of an especially pointed satire. However humorous this little liar may be in the above passage, however, the real crux of a moment like this one is not that Lady Eustace is telling another lie, but that Miss Macnulty, like everyone else in this novel, is letting Lizzie get away with it.

Chapter 2

²⁰ I define “mediocrity” and “local” detachment as I do in Chapter 1, as a revision of Amanda Anderson’s notion of the “cultivation of detachment” (*The Way We Argue Now* 66). While Anderson pushes back on the deterministic theories of poststructuralism and multiculturalism by arguing that “individuals and collectivities . . . cultivate habits, dispositions, and attitudes that [cannot] be attributed to any . . . limiting sociological determination” (6 *ibid*), I assert that engagements that *adhere* to social and cultural form can also produce “local” spaces of insight *within* cultures. “Mediocrity,” in this dissertation, is obeying the rules of social and cultural engagement, and “local” detachments are the non-determined experiences *within* social and cultural systems that provide opportunities for agency and self-awareness.

²¹ The marriage plot in *North and South* was a big enough issue in the 19th century that it led to condemnations of Gaskell’s entire oeuvre. Margaret Oliphant, in “Modern Novelists – Great and Small,” cites the novel in order to prove that “Mrs Gaskell” is a “story-teller of [the] second rank” (345 *sic*): “Shall all our love-stories be squabbles after this?” she complains. “Shall we have nothing but encounters of arms between the knight and the lady – bitter personal altercations, and mutual defiance?” (346-47).

²² In his 1865 obituary for the novelist, David Masson initiates the critical tradition (one popular well into the 20th century) that saw Gaskell as a “feminine” and “domestic” novelist. His retrospective look at Gaskell’s body of work is, in general, more laudatory than condemnatory, but Masson’s highly gendered account of the novelist’s successes and failures would prove to be a serious disservice. The happy, unpresupposing Gaskell that he offered contemporary readers became a difficult reputation to dislodge:

The literature of passion can only be treated worthily by persons who, whether for good or bad, are indifferent to the thought how their work may be judged by the standard rules of the society in which they move; and this was not the case with one of the most sensitive and delicate-minded women who ever wrote in England. “North and South,” and “Cranford,” perfect as they were as specimens of home portraiture, had not somehow that sustained interest that is necessary to constitute an eminently successful novel. Then, too, during the period which followed the appearance of “Mary Barton,” we have had a remarkable succession of distinguished female writers. (516)

Mid-20th century critics, attempting to recover Gaskell from the periphery of the literary canon, shifted the “many positive but tempered rankings” of the novelist that derive from this misogynistic characterization by prioritizing Gaskell’s socioeconomic representation over what seemed to be the averageness of her fiction (Hamilton 179). The author’s focus on the working classes became a point of interest for Marxist and feminist critics alike. When Raymond Williams read

Gaskell's industrial novels "as an expression of exaggerated middle-class anxiety" in *Culture and Society*, for example, he concerned himself less with the quality of Gaskell's fiction and more with what her social conscience could demonstrate about the experience of 19th-century industrialization (Shelston 1). If not exactly a defense of her ability or intellectual prowess, this early reassessment was able to get away from the aesthetic insufficiencies and "ordinariness" that had sidelined Gaskell in the late-19th and early-20th centuries.

²³ Schor argues against the first reading of the novel taken up by the majority of critics. Instead of telling a simple tale of compromise, Gaskell is said to "move in the opposite direction: . . . into an understanding of the complexity of any 'resolution,' whether romantic, social, or 'fictional'" (120). While this argument – like my own – is invested in challenging the notion that Gaskell is simply "conventional," "moderate," or "bourgeois," it still places emphasis on the ethnographic potential of Gaskell's realism in order to get away from *North and South*'s "romance." Schor insists that the novel's "romance plot begins to break down," and she compliments the author at one point for "the realism surrounding the melodrama" (127, 146). She also ultimately argues more for a sense of irresolution than for genuine social detachment:

Not only is there no novel *without* a conflict but the use of the novel seems to be that it can *incorporate* conflict. The "social intercourse" of the novel will be the moderating force of the "strikes" between readers, not in the sense that it will assuage their hostility but that it will force a recognition

of conflict, and of the utter necessity for the intercourse in which it involves its readers. (150)

²⁴ Lilian Furst has observed that the “perception of realism as essentially referential” has “persisted with astonishing tenacity” in the wake of Marxists and feminists accounts of the 19th-century novel, and has often, in its “emphatically referential perception,” left ethnographic representations like Gaskell’s in a “quagmire of mimesis” (15, 16). I would suggest that Matus’ reading of *North and South* is an example of this tendency. Though not explicitly invested in the socioeconomic representativity of the work, this critic’s analysis of Gaskell’s Manchester novels couches itself in previous sets of theoretical assumptions about the formal features of ethnographic literature.

²⁵ Catherine Gallagher observes, for example, that, “Like most practitioners of realistic fiction, Gaskell delineates characters and situations by giving eloquent, superficial details of dress, gesture, stature, bearing, behavior” (179). She uses this observation to demonstrate that although these “details fit together in a pattern of conventional associations that writer and reader share. . . ./Very soon . . . the novel subtly begins to undermine these assumptions” and develops “a covert criticism of its own metonymic narrative mode” (179-80). I take a slightly different approach in this chapter by focusing on how Gaskell’s details come together with her marriage plot, but Gallagher’s sense of the self-consciousness of this author’s detail is similar to my own.

²⁶ Realism’s characteristic dedication to detail is usually taken as a “shapeless” or “formless” effort at the genuine observation of the “real world,” while the

recognizably “shaped” or “formed” appearance of plot typifies the artificiality inherent to narrative fiction. Roland Barthes, in his influential account of descriptive “notation,” carefully predicates his discussion of realism’s “reality effect” by first differentiating between the “predictive” or “schematic” quality of most narratological structures and the purely “additive” or “superfluous” quality of descriptive detail:

The general structure of the narrative . . . appears essentially predictive; to be extremely schematic . . . [I]t can be said that, at each juncture of the narrative syntagm someone says to the hero (or to the reader, it does not matter which): if you act in this way, if you choose this alternatives, then this is what will happen . . . Description is quite different [from the general structural aspects of narrative]: it has no predictive aspect; it is “analogical”, its structure being purely additive, and not incorporating that circuit of choices and alternative which makes a narration look like a vast traffic control centre, provided with referential (and not merely discursive) temporality. (136)

For Barthes, the “referential plentitude” of the “realist enterprise” produces its “*effet de réel*” using “the *direct* collusion of a referent and a signifier” (140): “the signified is expelled from the sign, and along with it, of course, there is eliminated the possibility of developing a *form of the signified*, that is, the narrative structure itself” (ibid). He goes on to explain parenthetically that though “Realist literature is . . . narrative,” this is the case “because its realism is only fragmentary, erratic, restricted to ‘details’, and because the most realistic narrative imaginable unfolds

in an unrealistic manner” (ibid). Though not exactly “structure-less” for this structuralist, descriptive detail is essentially narratologically contrapositive: if “the main articulations of narrative” – not the least of which is plot – produce narrative meaning by generating interpretable structures, the “purely additive” structure of detail produces its “reality effect” outside the typical channels of narrative meaning (ibid 135).

²⁷ Details may be “incidental” in the sense that they do not form strict narratological architectures. You can have a longer or shorter description of a character’s face without changing the structure of a novel. But detail’s additive quality doesn’t make this device any more “artless” than plot or character. As Levine observes, “detailism” may “work towards plausibility and away from form, [while] plot works towards it,” but that doesn’t make detail, plot, or plausibility any less artificial (*sic* 18). To the contrary, when Gaskell “register[s] the particulars of the material world” in a routine attempt to “lessen the sense of manipulation” that her marriage plot generates, the work involved in maintaining that combination of literary forms makes writing a plausible story a highly self-conscious exercise (ibid).

²⁸ Instead of putting “realistic” detail and “unrealistic” plot into absolutely antithetical camps like Barthes, Levine describes realism’s combination of observationalism and narrative structure as a collaborative tension – one that includes both narrative devices *as* devices in its characterization of the genre. Instead of flatly identifying “detailism” as a naïve “reality effect” generated in opposition to artificially structured elements like plot, Levine incorporates both

detail and plot into his definition of the genre. This means that some “realistic” narratives may be more “plausible” than others because they cover the tracks created by their plot with convincingly “formless and plotless detailist representation” (ibid); but it also suggests that less “plausible” narratives with “heavier” plots are still realistic narratives that work self-consciously to combine plot and detail. Such narratives might not have descriptions as effective as their more plausible counterparts, but this doesn’t make them any less realistic. On the contrary, it is the combination of detail and plot that characterize realism; it is the effort at plausibility.

²⁹ It should be noted that, in arguing for the formal sophistication and self-consciousness of *North and South*, I contradict Catherine Gallagher’s influential reading of the 19th-century industrial novel. In her Introduction to *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction*, Gallagher claims that “industrial novelists take no sly satisfaction in formal self-reflexivity because their polemical purposes . . . lead them to make excessively naive mimetic claims for it. Even as they probe the contested assumptions of their medium, they try to insist that their fictions are unmediated presentation of social reality” (xiii). I do agree with much of Gallagher’s analysis, especially the notion that the “social cohesion” that Gaskell “ostensibly propose[s]” in *North and South* is offset by the revelation that there are “contradictions latent” in the novel’s social ideology (146). However, I strongly disagree with her characterization of an industrial novelist like Gaskell.

³⁰ Although I am indebted to Levine’s discussion of detail and plausibility, I should make clear that I define “detail” in this chapter a little differently than he

does. For Levine, detail means descriptive detail, a piling up of empirical observations. Long passages delineating the contents of a room or a careful catalogue of the features of a character's face. My own definition is not limited to diegetic descriptions, however, but includes any kind of incidental-ness in Gaskell's novel – a narratorial aside or omission, a stylistic pause or elaboration that attempts to counterbalance the marriage plot in *North and South*. Realism's details are not all descriptive. Its efforts to appear plot-less and plausible are not all diegetic. In order to appreciate everything Gaskell does to offset the tropology of her marriage plot, I expand Levine's definition. Without expanding it, I think it is easy to dismiss Gaskell as a "detailist" author in comparison to highly descriptive authors like Dickens or Eliot, who fill pages with empirical observations. Although Gaskell's approach to detail is less descriptive than some of her peers, she is no less invested in the collaborative tension that plot and detail can have in the realistic novel.

³¹ Critics like Linda Hughes and Michael Lund, in discussing the relationship between the "textual pleasure" and initial seriality of *North and South*, point out the very "familiar" set of tropes that make up "the erotic plot that characterizes romance fiction" in *North and South*, even noting that this "Victorian pattern has persisted into twentieth-century romance fiction" (157, 158). A scene like the one at Margaret's home after the strike is, in their analysis, an example of romantic deferral and anticipation. I argue against this interpretation in this chapter. Calling *North and South*'s marriage plot "romantic" is reductive, as it almost completely ignores the Gaskell's ethnographic efforts.

³² Anderson theory of detachment is, again, predicated on careful acts of

“cultivation:”

[The cultivation of detachment] is an aspiration toward universality and objectivity. The norms through which that aspiration finds expression may be situated, the aspiration may always be articulated through historically available forms, but as an aspiration it cannot be reduced to a simple form of illusion, or a mere psychological mechanism. (*The Powers of Distance* 33)

Anderson’s conceptualization of “nonsociological” detachment doesn’t make much space for Gaskell’s sociologically absorbed novel. In fact, in her recent examination of *North and South*, Anderson never uses the words “detachment,” “cultivation,” or “aspiration” to describe Gaskell’s work, despite being invested in revitalizing the author. Anderson stresses characteristically that what might first appear to be Gaskell’s didactic sociopolitical sincerity is, in fact, quite dynamic and reflective. She emphasizes that, although “what prevails [in *North and South*] is a Christianized liberalism that favors the continued power of the current system . . . it seems important to register Gaskell’s privileging of continuing collective deliberation . . .” (347). But Anderson’s claims for *North and South* stay fairly limited. This critic is always concerned with identifying forms of “universality and objectivity” that define detachment as a process of critical stewardship, and she doesn’t locate these kinds of things in Gaskell’s novel. Anderson concedes that, for Gaskell, “Argument is important because it keeps critique and self-

examination vital,” but she doesn’t characterize *North and South* as a text that demonstrates genuine detachment from the norm (348).

³³ A theory of rational detachment like Anderson’s limits a novel like *North and South* to a sense of dynamic irresolution – one that can appreciate the “continuing collective deliberation” that structures Gaskell’s message of social moderation, but that also can’t see that deliberation producing any genuine change (“Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, Gaskell,” 347). My own analysis is able to decipher the kinds of pragmatic, incremental progress that this novel actually imagines. The “local” moments of insight I argue for may not add up to an established “nonsociological” position. They aren’t brought together in a way that generates a deliberate political philosophy. But they demonstrate that keeping “critique and self-examination vital” entails the accumulation of radical moments that push moderation into revolution (ibid). “Local” moments in mid-century England precipitate the dramatic redistribution of power that occurs with the Second Reform Bill (1867), and they precede the financial autonomy that occurs with the Married Women’s Property Act (1882). This means that *North and South*’s moderation isn’t a static average of two sociological certainties, but is an accumulation of “local” insights that prove to be quite rebellious. If the larger lessons woven into *North and South* epitomize the steady, compromising spirit of Victorian England, its characters demonstrate that those same lessons are also a compilation of smaller, revolutionary ideas that are much more than a set of “basically bourgeois values.”

Chapter 3

³⁴ Meredith's style has elicited ongoing complaints. In 1879, R. H. Hutton described Meredith's prose as "a wayward wind [that] blow[s] against the current of the story" (214). Several decades later, Virginia Woolf remarked that reading Meredith means "mak[ing] certain allowances and relax[ing] certain standards," including "the perfect quietude of a traditional style" (538). And in the mid-20th century, the critic John Lucas condemned Meredith by saying that any effort to praise him as "an intellectual novelist . . . invite[s] disaster:" his style may appear, at first, to be "properly opaque," but "Sooner or later someone" is always "bound to shout that the Emperor really [isn't] wearing any clothes" (10).

³⁵ Although I explore a less conventional novelist in this chapter, I define "mediocrity" and "local" detachment as I do in Chapters 1 and 2, as a revision of Amanda Anderson's notion of the "cultivation of detachment" (*The Way We Argue Now* 66). In opposition to the deterministic theories of poststructuralism and multiculturalism, Anderson takes a rationalist approach, arguing that "individuals and collectivities . . . cultivate habits, dispositions, and attitudes that [cannot] be attributed to any . . . limiting sociological determination" (6 *ibid*). I agree with Anderson that rational detachment is possible, but I modify her argument in order to suggest that adherent engagements with social and cultural convention can also produce "local" spaces of insight *within* cultures. "Mediocrity," as I define it, is obeying the rules of social and cultural form. And "local" detachments are the non-determined *within* social and cultural systems that provide opportunities for agency and everyday awareness.

³⁶ Rachel Bowlby has also pushed back on the “facile assumptions” that characterize many critical assessments of realism, going so far as to parody them (xiv): “Found a realist work that doesn’t fit the stereotype? No matter, the virtues must be to do with its anticipation of modernist experimentation” (xv).

³⁷ Barthes famously defines the writerly in *S/Z*:

The writerly text is a perpetual present, upon which no *consequent* language (which would inevitably make it past) can be superimposed; the writerly text is *ourselves writing*, before the infinite play of the world (the world as function) is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticized by some singular system (Ideology, Genus, Criticism) which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages. (5)

The readerly is defined in opposition to the writerly as the traditional literary text that calls for no active production of meaning from the reader. Conventionally realistic texts epitomize the readerly for Barthes, as they present a narrow, predetermined, and representative world to the reader.

³⁸ Meredith theorizes his “Comic Spirit” in both the Prelude to *The Egoist* and the novelist’s “Essay on Comedy.” He launches it as a radical attack on the conventions of 19th-century realism:

Comedy is a game played to throw reflections upon social life, and it deals with human nature in the drawing-room of civilized men and women, where we have no dust of the struggling outer world, no mire, no violent crashes, to make the correctness of the representation convincing.

Credulity is not wooed through the impressionable senses . . . The Comic Spirit . . . has not a thought of persuading you to believe in him. (*The Egoist* 33)

The novelist repeats his disdain for the “dust” of conventional realism two paragraphs later:

[T]he realistic method of conscientious transcription of all the visible, and a repetition of all the audible, is mainly accountable for our present branfulness, and the prolongation of the vast and the noisy, out of which, as from an undrained fen, steams the malady of sameness, our modern malady. (ibid 34)

³⁹ Donald Fanger’s is one of the harshest denunciations:

Behind the Victorian graces of [Meredith’s] language [in the “Essay on Comedy”] lies a haziness of conception: the manifestations of the Comic Spirit may be detected by their incitement to thoughtful laughter – if, that is, you have comic perception. But how is comedy itself detectable? Is there a form, or a method (for otherwise what we have is only a test for risibility, and a manifesto for the reforming use of it)? None is discussed in [“An Essay on Comedy”]. (319)

Fanger ultimately does away with Meredith’s claims for himself altogether and “denie[s] . . . the notion that [Meredith’s] works either conform to an elaborated, conscious theory, or bear indications of an informing discipline” (324). Novels like *The Egoist* may be ironic, but Meredith’s accomplishments reach no higher pitch in terms of social criticism.

⁴⁰ Towards the close of the novel, after her engagement to Willoughby has been successfully broken off, Clara again tries to explain herself again to Laetitia. The imagery she uses not only throws Laetitia into confusion, but generates criticism for its improper obscurity:

‘Dearest, if I may convey to you what I was, in a simile for comparison: I think I was like a fisherman’s float on the water, perfectly still, and ready to go down at any instant, or up. So much for my behavior.’

‘Similes have the merit of satisfying the finder of them, and cheating the hearer, said Laetitia. ‘You admit that your feelings would have been painful.’

‘I was a fisherman’s float; please admire my simile; any way you like, this way or that, or so quiet as to tempt the eyes to go to sleep. And suddenly I might have disappeared in the depths, or flown in the air. But no fish bit.’

‘Well, then, to follow you, supposing the fish or the fisherman, for I don’t know which is which . . . Oh, no, no: this is too serious for imagery. . . ’

* * *

The simile chafed [Laetitia’s] wits with a suspicion of meaning hidden in it. (582)

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