

**Sympathy for Strangers:
Picturesque Aesthetics and the Politics of Feeling in the American Gilded Age**

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Abstract

The middle class in both Britain and America has always been a precarious position, its vague economic perimeters and financial vulnerability making it uniquely reliant on cultural and aesthetic values to define its boundaries. In mid- to late-nineteenth century America, the ability to see aesthetically – to perceive any object as beautiful or interesting – became a definitive feature for a class emerging between increasingly extreme wealth and poverty. The eighteenth-century British tradition of picturesque aesthetics, which prized the rough and the natural, made aesthetic taste a means by which the nascent middle class could define its social position. In America, works by Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman imported picturesque modes of perception and infused them with moral, spiritual, and political significance: to apprehend roughness or dereliction as beautiful became a virtuous act, fundamental to the creation of their radically new nation. The Transcendentalists made the picturesque a means of unification with otherness, a process which allowed moral sentiments to become a primary site of personal agency, and thus to serve as intervention in social problems. Frequent economic crises, mass immigration, and rapid urbanization during the Gilded Age created an urban middle class for whom aestheticizing roughness could foster a cosmopolitan identity; members of the bourgeoisie needed an antidote to their sense of the contingency and unreality of middle-class life, as well as a structure for understanding their obligations toward structurally distanced others. Sketches about the picturesque qualities of urban ghettos, ranging from touristic journalism to reform literature, educated genteel Americans on aesthetic and affective responses to class and ethnic difference. Writers responding to this tradition such as H.C. Bunner, Brander Matthews, Hutchins Hapgood, and especially William Dean Howells use the picturesque to probe their own interest – and that of their class – in rough people and places. The self-directed irony of their work depicts and interrogates the position of genteel viewers whose sympathy with poorer people is effected primarily through aesthetic products or cross-class spectatorship. These writers forge an important link to contemporary liberal culture, which upholds the social value of moral sentiment but consistently projects an ambivalent and ironic relation to it.

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Introduction

A Brief History of Aestheticized Roughness

The American Dream of social and economic progress rests on the middle-class family, an entity whose symbolic value is as stable as its reality is tenuous, ever one recession or bad decision from insolvency. One of America's greatest paradoxes is its fixation on the "middle class" – each election, particularly in recent years, yields near-compulsive references to it – in a society that was conceived as being what Benjamin Franklin called "a general happy mediocrity."¹ The middle was not meant to be a class, because there was not meant to be economic disparity sufficient to produce such a category; this is the "equality of conditions" Alexis de Tocqueville warily admires in *Democracy in America* (Zunz and Kahan 64). Nonetheless, middle-class life is produced by, and supports, economic structures that do generate tremendous inequality. Despite its mythical association with the nineteen-fifties, when the American middle class reached its apogee both numerically and culturally, the middle emerged as a class during the mid-nineteenth century, a time of financial instability and class fluctuation that bears important resemblances to the present moment. Indeed, as the economist Paul Krugman noted in 2014, "[i]t has become a commonplace to say that we are living in a second Gilded Age."² Then, as now, the middle-class family was central to American cultural life, yet precariously positioned between an increasingly wealthy elite and a rapidly expanding underclass. As it is today, socio-economic stratification was at its most extreme and most

¹ Franklin, *Information to those who would Remove to America*.

² While Krugman himself has been making this claim since prior to the 2008 financial crisis, he ascribes the current prominence of this idea to Thomas Piketty, whose *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* uses "pioneer[ing] statistical techniques to trace concentrations of income and wealth deep into the past," and has made ubiquitous the concept of the "one percent" (Krugman, "Why We're in a New Gilded Age").

evident in urban centres; William Dean Howells writes of New York City that, “a famishing man must suffer peculiarly here from the spectacle of people everywhere at sumptuous tables” (*Impressions and Experiences* 200). In the nineteenth century, newspapers, literary sketches, and realist literature began avidly to document urban slums, and much of this writing depicts these areas by way of contrast to surrounding wealth.³ The poverty in the midst of plenty theme raises questions about the moral and economic impact of extreme wealth in a democratic society; for the middle-class readers at whom such literature was primarily aimed, it also raises questions about their own responsibility or capacity to effect change for those in poverty.

Critics claim both that writing about the urban poor functioned as surveillance and social control, and that it expresses the fragmentation of rapidly urbanizing American society.⁴ This study negotiates between these views; I suggest that much aesthetic interest in urban poverty was – and is – generated by the need to define middle class cultural and economic boundaries, and that aestheticized poverty allows those who do not live in poverty to explore the ethical and social implications of apparently irremediable inequality. The complex interactions between middle-class social responsibility and the cultural distinction evidenced by cultural products about poverty also help to chart the emergence of contemporary liberalism. Of particular relevance for the present moment, the self-directed irony of Gilded Age authors grappling with the clash between social and aesthetic responses to poverty provides context for current cultural trends that appropriate objects associated with poverty, and suggest a partial etiology for the

³ See for instance Ned Buntline’s *Mysteries and Miseries of New York*.

⁴ For the first view, see Mark Selzer, *Bodies and Machines*; June Howard, *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism*. For the latter, Joseph Entin, “‘Unhuman Humanity’: Bodies of the Urban Poor and the Collapse of Realist Legibility”; Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism*.

crisis which many commenters perceive to be besetting liberal ideology.⁵ This project attempts neither a cultural history of liberalism nor a genealogy of literary representations of poverty; rather, it is concerned with the ways in which an aesthetic movement that embraced making art of common, and particularly derelict or rough, objects contributed, in the United States, to the development of an affective orientation towards structurally distanced others that has become a prominent aspect of cultural liberalism.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote about viewing the world aesthetically as a moral ability, one that signified attunement to and spiritual engagement with one's environment. Over the course of the century, industrialization, urbanization, and mass immigration made urban poverty highly visible in northern cities, and representations of the slums featured prominently in newspapers and fiction. While much has been written about these phenomena, less understood are the intersections of aestheticized poverty, affective responses to suffering, and the sense of moral obligation within the emergent American middle-class liberalism of the nineteenth century. The crossroads of aesthetic and ethical engagement with poverty can be found in an aesthetic movement which originated in Britain in the late eighteenth century, but which I argue reached its fullest expression in nineteenth-century America: the picturesque. This aesthetic of roughness, naturalness, and dereliction became a definitive feature of writing about the urban poor. The development of picturesque viewing, which in America became a mode of perception, created connections between aesthetic taste, moral sentiment, and class structure which persist into the present.

⁵ See for example Ross Douthat, "The Crisis for Liberalism"; Yuval Noah Harari, "Does Trump's Rise Mean Liberalism's End?"; John C. Goodman, "Liberalism in Crisis."

The precariousness of the middle class and the anxieties derived both from this instability and from a sense of social constraint within bourgeois culture produced an aesthetic fascination with roughness. The perception of common and rough objects as beautiful expressed the American belief in the social and spiritual benefits of material deprivation as well as the affective and moral responses to poverty by a nascent middle class. This dissertation theorizes the significance of picturesque aesthetics to the American middle class through an examination of mid- to late-nineteenth-century writing about aestheticized seeing and about urban poverty. Literature aestheticizing derelict urban spaces and distinctive or beautiful poor people coincided with the rapid growth of cities⁶ and with the simultaneous expansion of an urban, literate middle class⁷ for whom the picturesque functioned both to consolidate class position and to address concerns about social responsibility. Although the picturesque has been, since its inception in the late eighteenth century, intertwined both with literature and with issues of class,⁸ its significance changed when applied to urban subjects: writers began using it to address issues of inequality directly. Earlier, British iterations of the literary picturesque frame the moral and aesthetic foibles of the middle and upper classes,⁹ but in urban American contexts these failings are contrasted with the positive qualities of poor and working-class characters and to a sense of powerlessness and unreality pervading the bourgeoisie.

⁶ The population of New York City, for example, grew by 450,000 people in the first half of the nineteenth century. See Stuart Blumin, Introduction, *New York By Gaslight*, p. 3.

⁷ Robert M. Dowling, *Slumming in New York: From the Waterfront to Mythic Harlem*, p. 1. See also Stuart Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City 1760-1900*.

⁸ See, for instance, Alistair Duckworth's seminal book *The Improvement of the Estate*, for the class significance of picturesque aesthetics in the work of Jane Austen.

⁹ Jane Austen's eponymous heroine Emma, for instance, tries to apply picturesque principles to the orphan Harriet, leading to near-disaster and ultimately, of course, to Emma's moral maturation.

The limited scholarship on the urban picturesque derides it as a callous and superficial approach to human suffering,¹⁰ or at best as a failed attempt to provide the middle class with access to the poor through art.¹¹ Both such critiques are valid; however, there is a lot more to examine, particularly of those aspects which continue to make the picturesque relevant in the twenty-first century: the frame they provide around the ethics of aestheticizing others; the affective responses such art at once comes from and generates; and the relationship between aesthetic and social engagement with structural inequality. Because the picturesque is at its core an aesthetic collision with unfamiliar conditions, picturesque narratives offer a kind of case study of the relationship between sympathy and art. Their central questions are how and why depictions of decay, dirt, and deprivation can be aesthetically appealing, and what we can learn from pleasurable responses – whether moral pleasure in a sense of sympathy or a purely aesthetic reaction – to aestheticized hardship or suffering.¹² The efflorescence of the American picturesque at a formative moment in that nation’s history makes possible an analysis of how aestheticized roughness intersects with concepts of moral and ethical responsibility, as well as with constructions of class and cultural cachet.

Because it foregrounds the act of representation, and represents poverty and dereliction, the picturesque offers a uniquely focused means of reflecting on the ethical implications of aesthetic taste. Alain de Botton’s recent claim that art has a moral purpose¹³ responds to the fact that it has become unfashionable to raise questions about the moral or ethical responsibilities and

¹⁰ Benedict Giomo, *On the Bowery: Confronting Homelessness in American Society*, pp. 52-62.

¹¹ Carrie Tirado Bramen, “William Dean Howells and the Failure of the Urban Picturesque,” pp. 82-99.

¹² These latter questions are as old as Aristotle’s *Poetics*.

¹³ TED, “Atheism 2.0.”

resonances of art – such thinking is associated with hyper-vigilant parent groups lobbying against rap albums.¹⁴ The relation between ethics and art, though now largely abandoned to conservative thinkers, was a founding tenet of liberal ideology. After all, a society based upon the independent and conscientious participation of every member must take seriously the ways in which people discover what they think. For many eighteenth-century thinkers, art offered the opportunity to externalize one’s responses to the world, and thereby to reflect upon them. Beauty was not simply about pleasure, but indicative of an ideal good – of a sense of order and potential for a harmonious society. For Anthony Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, art offers access to a set of shared values, or what he calls the *Sensus Communis*, a common sense which is inextricable from a sense of the public good, from “Love of the Community or Society, natural Affection, Humanity, Obligingness, or that sort of Civility which rises from a just Sense of the common Rights of Mankind, and the natural Equality there is among those of the same Species” (Cooper, I: 104). This sense is spontaneous and natural, yet becomes known through a process of self-reflection, for which art provides the catalyst. Shaftesbury and other eighteenth-century theorists believed that the emotions or sensory responses generated by aesthetic objects are “profoundly rich occasion[s] for moral experience” (Valihora 105).¹⁵ These theories, which deeply influenced early American ideologies, argue that society is held together by common feeling, a community of mutually recognizable affective responses.¹⁶ Moral obligations are not primarily theorized but felt; the imaginative and sympathetic capacities exercised by interactions with art allow for the development of moral feeling.

¹⁴ Progressive groups have not entirely eschewed the ethical implications of art: the GLAAD media award, for instance, recognizes positive representations of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered characters in media.

¹⁵ See also Valihora pp. 33; 68-105.

¹⁶ Locke can be seen as an exception; for him, as for Hobbes, our social responsibilities are learned, not innate.

Contemporary liberal democracies, as de Botton argues, would do well to reconsider the ethical potential of aesthetics. The picturesque is an ideal mode of representation for such a reconsideration because of its centrality to middle-class identity formation, its inherent self-reflexivity, its explicit interaction through American writing with issues of class and social responsibility, and because its influence on the middle class has persisted into the present. This influence can be seen in the fads for slum tours and rough luxe interior decorating,¹⁷ and in the extensive visual documentation of downtown Detroit.¹⁸ George Packer, in a 2013 *New Yorker* article about journalism chronicling the fallout of the 2008 economic crisis, refers to “the picturesque decay of Rust Belt cities” (72) – but no study exists on why such images are “picturesque,” or what the implications are of such a designation. Packer’s use of the term suggests that the picturesque exists as a part of North America’s aesthetic lexicon, describing the affective appeal of a certain type of decay; my project brings to light the presumptions behind such applications of this term, as well the historical contexts for contemporary manifestations of the picturesque. The most measurable effect of the picturesque on current middle-class culture is the gentrification of urban ghettos and working-class neighbourhoods. Processes of gentrification engage ideals of “improvement” articulated by picturesque aesthetics, and like the

¹⁷ A quick internet search for “slum tours” will yield a variety of sites offering tours of cities such as Rio de Janeiro (the favelas appear to be a tourist favorite), Johannesburg, Mumbai, Nairobi, and other cities. Around the year 2000, the term “poorism” was coined to describe these tours. See Evan Selinger and Kevin Outterson, “The Ethics of Poverty Tourism.” The post-Katrina tours present a particularly complex and interesting example.

¹⁸ See, for instance, detroiturbex.com. Also relevant is the film *Detropia*, a documentary which actually takes pains to avoid unconsidered aestheticization of the city, most notably by including a piece of dialogue between a Swiss tourist and a coffee shop worker. The tourist says that he came to Detroit because Switzerland is so clean and orderly, and he thought it would be interesting to see the “decay” – a comment which the coffee shop worker says, smilingly, could be offensive. Outside on a break, the employee comments that the shop had been busy that day – “Thank God for the opera house,” she says, looking across the street at the cultural center that has figured repeatedly in the film. The Swiss tourist does not reply. This interchange reminds viewers that despite the beauty of the scenery – and the film is very picturesque – the object of the film is not aestheticized decay but a narrative about people trying to live in a city devastated by specific circumstances, to which the derelict landscape gives voice.

interest in picturesque narratives, gentrification is driven in part by disgust with the homogeneity of middle-class life and by guilt about middle-class complicity in exploitative economic structures.¹⁹ Today, as in late-nineteenth-century America, the aesthetic appropriation of poverty by middle-class people indicates a deep unease about the causes and effects of class inequality, and about the aesthetic vibrancy and moral validity of middle-class life.

I propose that the formal properties of the picturesque which encourage reflection upon personal aesthetic taste and social position provide a useful framework for considering how aesthetics can help wealthier members of society to live more ethically. The aesthetic interest in poverty serves both to facilitate expressions of sympathy with those in need and to mitigate guilt about their suffering; acknowledging this guilt and the catharsis achieved by aesthetically engaging with poverty encourages an awareness of the material and psychological complicity of middle-class people in perpetuating class inequality. Sympathy stands alongside private property at the foundations of liberal society: for Shaftesbury and Hume as for Adam Smith and, later, John Stuart Mill, a society based on personal freedoms coheres through the natural moral impulse of one human toward another. The contemporary liberal theorists Judith Shklar and Richard Rorty conceive of liberalism as an ideology based in the abhorrence of cruelty.²⁰ Sympathy becomes liberalism's defining ethical imperative because the abhorrence of cruelty derives from the ability to conceive of another's suffering. Yet American society is, of course, proudly individualistic; as Neal Dolan has recently observed, American republicanism emerged between competing virtues of liberty and equality – and paradigm-setting thinkers such as

¹⁹ Tim Butler, *Gentrification and the Middle Classes*, 1-3; David Ley, "Gentrification and the Politics of the New Middle Class," 70.

²⁰ The first chapter of Shklar's *Ordinary Vices* proposes that "liberal and humane people ... would, if they were asked to rank the vices, put cruelty first. Intuitively they would choose cruelty as the worst thing we do" (44). In the Introduction to *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Rorty refers to Shklar's "influential definition of liberals as people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do" (xv).

Franklin and Emerson chose liberty (Dolan 20-24). The definition of liberty itself – to what degree it is individualistic or communitarian – has been a fraught question in America since the nation’s inception. This dissertation focuses on one small aspect of issues around individual choice and the structure and role of government that remain important and often potentially divisive in American society. Aesthetics offers a point of entry to these questions by making available for analysis the relation between object, representation, and subject. The picturesque places a privileged viewer in relation to objects that bear the marks of neglect or decay; its basis in subjective perception foregrounds the viewing position that composes these objects for view and thus also the affective responses to them, making possible a close reading of the ways in which feeling mediates between the individual and the communal.

In liberal societies, sympathy is not necessarily commensurate either with private acts of charity or with the desire to implement social structures that reduce poverty and the suffering it causes. The picturesque as it has developed in America is useful because it expresses concern with the problem of poverty while exalting the poor as possessing self-reliance and resilience – and thus a vibrancy and connection to the world – that wealthier people lack. Indeed, the image associated with the American ideal of self-reliance and authenticity is emphatically not the rich but the working man: homesteaders, Whitman’s blacksmiths and dockworkers, the Bowery b’hoys and gals popularized as folk heroes in plays and city sketches – these were the Americans that embodied the desired national virtues of valour and pluck, of independence and individuality maintained within a strongly cohesive community. Picturesque aesthetics provide historical precedent for the identification of such virtues with working-class people, but more importantly the urban picturesque frames a need to domesticate the dissonance of liberal middle-class life. This study emerged from my sense of responsibility, as a middle-class person, to understand my

own aesthetic interest in dereliction, and the relationship between this interest and my concern with issues of social justice. Today as in the nineteenth century, the aestheticization of roughness, dereliction, and poverty offers the opportunity of attending to the vantage point from which middle-class liberals view structurally distanced others.²¹ It provides a much-needed moment of destabilizing self-awareness, and from there, the potential to cultivate a more ethical and effectual sympathy with strangers.

A qualification of the term “middle class” in the United States is necessary here, for this is a notoriously slippery designation, proceeding from individual self-definition as much as from economic position – “more of a state of mind than an actual economic status” (Baker). Despite the economic and cultural import of the American middle class, there is surprisingly little scholarship about its emergence in the mid-nineteenth century. Stuart Blumin, whose 1989 study *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* remains the most comprehensive work on the subject,²² observes that “American historians didn’t start theorizing the formation of the nation’s middle class until the 1970s” (4). Particularly in an American context, the middle class refers to a culturally and economically heterogeneous group whose occupations span the traditional blue/white collar divide and who embrace a multiplicity of ideologies. Perhaps their only apodictic qualities are that middle-class people must work for a

²¹ It is worth mentioning here that, since I undertook this project, the opioid crisis as well as the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States have made rural poverty a topic of some discussion. The American rural poor have not, however, been the subject of picturesque representation, with the possible and interesting exception of James Agee and Walker Evans’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, the Depression-Era study of southern tenant farmers. More recent depictions of rural poverty, such as the 2010 film *Winter’s Bone*, tend to represent situations whose horror extends beyond the perimeters of the picturesque and into the gothic (I am thinking in particular of a scene in which the teenaged heroine is tortured by a barn-full of meth dealers.) For reasons that will become clear in the course of this study, the American picturesque – apart from its use as a term to describe charming or quaint country homes – since the Gilded Age has developed as resolutely urban, an aesthetics that locates vitality and grit within gritty and highly populous neighborhoods.

²² Alan Trachtenberg’s *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* looks at the rise of corporate culture and provides useful insight into the development of the middle class in this context.

living, and they have enough discretionary income to engage in some degree of conspicuous consumption.²³ This study considers the segment of the middle class that can be seen as part of the genteel tradition: people who are primarily engaged in non-manual occupations, and who place value on higher education, social respectability, and cultural refinement. My definition encompasses those whom Bourdieu classifies as possessing the highest educational levels, such as executives, people in the professions, and secondary or higher-education teachers and art producers.²⁴ I use the term refinement both because it suggests more classical or conventional arenas of cultural knowledge – art galleries, literature, intellectually challenging film – and also because it indicates cultivation of the kinds of specialized cultural knowledge that gives social distinction to middle-class people, for instance of “underground” aesthetic products, or, increasingly, of local food and handmade goods.²⁵

²³ Advanced capitalism has muddied this second qualification, as the influx of cheap consumer goods has made an increasing number of items such as televisions almost universally available, although consumer spending since 2008 has dropped off significantly. The financial crisis, in which millions of middle-class Americans have become unemployed and/or lost their houses, has generally added to the class confusion.

²⁴ It is notable, however, that within this highest class there exists distinct levels of cultural engagement. A “private-sector executive” or “engineer” for instance, is as likely to enjoy “Rhapsody in Blue” – Bourdieu’s example of “middle-brow” culture – as is a “junior administrative executive,” despite being in a higher socio-economic class and possessing a greater level of education (17). Enjoyment of more complex or less popular cultural products is “highest in those fractions of the dominant class that are richest in educational capital” (16). It would be interesting indeed to study whether there is a greater predilection for the picturesque amongst, say, academics than engineers – I wager there is. Moreover, since “members of the intellectual occupations (teachers, researchers, artists) declare themselves, more often than all other categories, ‘supporters of revolutionary action’, opposed to ‘authoritarianism’” (Bourdieu 420), this class might also be more likely to enjoy the picturesque, given its sympathetic portrayal of the poor and its valorization of both naturalness and subjective experience. As Bourdieu notes in his section on political principles, intellectuals also “betray an ethos at variance with their discourse” (420). He describes an essentially aesthetic preference for class equality, one which lacks a correlate in his respondents’ beliefs and understandings of social problems; this conflict between affective or aesthetic class solidarity and actual political beliefs and choices remains a definitive feature of liberalism and, I argue throughout this study, a driving force behind the taste for the picturesque.

²⁵ Bourdieu’s classic study of the “zones of taste” as they “correspond to educational levels and social classes” (16) would be fascinating – but very difficult – to reproduce today. His findings resonate in the taxonomy I suggest above, if we consider “underground” cultural products as a correlate of what Bourdieu calls “arts that are still in the process of legitimation,” which he suggests include “cinema, jazz, or even song,” and which are most popular amongst those with the highest educational level (16-17). The difficulty arises because in the fifty years since Bourdieu conducted his studies, “highbrow” and “lowbrow” taste have both collapsed into each other and spawned innumerable new tastes and values that cannot be classified in this way. Thus, while it is likely that “reading

This latter quality suggests the most important aspect of genteel or middle-class culture for our purposes: for individuals in this group, cultural choices are often meant to demonstrate an awareness of wider society – thus, membership at an art gallery signifies a general belief in the cultural value of art; a collection of rare vinyl records indicates a rejection of mass consumer culture. As the middle class emerged, gentility was achieved both through observing a code of behaviour and through the acquisition of appropriate goods, including cultural knowledge.²⁶ Aesthetic choices demonstrate participation in a distinct group with a unique social vision. The idea that aesthetic taste has social significance is today inextricably entwined with a consumerist culture and the identity politics that dominate liberal democratic societies. Modernist aesthetics discredit the idea that art should have an overtly moral or didactic purpose,²⁷ but the historical connection between taste, class, and moral sentiment is always there, even if largely unacknowledged. Aesthetic taste remains central to self-identification, functioning as cultural shorthand for one’s constellation of beliefs and values, which are expressed through choices in clothes, films, vehicles, neighborhoods, and so forth. In the eighteenth century, aesthetics were thought to offer an opportunity to reflect upon one’s emotions and beliefs, to educate the intellect through feelings, a process which helped to generate social cohesiveness. The process of self-

philosophical essays” remains an occupation mainly enjoyed by those with the highest levels of education (Bourdieu 16-18), Kendrick Lamar’s music likely appeals to those who possess both very high and very low levels of education. And what do we say about ripped jeans, which might cost anywhere from \$30 to \$300 dollars? The absorption into popular culture of roughness as positive quality has played a significant role in blurring the lines between high and low culture.

²⁶ Thorstein Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class* provides an influential theory of how consumption codifies social class in capitalist societies. For specific analysis of the material culture that contributed to the development of the American middle class, see Linda Young’s *Middle-Class Culture in the Nineteenth Century*.

²⁷ For an overview of the position that modernism abandons earlier aesthetic modes to which morality was central, see David Sidorsky, “Modernism and the Emancipation of Literature from Morality: Teleology and Vocation in Joyce, Ford, and Proust.” Responding to claims of modernist amorality, Martin Halliwell argues in *Modernism and Morality: Ethical Devices in European and American Fiction* that modernist aesthetic techniques presented new modes of addressing ethical problems.

examination has become the imperative to articulate one's identity through aesthetics, which does not necessarily include the need to examine the causes or effects of this self-expression. The most obvious and salient example is the rise of "ethical" products, from organic and fair trade products to hybrid cars. Purchasing such products not only announces to others the moral views of the buyer, but is also meant as a kind of activism that will influence corporations to consider the profitability of ethical behaviour. In a culture where even Coca Cola is selling the ethics of their product (their company is "helping address obesity"),²⁸ "ethical consumption" is the predominant expression of taste as an indication of morality. But such behaviour usually fails to consider what has generated the values invested in a product, or the ways in which ethics are aesthetically driven and enacted.

This study intervenes in this subject at the point where aesthetic taste meets roughness, dereliction, or raggedness – what William Gilpin, first theorist of the picturesque, termed "rough objects" (*Three Essays* 17). The narrative picturesque can be read as a point of origin for the consumption of aesthetic products with ethical, but secular, intentions: urban picturesque writing promoted interest among wealthier Americans in the working and lower classes, while also offering a less dire – and often fantastically romanticized – vision of their conditions that tempered concerns about inequality. Just as the purchase of organic fruit might mitigate guilt about the environmental costs of a middle-class life, a middle-class person reading a picturesque narrative in nineteenth-century America could assuage her concern over the impoverishment everywhere evident in American cities. The intersection of aesthetic pleasure with social awareness yields what Pierre Bourdieu calls "the aesthetic disposition" (28-29), which is essential to the development of the bourgeois subject position. The aesthetic disposition is,

²⁸ coca-cola.ca/calories-in-vs-calories-out.

essentially, the ability to aestheticize any object, to appreciate its formal qualities separately from its content or function. Thus, while a picturesque narrative provides the opportunity to consider the social issue of poverty, as a narrative it functions by making aesthetically pleasing subjects that are not traditionally considered so. The consolidation of “rough objects” into a pleasing whole is the foundation of the picturesque. It should be mentioned here that, in its concern with how aesthetics contribute to subject-formation, this study relies on an essentially Kantian definition of the aesthetic: aesthetic judgments are those that concern imaginative responses to objects rather than the formal qualities of objects themselves.²⁹ That said, the picturesque breaks with Kantian conceptions of taste in ways that indicate both the social contexts in which this aesthetic became popular and the ethical concerns inherently implicated in picturesque representations.

Through the transformation of objects conventionally perceived as ugly, awkward, or offensive – such as raggedness and decay – middle-class viewers assert their separateness from such qualities, a reification of their position as distinct from the working class that I will historicize below and return to throughout this study. The aesthetic disposition not only asserts distance, however, but also interest – albeit mediated through aesthetics – in the subjects depicted. Bourdieu provides detailed evidence of the middle-class tendency to aestheticize objects not conventionally considered beautiful, such as, for instance, gnarled hands (which are a picturesque trope; Ruskin’s response to picturesque representations of aged labourers informs the discussions to follow). Whereas “the culturally most deprived express a more or less conventional emotion or an ethical complicity but never a specifically aesthetic judgement (other than a negative one)” in response to a photograph of an old woman’s arthritic hands, members of

²⁹ When judgments refer to the Object, they are logical; when they refer to the subject “(to its feeling), the judgment is so far always aesthetical” (*Critique of Judgment* 46).

the middle classes expressed varying degrees of aesthetic engagement, often finding the picture pleasing. “At higher levels in the social hierarchy, the remarks become increasingly abstract, with (other people’s) hands, labour and old age functioning as allegories or symbols which serve as pretexts for general reflections on general problems” (Bourdieu 44). The picturesque does precisely “declar[e] that any object can be perceived aesthetically” (Bourdieu 39), and also encourages this synecdochical approach to the aestheticized objects, promoting reflection on “general problems” such as poverty through compelling depictions of specific impoverished subjects.

I focus on American literary manifestations of the picturesque for two reasons: first because American writers explored the relationship between class, aestheticized seeing, and moral sentiment in new and heretofore unexamined ways, and second, because of the importance of literature to the development of the middle class, a subject that has received far less attention in an American than in a British context.³⁰ Before moving into a discussion of the American urban picturesque, it is important to understand why this aesthetic evolved in America in a way that it did not in Britain, where, despite the popularity of slumming, slums were not romanticized in popular novels and newspapers did not produce depictions of urban ghettos as picturesque tourist destinations. There are two primary reasons for this different American evolution. The first is the admiration for the poor derived from the American Transcendentalists, whose writing united aestheticized seeing and moral feeling as a spiritual capacity, and helped to promulgate a national mythos based on the ability to endure hardship. The second reason is that picturesque

³⁰ Mary Poovey’s book *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain* is a recent example.

aesthetics were integral to the emergence of a class structure in America, whereas in Britain this structure already existed.

This study identifies the need that existed in nineteenth-century America for a means of understanding the relations between classes, and specifically the obligations that wealthier people held towards poorer ones. This necessity was heightened by the fact that in America, class difference was correlated with cultural otherness. The Gilded Age is now called “the ‘second wave’ of American immigration”; during this period, America received “two million eastern European Jews, five million Italians, and millions more from Austria-Hungary, Ukraine, Poland, Greece, Syria, and other Mediterranean-Slavic jumping-off points [...] From 1880 to 1910, approximately 1.4 million eastern European Jews alone would make New York their home” (Dowling 84). The people termed “picturesque” in American writing were predominantly Jewish and Italian, although the Bowery culture shaped by a previous generation of Irish immigrants is also a definitive feature of the urban picturesque. In literature ranging from the mid-century journalism of Whitman and sketches by George Foster to the early twentieth-century writing of Hutchins Hapgood, the Bowery is synonymous with roughness that is lively, communitarian, and fundamentally American. In works that depict urban areas as picturesque, the genteel observer models and constructs a mode of approaching otherness in which condemnation is replaced, or mitigated, by interest; this interest signifies tolerance and, at times, an ethically complicated compassion that becomes central to liberal bourgeois values.

The work of Charles Dickens provides a good example of why picturesque aesthetics were not necessary in the same way in Britain as they were in America. While his early work plays with the idea of an urban picturesque, his novels actively work against it, depicting a society connected not by aesthetic taste but rather an ineluctable web of human relations. His

first book-length work, *Sketches by Boz* (1836), originally short pieces published in newspapers and periodicals, contains many elements that became familiar tropes in American writing about the urban working class. For instance, “The Last Cab-Driver, and the First Omnibus Cad” celebrates the volatile, unflappable cab-driver, and the excitement of city life: “You had hardly turned into the street, when you saw a trunk or two lying on the ground: an uprooted post, a hat-box, a portmanteau, and a carpet bag, strewed about in a very picturesque manner: a horse in a cab standing by, looking about him with great unconcern; and a crowd, shouting and screaming with delight” (Dickens, *Sketches* 166). The picturesque here is associated with danger, disorder and the daring-do of the cab-driver; it alerts the reader to the inherent interest of the scene, supported by the delighted spectators. The cab driver, with his knowledge of the city, his insouciance, slang, and camaraderie, is a cousin to the Bowery b’hoy, who in coming decades will delight American audiences. *Sketches*, like much American picturesque writing, relies on the jovial narration of a knowledgeable urban explorer, who serves as a kind of tour guide, providing valuable information and alleviating the potential hazards, moral or otherwise, of travelling through unknown urban environments. Dickens’s detached, lightly ironic but compassionate narrative voice in *Sketches by Boz* anticipates similar postures by American writers like George Foster and H.C. Bunner, who helped to elevate the “Sketch” to an enormously popular and creatively productive form.³¹ Boz’s Sketches, however, differ from

³¹ Foster’s *New York by Gaslight* (1850), transformed “the emerging newspaper sketch into a nationally circulating book” (Connery 53). Kristie Hamilton, in *America’s Sketchbook: The Cultural Life of a Nineteenth-Century Literary Genre*, convincingly argues for the importance of the literary sketch to the America’s emergent literary culture and national self-conception. Because it was “more widely available and formally accessible than the novel, less governable by the critical establishment, and shot through with the tensions and types of local and national culture-making” (Hamilton 1), the sketch serves as a record of the perceptions and concerns of a diverse range of Americans in the nineteenth century. As the history of the picturesque makes clear, the literary sketch, with its basis in subjective experience, ordinary objects, and interest in authenticity, is a clear development of the picturesque visual sketch. Benedict Giomo finds that “[t]he typical representational form of the urban picturesque was the brief sketch or vignette. Essentially ornamental and decorative, the form was infused with a narrative style marked by subtlety and refinement” (54). Although, as I argue in Chapter Four, the reading of the picturesque sketch as purely

their American descendants in two significant ways: there are no immigrants in Dickens's work, and rather than describing whole working-class or immigrant neighbourhoods, as many American writers will do, Dickens makes synecdoches of specific places, such as East End London's Tom-All-Alone's, in *Bleak House* – a place of unrelieved misery and vice. Thus, while Dickens's sketches do, like other nineteenth-century texts such as James Greenwood's *The Seven Curses of London* (1869), write working-class lives in an attempt to make them legible and possibly interesting to wealthier people, they do not offer views of ghettos as places that might offer a pleasant afternoon's jaunt – local colour in the city, as they become in later American writing.³²

Dickens does at times associate poverty with romance in *Sketches*, such as in his depiction of chimney sweeps in "The First of May." After the general practice of dancing on May Day faded, the sweeps "got the dancing to themselves, and they kept it up, and handed it down. This was a severe blow to the romance of spring-time, but it did not entirely destroy it, either; for a portion of it descended to the sweeps with the dancing, and rendered them objects of great interest" (196). As with American depictions of laboring children – not factory-workers, which are never picturesque because rendered too ill and weak by their work to be romanticized, but newspaper and shoe-shine boys – the chimney-sweeps are objects of interest because of their

ornamental is reductive, it is useful to consider the refinement Giamo observes as a development of the posture of the *flâneur*, who brings his sophisticated taste to the urban ghetto.

³² Kristie Hamilton, in her discussion of the early-nineteenth-century British writer Mary Russell Mitford, observes that Mitford's sketches were admired for their "fidelity to the scene" in part because of "the prominent incorporation of the poor into her pictures" (51). Hamilton explores Mitford's work, which was influenced by Washington Irving's 1820 *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon*, as an important example of "the appropriation by a woman writer of the private reconstruction of history and values inscribed in Irving's sketches" (46). Mitford's contribution to the sketch form is particularly notable in the context of the picturesque for the ways that she "emphasizes movement and change, variety and interest – of authentic, everyday activity" (Hamilton 50). Her subjects are, however, entirely rural, and her evocations of the working class do not – as American sketch writers will do – dwell upon the details of their poverty or roughness, but rather imbue them with middle-class values and characteristics.

cheerfulness, hardiness, and an association with bygone ways and a communal practice lacking in society at large. Yet even in this early text, Dickens also paints the picturesque as the province of foppery and pretentiousness in middle-class people striving to differentiate themselves from the lower classes. In “The Boarding-House,” the only other sketch to feature the term “picturesque,” just as in Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, it becomes a way to send up bourgeois cultural aspirations and a mass-produced culture of sentiment.

While Dickens’s *Sketches* do depict some sunny aspects of poverty, more prevalent by far is the association of poverty with “misery and distress” (217), as in “The Pawn-Broker’s Shop,” which Boz illustrates because such places are “but little known, except to the unfortunate beings whose profligacy or misfortune drives them to seek the temporary relief they offer” (217). This assertion suggests what is to become one of the great themes in Dickens’s work, the interconnectedness of all classes of society, and the dangers of failing to recognize it. As the ghost of Marley tells Scrooge in Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*: “Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all, my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of the business” (49). Like the pestilential fog at the opening of *Bleak House*, the plots of Dickens’s novels reveal the connections between wealthy and poor, with hardworking middling and working-class people providing the centripetal force that draws together the disharmonized social parts. Poverty, then, can never serve as a romanticized otherness for Dickens; it is always simply a condition one’s neighbor might be in, and which it is one’s business to know.

If for Dickens poverty is too familiar to be romanticized, it can nonetheless serve sentimental ends, and his representations of the honesty, faith, and fellow-feeling of working people offer clear lessons for the better-off. Such depictions by a writer of Dickens’s popularity

cannot but have informed the American picturesque – and indeed, his interest in visiting slums sparked one of America’s earliest slumming trends: “Soon after the publication, in 1842, of Dickens’s *American Notes*, which included a scathing portion on New York’s notorious Five Points neighborhood, it became the city’s biggest tourist attraction” (Dowling 4). Unlike Gilded Age depictions of slums, however, Dickens’s assessment of Five Points contains nothing to recommend it other than filth, crime, and despair. Its interest as a tourist destination, then, differs from the prospects that later picturesque sketches would supply of love-making Italians, bargain-spielers, Jews, and philosophizing Irishmen. The Five Points fad does, however, indicate the troubling economy of pain and pleasure in which depictions of poverty inevitably participate. In his history of the Bowery, Stephen Paul DeVillo records how “the dive in the Five Points that Dickens went into and described was later renamed ‘Dickens’ Place’ and became so famous that the name was retained even after the original building burned to the ground in the 1850s and had to be rebuilt” (60). Bowery residents continued to capitalize on genteel visitors’ depictions of the area, as we see in the early twentieth-century writing of Hutchins Hapgood, and the slum tour guided by an area’s residents lives on in the twenty-first century, indicating that those who live in rough places are alive to the opportunities posed by wealthier people’s interest in poverty.³³ Dickens’s work helped to initiate American interest in the aesthetic potential of slums and the moral possibilities which depicting them might hold. However, his writing also invokes acts of aestheticization as absurd or insufficient moments of perception. In *Sketches*, the clerk Mr. Tompkins makes himself ridiculous by his excessive excitement over a broken chimney-pot.

³³ Residents of rougher areas also often speak out against slum tours: Vancouver’s *The Georgia Straight* reported in August 2016, “Residents respond to Downtown Eastside walking tour with their own ‘yuppie tour’ of gentrifying businesses.” An earlier article in the *Straight* offers views from residents and business owners on both sides of the debate about whether tours of rough neighborhoods are exploitative or helpful to those who live there (Lupick, 9 Aug 2016).

Stephen Blackpool, the power loom operator in *Hard Times* (1854), is “neither courtly, nor handsome, nor picturesque, in any respect” (190), a description that conveys discomfort with aesthetics functioning as the primary medium through which genteel people approach poorer ones. The line insists that readers respect Blackpool, as the novel’s heroine learns to, for his own good qualities and not because he appeals to an aesthetic sensibility of the wealthy.

Despite their limitations as instruments of moral or social change, representations of class disparities are crucial to the development of class awareness. As did the journals, periodicals, and novels that comprised the republic of letters in England a century before, the literary culture that arose in nineteenth-century America helped to construct the relations between emergent social classes. Richard Brodhead, in his study *Cultures of Letters*, shows “the correlation of newly severed literary worlds with newly sharpened class divisions, and the resultant conversion of literary taste into a prime sign of class difference” and argues that these are “decisive feature[s] of American cultural organization in the Gilded Age” (103-104). Literary representations of poverty as picturesque were written by and for genteel people who were, in the later nineteenth century, learning to perceive their social station as a defined social class. This process was differently fraught in America than in England: in the former, as Stuart Blumin writes, “the very idea of a clearly differentiated set of social levels” (35) was, for many, anathema to the national character. England, by contrast, experienced the painful evolution from a feudal society into a constitutional monarchy in which class position remained a definitive feature of social and political life. The obligations and responsibilities between classes figures prominently in British literature as well: Thomas Carlyle is notorious for the fondness he expresses for the feudal system; his writing mourns capitalism’s destruction of the absolute connection between master and servant he ascribes to feudal society. In “Democracy,” for

instance, he discusses the restrictive but necessary social order, in which a peasant had at least “the inexpressible satisfaction of feeling himself related indissolubly, though in a rude, brass-collar way, to his fellow-mortals in this Earth. He had superiors, inferiors, equals” (*Past and Present* 263). At least, under the aristocracy, “Cash Payment had not then grown to be the universal sole nexus of man to man” (Carlyle, *Chartism* 58). Dickens’s work militates against this impersonal social structure by stressing the relations between classes and the dangers of the cash nexus, and his writing about the poor cannot be dissociated from the sense of social responsibility his works consistently champion.

The American picturesque does not always serve as an argument for the interconnectedness of social classes, but it does bring class relations into view in new and compelling ways. An aesthetic framework through which to perceive class disparities was particularly necessary in nineteenth-century America. Whereas in Britain feudalism supplied some basis for considering the social determinants of class position, class hierarchy in the United States was – and arguably still is – perceived as being determined mainly by an individual’s qualities and choices. However, as Joseph Fichtelberg shows in his frequently-cited work *Critical Fictions: Sentiment and the American Market 1780-1870*, profound economic instability throughout the nineteenth century undermined the American ideal of economic self-determination. Class stratification and financial uncertainty produced narrative responses in which sympathy was a vital aspect of coping with the impersonal destructiveness of capitalism:

American fictions of the market addressed a critical social contradiction. They sought to accommodate a belief in the power of individual action to the persistent evidence that such action was useless in the face of repeated economic crisis. Such narratives needed to work out a new understanding of personal agency by

trying to imagine the individual's place in a system of economic relations that had become increasingly strained and violent. (Fichtelberg 7)

The picturesque intervened in this crisis in two ways: first, picturesque depictions of the poor calmed Americans' fears about both the existence of a permanent underclass and its propensity to revolt, making immigrants and the poor quaint and sometimes admirable rather than frightening; second, picturesque narratives instructed genteel viewers of the poor in appropriate cultural and affective responses to poverty. Fichtelberg argues that a crucial function of nineteenth-century literature was that of negotiating who was entitled to sympathy. As certainty about individual autonomy waned, more affluent citizens learned both to regard poverty as structural and thus not necessarily the sign of moral failings, and to view their own sympathetic responses, rather than more direct reform or charitable activities, as a form of compassionate citizenship. In a society founded on principles of personal autonomy and developed through liberal economic principles, aestheticized seeing and its promulgation through narratives of the urban picturesque functioned to restore individual agency and to provide a structure for understanding the individual's obligations toward others.

This study as a whole is concerned with how picturesque aesthetics contributed to middle-class formation in America, and in particular the influence of this aesthetic on the tastes and values of the liberal bourgeoisie.³⁴ Chapter One examines the association between the picturesque and the middle class and sets up how this aesthetic came to function as a structure of feeling for the American bourgeoisie. Chapter Two looks at the introduction of picturesque aesthetics in America, in a sketch by Nathaniel Hawthorne which illustrates the ethical

³⁴ For a discussion of the social implications of the picturesque in England, see especially Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: the English Rustic Tradition 1740-1850*; also Stephen Copley and Peter Garside, eds. *The Politics of the Picturesque*.

limitations of picturesque representations, and by transcendentalists whose belief in the moral significance of aesthetic engagement with the world enriches both the concept and the social significance of the picturesque. Works by Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman depict the ability to aestheticize any object as a moral and spiritual capacity that has not only personal but also social and political implications. Their writing sets the American picturesque on its trajectory towards its later emergence as a literary trope through which bourgeois writers both depict urban poverty and explore middle-class responses to it. Understanding the influence of the picturesque on these thinkers reveals the deep roots of American bourgeois liberalism in affective orientations toward suffering and their expression in cultural products.

Chapter Three explores the relationship of aestheticized seeing and moral feeling in the journalism of the later nineteenth century. Walt Whitman's early journalism transposes the European *flâneur* to American cities, and most importantly to New York's ghettos, making these areas an integral aspect of both bourgeois cultural edification and social knowledge. Middle-class cosmopolitanism becomes further entangled with the aestheticization of poverty after the publication of Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), which makes the term picturesque central to depictions of slum life and creates new intersections of moral feeling, aestheticized seeing, and social conscience. Chapter Four explores the work of three largely forgotten writers of the late nineteenth century, H.C. Bunner, Brander Matthews, and Hutchins Hapgood, whose work uses the picturesque explicitly to examine the ethics of aestheticizing poverty. Their representations of bourgeois subjects' interest in slums and their residents as picturesque art portray the extent to which liberal attitudes toward the poor were entwined with both aesthetic and affective responses to class disparity. Chapter Five focuses on the work of William Dean

Howells, particularly *Annie Kilburn* (1888), *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), and *Impressions and Experiences* (1896). Together these works develop a theory of the insufficiency of aesthetic responses to poverty as interventions in social problems. *Hazard* and *Impressions* employ the picturesque ironically to comment on middle-class identity and aestheticized sympathy; they initiate a new understanding of middle-class social responsibility and of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics.

The guilt and anxiety in picturesque literature, and its significance for an emerging urban middle class – especially its concern with the potential barrenness of bourgeois life – determine my project’s narrow geographical context. It is primarily the urban picturesque which has exerted its influence on American culture from the nineteenth century until this one; I therefore focus on New York because the urban picturesque begins there as a response to urban growth, immigration, and its concomitant class disparities. Because this project is interested in the literary picturesque, and in particular the cultural work this aesthetic does in urban contexts, I am passing over the tremendous influence it had in visual art and in conceptions of American wilderness.³⁵ This scholarship has also been done: Beth Lueck’s *American Writers and the Picturesque Tour: the Search for National Identity 1790-1860* explores the influence of picturesque tropes on American travel writing. The visual picturesque has been most recently and comprehensively explored by John Conron, in his study *The American Picturesque*. He convincingly argues that “the picturesque was the first American aesthetic. Its influence is everywhere evident in nineteenth-century Euro-American culture. It converts both the world and the human body into readable texts” (xvii). The picturesque caters to the need to make an

³⁵ For the same reason, I omit what Conron calls the “first flowering” of the picturesque in America, “in the generation of Irving, Cooper, and Cole” (307). For a thorough investigation of the picturesque in this era, see Donald Ringe, *The Pictorial Mode: Space and Time in the Art of Irving, Bryant, and Cooper*.

unknown and potentially hostile environment legible because it offers clear guidelines for perception and representation, particularly of uncultivated spaces. “Read ‘steadily and repeatedly,’ natural scenery becomes, in American versions of the picturesque, the chief means of aesthetic education” (Conron xix). In America as in Britain, this education constituted the formation of an aesthetic disposition crucial to the definition of the bourgeoisie. This disposition, or the ability to appreciate the aesthetic properties of any object, Bourdieu defines as being predicated on “distance from the world” (54); in America, however, this way of seeing is promulgated through literature that associates pictorial sight with unity, absorption, and the immutable relation between subject and object.

While I aim in this project to show the influence of the picturesque in urban contexts, I do not wish to elide the impact of this aesthetic on colonial expansion in the Americas. The picturesque was uniquely useful to American conceptions of the frontier and to the project of westward expansion. Alan Trachtenberg discusses the relationship between exploitation and a mythology of the “West” as “picturesque landscape” in *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age*.³⁶ From works such as Clarence King’s *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada* (1871) and William Cullen Bryant’s massively popular, two-volume *Picturesque America* (1874), Americans gained a sense of the natural environment as both “aesthetic object [and] as a resource” (Trachtenberg 18). Bryant’s work, in particular, functioned as travel guide, offering the newly opened cross-country railroad as “a chariot winging Americans on an

³⁶ See especially pp. 17-19. See also Giorgio Bertellini, *Italy in Early American Cinema: Race, Landscape and the Picturesque*, who deals more extensively with the picturesque as an instrument of colonialization, both within America and abroad; in particular Chapter Three, which examines the proliferation of travelogues and their “reification of . . . picturesque form [which] hid their stylized domestication of wilderness, including all the violence perpetrated on the landscape and its native inhabitants” (113).

aesthetic journey through the new empire. Tourism, already implicit in the landscape conventions, becomes yet another form of acting upon the land” (Trachtenberg 19).

The colonial implications of aestheticizing the American landscape are clear,³⁷ and not only on the “frontier”: the “sentimentalizing of the rustic landscape” (Bermingham, *Landscape* 54) effected by early proponents of the picturesque is evident – if arguably more sinister – in nineteenth-century renderings of the American south.³⁸ Roberta Sokolitz, in the recent collection *Landscape of Slavery: The Plantation in American Art*, discusses the influence of British landscape artists on early nineteenth-century American painters and the ways that “the idealizing vocabulary of picturesque aesthetics” impacted representations of southern plantations throughout the century (Hoffius and Mack 55).³⁹ Several essays in this collection also consider the influence of a related eighteenth-century English landscape tradition, the pastoral, which like

³⁷ The picturesque served colonial interests in the Caribbean as well, as Krista Thompson makes clear in her recent book *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque*.

³⁸ The nostalgia associated with New Orleans in novels such as George Washington Cable’s *The Grandissimes* (1880), however, falls outside the definition of the picturesque, despite Cable’s use of this term in that novel. In this context, the picturesque designates the broader idea of something that makes a good picture, and it is associated with New Orleans as it was before the Louisiana Purchase: there is thus, “left to our eyes but a poor vestige of the picturesque view presented to those who looked down the rue Royale before the garish day that changed the rue Enghien into Ingine street, and dropped the ‘e’ from Royale” (145). What would have been picturesque was a more elaborate, courtly time in the city’s history. The poor in this city are in fact explicitly “unpicturesque” (86). Inter-class relations in this novel tend toward the tragic, asserting neither the spiritual elevation of the poor, nor the education of the genteel through their experience in poverty. Aurore Nancanou is a poignant character, and her pluck facing poverty verges on picturesque, but her strength comes in concealing her poverty and retaining the appearance of gentility; such dissimulation makes poverty a shameful state, and therefore not one the narrative embraces as picturesque.

³⁹ This essay also contains fascinating discussions of paintings that employ picturesque principles to convey the perspective of indigenous and black subjects. See Sokolitz, “Picturing the Plantation,” pp. 30-57, especially pp. 46-47; 52-53. Similarly, in “The Picturesque, Miss Nottage, and the Caribbean Sublime,” Richard J. Powell explores how Caribbean artists use picturesque tropes in “ironic, self-conscious, and/or contradictory ways” to interrogate colonial perspectives (167). John Michael Vlach’s *The Planter’s Prospect: Privilege and Slavery in Plantation Paintings* also addresses the depiction – and lack thereof – of southern blacks in nineteenth-century art and the influence of picturesque principles on paintings of southern plantations.

the picturesque romanticizes the natural world and those who work the land.⁴⁰ The pastoral, like the picturesque, “portrays a less complex state of existence than the writer’s own” (Buell 4); both aesthetics evoke simplicity, authenticity, and vibrancy in idealized renderings of lower-class people.

However, whereas the pastoral in America represents “a desire, in the face of the growing power and complexity of organized society, to disengage from the dominant culture and to seek out the basis for a simpler, more satisfying mode of life in a realm ‘closer,’ as we say, to nature” (Marx 54), the picturesque offers a more complex engagement with modernity. Picturesque aesthetics are adaptable to the city, and arguably have found their most lasting expression there, because they embody the pastoral nostalgia for a lost time in actual, physical decay; rather than an idealized purity, the picturesque offers romanticized corrosion, investing it with the qualities formerly associated with rural life in order to bring them into urban, industrialized modernity.⁴¹ The picturesque makes beautiful what the pastoral denies: it situates the longed-for qualities of simplicity, authenticity, and community within working-class neighborhoods apparently free of the social constraints and falseness associated with genteel life.⁴² Picturesque ghettos and their inhabitants can be seen as cracks in the edifice of modern capitalism, suggesting structural

⁴⁰ Gordon M. Sayre discusses the impact of the pastoral on British and settler conceptions of the indigenous peoples of the Americas in “The Oxymoron of American Pastoralism.”

⁴¹ Stephanie Palmer’s *Together by Accident: American Local Color Literature and the Middle Class* explores encounters with picturesque characters in rural contexts as manifestations of nostalgia for pre-industrial life and of increasing regional and class disparities; the present study builds on Palmer’s by showing how in urban contexts the picturesque grapples directly with middle-class social concerns and ethical dilemmas about inequality.

⁴² It is significant that picturesque characters are never factory workers; they are fruit sellers, dancers, seamstresses – invariably occupations that do not rely on mechanized production. That is not to say, however, that they are outside the modern economy; picturesque characters may work in hotels or as domestics for the wealthy, and they often talk in the most modern slang.

problems. They allow glimpses of a communal existence nostalgically reconstructed within urban space.

The focus on the urban picturesque also, as we can see, allows me to circumvent the immense issue of race in the United States. This subject should be explored in future studies, which could investigate the many aspects of picturesque aesthetics that bear directly on American race relations, such as the Harlem Renaissance, Beat Culture, or the current ubiquity of hip-hop culture.⁴³ I offer instead a detailed account of how and why the picturesque originated as an important expression of social and ethical issues in middle-class life. The picturesque provides an unique opportunity to talk about class as a social phenomenon distinct from race and other social categories. As several critics have recently observed, questions of class in America have long been subsumed within those of race, ethnicity, and gender.⁴⁴ Although the American picturesque is by no means entirely free of essentializing claims about ethnicity (for instance, in its characterizations of various immigrant populations), the social and ethical value of the picturesque derives from its focus on experiences related to class and class identity. Aesthetic interest in immigrants and the poor played a significant role in combating nineteenth-century

⁴³ Jason Tanz's *Other People's Property: A Shadow History of Hip-Hop in White America* offers a starting point for such a study, looking at how and why hip-hop has had such mass appeal for white youth. Tanz observes that "[t]o an unprecedented degree, our popular culture consists of white people entertaining themselves with, and identifying with, expressions of black people's struggles and triumphs" (xi). Further work on the contemporary picturesque would connect the idealizations of hardship found in nineteenth-century picturesque narratives – including a sense of the authenticity and self-reliance derived from "street" life – with the current predilection for rap music.

⁴⁴ Amy Schrager Lang, for instance, argues that "Americans displace the reality of class into the discourses of race, gender, ethnicity, and other similarly 'locked-in' categories of individual identity. This displacement, in turn, distorts sexual and racial relationships by redistributing conflicts of class across these other domains" (6). See also Gavin Jones: "In their unusually statistical analysis of the breadth of articles that have appeared in *American Quarterly* since its inception in 1949, Larry Griffin and Maria Tempenis conclude that there is a long-standing bias in American studies toward the multicultural questions of gender, race, and ethnicity at the expense of analyses of social class – an emphasis on questions of identity and representation rather than on those of social structural position" (6).

theories that poverty indicated essential moral or physical degeneracy, and thus to engendering the sympathy for classed others essential to liberalism.⁴⁵

There is, however, a notable absence of black characters in nineteenth-century urban literature. Scholars of Riis's work have discussed his avoidance of predominantly black neighborhoods and the racial hierarchy that emerges from his application of the picturesque to various ethnic populations.⁴⁶ Giorgio Bertellini, for instance, observes that “[t]he picturesque operated not as a racially democratic aesthetic trope, but as a discriminating one that privileged those social groups that counted as white” (162). It is significant that the largely black neighborhoods of New York's Tenderloin district are not featured in any of the nineteenth-century writing about the city's picturesque ghettos. Carrie Tirado Bramen argues that white authors did not depict these areas as “quaint” or “charming” because “Blackness signaled the representational limit of the picturesque. Concerned with the ‘smiling aspects’ of modern life, the picturesque could not address uncomfortable topics such as racism and racial segregation” (“Spectacle” 448). While I argue that the picturesque is not concerned simply to show ghettos as locales for interesting excursions by the bourgeoisie, I agree with Bramen on her essential point: black people in America were, in the Gilded Age, beyond the framework of the picturesque. The reasons for this should be considered in a work that focuses specifically on blackness and the

⁴⁵ Class fluidity – both middle-class characters benefitting from temporary poverty and “deserving” poor characters being rewarded with greater wealth – is a central dynamic in many of the plays and early realist novels and short stories that concerned the urban poor. Prominent examples of such works include Edward Townsend's *Daughter of the Tenements* (1895) and *Chimmie Fadden* (1895), and Richard Harding Davis's *Cinderella and Other Stories* (1896). This project does not discuss these works in detail, focusing instead on the urban sketch, a form which made more explicit use of the picturesque, employing the term to describe rough people and places. Romanticized portrayals of poverty and the depictions of wealthier characters as morally compromised can also be found in the slum plays popular throughout the end of the nineteenth century, which I discuss in Chapter Four.

⁴⁶ See also David Leviatin, in his Introduction to *How the Other Half Lives*. For an exploration of how museums and public historians tend to elide Riis's racial biases, see Edward T. O'Donnell, “Pictures vs. Words? Public History, Tolerance, and the Challenge of Jacob Riis.”

picturesque in America. I contend, however, that such inquiries will benefit from a fuller understanding of how picturesque aesthetics shaped American discourses of class and social responsibility, as well as how the aesthetic pleasures of roughness became fundamentally linked to a desirably subversive identity.

Chapter One

Pleasure, Sympathy, and the Rough Object: The Ambivalent Ethics of the Picturesque

The aesthetic debates of the late eighteenth century provided the heyday of picturesque theory in England. The work of picturesque theorists William Gilpin, Richard Payne Knight, and Uvedale Price and their engagement with the prominent aesthetic concepts of the day – in particular disinterest, the sublime and the beautiful, and the relation of aesthetic to moral judgment – underpin my discussion of the nineteenth-century picturesque. In addition, the intersections of eighteenth-century aesthetic theory with the moral philosophy of Adam Smith indicate the values and beliefs at stake for liberal societies in their representations of structurally distanced others; the most important of these is sympathy, the possibilities for art to promote it, and the degree to which such art benefits the creation of a just society. My project is guided by two primary interests: first, to understand how and why the picturesque obtained its prominent position within Gilded Age literature, and second, to theorize the emergence of a bourgeois liberal culture dependent on representations of structurally distanced others to generate and articulate a system of values in which sympathy for others is a central component. Eighteenth-century aesthetics provide the framework for my contention that the picturesque can promote a more ethical bourgeoisie, even as this aesthetic evolves from and relies upon morally ambivalent tropes, primarily because it works through the reflection upon individual perceptions and their relationship to one's broader community that was conceived by early aesthetic theorists as the moral underpinnings of taste.

I have come to these questions because of the striking prevalence of the picturesque within contemporary culture, a fascination with roughness and its perceived association with

vibrancy, intensity, and authenticity that has persisted, with ebbs and flows, for more than two centuries. For example, during the 2014 World Cup, held in Brazil, Milwaukee soccer fans could, if they so desired, watch the games at a bar that had composed its patio to mimic a Brazilian slum. A local blog advertised: “The Nomad event includes the temporary construction of a courtyard viewing area inspired by the colours and spirit of the mountainside ‘favelas’ of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.”⁴⁷ The fake favela conforms in several ways to the principles of picturesque beauty first outlined by William Gilpin in his treatises published between 1782 and 1809.⁴⁸ At the Nomad, the bright and highly contrasting colour scheme – pink, green, orange, blue, yellow, and red – provides “variety” and “contrast” (Gilpin, *Observations* 20). The clothes hanging from clotheslines strung across the courtyard render the space “free from the formality of lines” (Gilpin, *Observations* 18) and suggest both the dangling “Mosses of various hues” (*Observations* 24) which Gilpin praises and, more significantly, a life exposed both to the elements and to the curious eyes of outside observers. (As we will see, nineteenth-century American iterations of the picturesque consistently include descriptions of brightly-coloured clothes strung between tenements.) The fake favela beer garden suggests the continued ubiquity of an aesthetics predicated on roughness and vibrancy, and it indicates the propensity of wealthier people to take pleasure in ragged or derelict environments. The cultivation of such an aesthetic disposition is rooted in Gilpin’s handbooks, which were significantly not primarily instructions on how to sketch, but on how to see. Gilpin’s work not only made available new

⁴⁷ *Death and Taxes*.

⁴⁸ *An Essay on Prints; Containing Remarks on Picturesque Beauty, the Different Kinds of Prints, and the Characters of the Most Noted Masters* (1762), six volumes of travel writing published between 1782 and (posthumously) 1809 – the first of which, *Observations on the River Wye*, I refer to here – *Forest Views, Relative Chiefly to Picturesque Beauty Illustrated by the Scenes of New Forest in Hampshire* (1791), and *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty, On Picturesque Travel, and on Sketching Landscape, to which is added a poem, On Landscape Painting* (composed in the 1770s but published in 1794), the work which develops most fully the concept of the picturesque.

objects as sources of aesthetic enjoyment, but also presented a new orientation within the aesthetic theories of the eighteenth century, one which for the first time suggested that moral and aesthetic judgement might be considered two separate activities.

Gilpin's handbooks made possible the perception of objects previously considered ugly or offensive as beautiful, and his narrative depictions of these objects do not indicate that a moral or emotional response is required by the viewer either to enjoy the picturesque or to create a successful work of picturesque art. The single longest description of any location in *Observations on the River Wye* is of Tintern Abbey, the ruined exterior of which is included as a sketch. Most fascinating, however, is the interior, where the ruination is most complete, and to which Gilpin is led by an old and crippled woman:

All indeed she meant to tell us, was the story of her own wretchedness; and all she had to shew us, was her own miserable habitation. We did not expect to be interested: but we found we were. I never saw so loathsome a human dwelling. It was a cavern loftily vaulted between two ruined walls, which streamed with various coloured stains of unwholesome dews. The floor was earth; yielding through moisture to the tread. Not the merest utensil or furniture of any kind appeared, but a wretched bedstead, spread with a few rags, and drawn into the middle of the cell to prevent its receiving the damp that trickled down the walls. At one end was an aperture, which served just to let in light enough to discover the wretchedness within. – When we stood in the midst of this cell of misery, and felt the chilling damps which struck us in every direction, we were rather surprised that the wretched inhabitant was still alive, than that she had only lost the use of her limbs. (Gilpin, *Observations* 51-52)

This passage represents the first published depiction of abject poverty that associates it with the aesthetics of the picturesque. Despite using some variants of the adjective “wretched” four times and depicting in detail the misery of the person inhabiting this ruin, Gilpin is frankly fascinated. Unlike earlier depictions of wretchedness such as Hogarth’s 1751 print “Gin Lane,” which shows a London street crowded with drunken, destitute, and dead people, and served an overtly moral and didactic purpose,⁴⁹ Gilpin’s depiction appears in a travel narrative for those who can afford to travel. His only comment on “this scene of desolation” surrounding the Abbey is that “the wretchedness of the inhabitants was remarkable” (50). Neither his expression of “interest” or of “surprise” that the old woman still has her limbs at all suggests an affective response to her plight or to that of the other impoverished inhabitants of the area.⁵⁰ While Gothic literature was already making frequent use of ruins to embody horror and to evoke the sublime, Gilpin’s work is devoted to the ruin as a species not of the sublime – a word which does not appear in *Observations* – but rather of beauty, which his theory of the picturesque expands to include objects that do not possess the qualities of smoothness and harmoniousness of the beautiful. The relation of the picturesque to the beautiful and the sublime will be dealt with in detail below; what is important here is that Gilpin’s evocation of wretchedness does not impart a feeling of horror, sorrow, or compassion: the inhabited ruin, and those who live miserably in its vicinity, are quite simply instances of the kind of irregularity and roughness which Gilpin termed picturesque.

The search for the picturesque, in Gilpin's telling, can be undertaken without reference to one’s moral judgement. Bustling towns, for instance, are incompatible with picturesque beauty:

⁴⁹ The print was created in response to the British gin crisis and circulated cheaply in an effort “to reform working-class morality” (*The Guardian*). Moreover, the scene is too chaotic and ghastly to accord with the principles that would later undergird the picturesque, which require the omission of horrifying or grotesque details.

⁵⁰ His only putatively moral response to the scene of impoverishment he witnesses is to comment that those who “occupy little huts, raised among the ruins of the monastery, seem to have no employment, but begging: as if a place, once devoted to indolence, could never again become the seat of industry” (*Observations* 50).

“The moral sense,” he avers, “can never make a convert of the picturesque eye” (Gilpin, *Observations* 12). While this statement is made in relation to the moral good associated with industriousness, its broader implication is that objects which might be considered signs of moral dereliction – beggars and hovels, for instance – can yet provide aesthetic gratification. The sights he chronicles do not evoke sympathetic responses, only aesthetic ones: later in *Observations*, Gilpin describes a Dutch vessel that has been wrecked, drowning all its passengers including the entire family of a man awaiting their arrival. Gilpin notes the circumstances without a single expression of concern or condolence, considering only how to render such a busy scene artistically and where in a painting to place the capsized ship (123-4). In his later work, Gilpin again defends the search for picturesque beauty as a pleasant amusement into which morality need not enter. He considers, for a moment, “in what way the mind is gratified by these objects. We might begin in moral stilt; and consider the objects of nature in a higher light, than merely as amusement. We might observe that a search after beauty should naturally lead the mind to the great origin of all beauty” – that is, God. “But tho in theory this seems a natural climax, we insist the less upon it, as in fact we have scarce ground to hope, that every admirer of *picturesque beauty*, is an admirer also of the *beauty of virtue*” (Gilpin, *Essays* 47, emphasis in original). Not only is the moral sense unable to create picturesque beauty where it does not naturally occur (the understanding that industriousness is morally superior to idleness cannot make prospering towns picturesque), but the apprehension of picturesque beauty is also not, Gilpin suggests, certain to generate a moral response. Thus, while nature was for eighteenth-century thinkers a manifestation of the divine order, the appreciation of nature as picturesque does not refer to that order. Gilpin, while acknowledging that the apprehension of beauty can and perhaps should have spiritual benefit, specifically excuses the seeker of picturesque beauty

from this moral relation to his subject. Gilpin was a clergyman, and yet his writings on the picturesque, with their rather arch tone (“we have scarce ground to hope...”), seem to separate aesthetic from moral pursuits, at least where the aesthetics of dereliction are concerned. Doing so was a major claim for the eighteenth century. The picturesque abandons, according to Stephen Copley, “a key trope in which economic provision and aesthetic pleasure are united within the terms of a discourse of morality in much earlier eighteenth-century loco-descriptive writing”; Gilpin’s “picturesque eye ... merely examines the face of nature as a beautiful object” (Copley 49). This basis of the picturesque in a separation between aesthetic and affective or moral responses remains at the heart of its ambivalent ethics.

Gilpin’s construction of the picturesque’s moral neutrality is all the more striking because picturesque beauty is antithetical to the priorities of the beautiful. Anthony Cooper, The Third Earl of Shaftesbury, in his profoundly influential *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711), asserts that the beautiful is the model for the order of society: “what is beautiful is *harmonious and proportionable*; what is harmonious and proportionable, is *true*; and what is at once both *beautiful* and *true*, is, of consequence *agreeable* and *good*” (III: 182-183). Society is, Shaftesbury argues throughout, a complex but unified system: discord in any aspect will necessarily affect the whole. Art should therefore be comprised of proportionate and harmonious interactions which create a cohesive society and cause individuals to reflect upon these virtuous qualities. Yet he begins the third volume of his *Characteristicks* warning of a dangerous tendency taking hold in society toward whimsical and irregular art:

A manner therefore is invented to confound this simplicity and conformity of design. Patch-work is substituted. Cuttings and shreds of learning, with various fragments, and points of wit, are drawn together, and tacked in any fantastic form.

If they chance to cast a lustre, and spread a sort of sprightly glare, the Miscellany is approved, and the complex form and texture of the work admired. The eye, which before was to be won by regularity, and had kept true to measure and strict proportion, is by this means pleasingly drawn aside, to commit a kind of debauch, and amuse itself in gaudy colours, and disfigured shapes of things. Custom, in the mean while, has not only tolerated this licentiousness, but rendered it even commendable, and brought it into the highest repute. The wild and whimsical, under the name of the odd and pretty, succeed in the room, of the graceful and the beautiful. Justness and accuracy of thought are set aside, as too constraining, and of too painful an aspect to be endured in the agreeable and more easy commerce of gallantry, and modern wit. (Cooper III: 4-5)

Beauty, in Shaftesbury's definition, is based in harmoniousness, in proportionality and regularity, and these qualities are equated with a moral relation to the world and to a universal order and wholeness of which each person is a part.⁵¹ “One is struck by the beauty of any object of understanding, and the beautiful is itself a sign of an order waiting to be grasped by the mind” (Den Uyl x). Beauty offers an example of wholeness and perfection; it “gives form to virtue” (Valihora 102). Irregularity – the “wild and whimsical” – abandons this embodiment of order

⁵¹ “Avoiding any attempt at a rigorous demonstration of the goodness of the natural order, he simply strove ... to prove the *unity* of all things, and asserted ... the teleological interdependence which unity, for him, entailed” (J. Bernstein 25). It is significant that Shaftesbury's concept of order was not restricted to that created by men; rather, as David Marshall observes in “The Problem of the Picturesque,” he “condemned the formality, symmetry, and artificial order of the classical garden associated with France and Holland” (415). Marshall connects this condemnation with the development in England of new types of gardens based in “a pre-Romantic effort to embrace a state of nature with the transports of a new enthusiasm that sought out the wild, the savage, and sublime ... in an at once ideological and allegorical display that sought to figure English democracy and liberty in contrast to French despotism” (416). In “The Moralists,” Shaftesbury's enthusiast praises “the rude rocks, the mossy caverns, the irregular unwrought grottos and broken falls of water, with all the horrid graces of wilderness itself” for “representing Nature more than the formal mockery of Princely gardens” (Cooper II: 394) a depiction which anticipates the descriptions of Gilpin, Price, and Knight.

and the sense of unity such an aesthetic promotes, replacing it with an individual and fleeting sense of pleasure. A primary tenet of the picturesque is the potential beauty of “the disfigured shapes of things”; in the next century, a rejection of constraint and a taste for wildness would contribute to debauches of more than the eye.

Gilpin’s handbooks, with their accounts of enjoyable travel and notable sights, are pleasure reading, free from the complex associations of aesthetics with morality and social good. “[T]he purpose of the Picturesque was, as Gilpin so often noted, to ‘please’, ‘delight’, and ‘amuse’ the Picturesque eye and not to challenge the intellect” (Bermingham, “Ready-to-Wear” 84). His style and his proposition of an aesthetics for aesthetics’ sake presents a decisive move away from the Shaftesburian mode of thought which dominated eighteenth-century aesthetic discourse.⁵² For Shaftesbury, aesthetics are fundamental to our relationship with the world, because they offer a “way of organizing sensations” (Valihora 40). Most important when considering the development of the picturesque, aesthetics for Shaftesbury “make tastes the first moment in a study of human moral nature” (Valihora 33). As he writes in his “Miscellaneous Reflections”: “Thus we see, after all, that ‘tis not merely what we call *Principle*, but a Taste, which governs Men” (Cooper III: 177). I take as my basis of argument the idea that taste is indeed a fundamental aspect of our moral orientations toward the world, that how people think and act is expressed in and influenced by aesthetic judgements, and that we therefore have a responsibility to reflect upon these judgements. Gilpin’s handbooks indicate a gap between aesthetic and moral judgement which has grown wider in the past two centuries, at the same time

⁵² Shaftesbury's *Characteristicks* was the second most reprinted book of the eighteenth century, and “has been credited with pioneering some forms of modern thinking about aesthetics and aesthetic experience” (Den Uyl vii). “Peter de Bolla, in *The Discourse of the Sublime: History, Aesthetics and the Subject* (Basil Blackwell, 1989), notes the bizarre popularity of aesthetics... De Bolla suggests there were as many as 6000 works on aesthetics produced during the period” (Valihora 303 n. 29).

as the aesthetics of dereliction central to the picturesque offer a potent opportunity to consider the ways in which taste expresses sentiment and influences action.

Gilpin's work was not the first to disentangle virtue from proportionality or from beauty more generally. Edmund Burke, in his profoundly influential *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756), dispatched the idea that proportion is essential to beauty, and replaced moral reasoning with "passion and emotion as the products of aesthetic perception" (Hussey 57).⁵³ In Section XI, "How Far the Idea of Beauty May Be Applied to Virtue," Burke argues that

affixing the name of beauty to proportion, congruity, and perfection, as well as to qualities of things yet more remote from our natural ideas of it, and from one another, has tended to confound our ideas of beauty, and left us no standard or rule to judge by, that was not even more uncertain and fallacious than our own fancies. This loose and inaccurate manner of speaking has therefore misled us both in the theory of taste and of morals; and induced us to remove the science of our duties from their proper basis (our reason, our relations, and our necessities), to rest it upon foundations altogether visionary and unsubstantial. (190)

Gilpin's concept of picturesque beauty applies to rough or common objects Burke's idea that beauty is not the material manifestation of metaphysical unity, but the product of specific qualities apprehended by perceiving subjects.⁵⁴ Martin Price argues that "[b]y reducing the

⁵³ In "The Meaning of the 'Sublime and Beautiful': Shaftesburian contexts and Rhetorical Issues in Edmund Burke's 'Philosophical Enquiry'," Paddy Bullard argues that Burke's treatise was originally a response to Shaftesbury's *Characteristicks*, and an attempt to "purge moral discourse of ... aesthetic terms" (169).

⁵⁴ Uvedale Price, a disciple of Burke's and theorist of the picturesque, responds to Burke's claims by arguing that, because both beauty and virtue can be both a collective idea and a particular quality, "Virtue ... seems to be, in a moral and metaphysical light, precisely what beauty is with regards to sensible objects" (*Essay* 461).

beautiful from a comprehensive aesthetic term to the name of a limited and lesser experience, Burke opened the way for others to identify new aesthetic categories” (262) – most prominently, the picturesque.

Gilpin defines the picturesque in relation to Burke’s concepts of the beautiful and the sublime (as did subsequent picturesque theorist Uvedale Price), and in *Three Essays* he classes picturesque objects into these categories, though he fears this is inaccurate (42).⁵⁵ He explains that the picturesque always combines the two, and designates objects as one or the other as its qualities predominate (Gilpin 43). Although Gilpin refers to “picturesque beauty,” his use of the term derives from Burke’s association of the beautiful with pleasure (Burke 9), rather than with any specific qualities of beauty. The simplest way to think of the picturesque in relation to these categories is as a domesticated sublime – rather than the peaks of the Alps, the picturesque delights in the craggy hill or thatched roof; the ruined castle is integrated into a pastoral landscape. As John Ruskin will observe in the nineteenth century, if the picturesque represents images of “sorrow and old age, attributes which are both sublime, [this is] not a dominant expression, but one mingled with such familiar and common characters as prevent the object from becoming perfectly pathetic in its sorrow, or perfectly venerable in its age” (Ruskin 2). The homeliness or familiarity of the picturesque brings infiniteness, which is one of the attributes of Burke’s sublime (Burke 52), into the finite and accessible everyday world.

In mediating between the sublime and beautiful, the picturesque brings the aestheticizing subject into contact with potentially distressing objects, and makes it possible to perceive these, too, as aesthetically pleasing. Beauty Burke defined as “a social quality” (18), because it creates

⁵⁵ “Between these two categories William Gilpin inserted the Picturesque, which was not smooth like beauty but ‘rugged’ ‘rough’ and destructive of symmetry, yet devoid of sublimity’s power and obscurity” (Brewer 649)

“sentiments of tenderness and affection” (19) in the beholder. Gilpin’s handbooks suggest, however, that aesthetics are separate not only from moral but also from emotional investment. Gilpin claims that “roughness forms the most essential point of difference between the beautiful, and the picturesque (*Three* 6); however, arguably the difference of effect, rather than any particular physical characteristic, is what distinguishes them most.⁵⁶ Picturesque objects do have “a social quality,” but not, like beauty, for the purpose of inspiring tenderness, “love,” or any “passion similar to it” (Burke 74); the effect of the picturesque, as Hipple and others have noted, is “curiosity” (204)⁵⁷ – and often tinged with disgust or apprehension. Like the beautiful, however, picturesque objects do inspire their beholders to “enter willingly into a kind of relation with them” (Burke 19). As an aesthetic response to sights of privation and dereliction, the picturesque potentially replaces the “love” Burke associates with beauty with the “sympathy” that he says can be produced by fearsome objects.⁵⁸ The complexity of the social and ethical implications of picturesque aesthetics derives in part from the fact that, while they do not necessarily generate a personal relation with the objects under observation, the composition of

⁵⁶ Price claims that “when there are any marked irregularities in the features combined with the qualities of beauty, although such combinations have often a wild variety and playfulness, more attractive perhaps than even beauty of a more pure and unmixed kind, yet the difference is manifest, and the addition of the term picturesque to that of beauty, most accurately marks the distinction” (*Dialogue* 37). Yet this definition is only of one aspect of the picturesque, and cannot be seen to encompass the picturesque qualities of hovels, ruined mills, etc. which he also sees as sources of the picturesque. He also observes that, “the beautiful in nature is that moment before which something would seem unfinished and after which it begins to decay” (*Dialogue* 32). The picturesque, then, might take over once it can no longer be beautiful – beauty decays into the picturesque.

⁵⁷ See also Bermingham: “instead of soothing the eye and awakening protective feelings of affection in the viewer, as did the Beautiful, the Picturesque stimulated, excited and irritated the eye and provoked feelings of curiosity, interest and amusement (“Ready-to-Wear” 88).

⁵⁸ Burke contends that “sympathy” – one of the “principal links” in “the great chain of society” – can “partake of the nature of those [passions] which regard self-preservation, and turning upon pain may be a source of the sublime” (21). As I discuss below, Sir Joshua Reynolds held that the appreciation of art proceeds from an intuitive emotional response which he terms sympathy. This is a useful concept when considering the picturesque, because the appreciation of a potentially picturesque object as art can displace or elide the emotional response to the specific conditions that make the object picturesque.

these objects for viewing does bring perceiver and perceived into a relation which is inscribed in the picturesque view, and this is an element of picturesque aesthetics which Gilpin did not foresee.

In contrast to Burke's focus on the physiological and psychological responses to objects that render them beautiful or sublime – the passions of self-propagation and self-preservation, respectively – Gilpin insists that a viewer's moral or affective response to an object or scene has no bearing on its creation as a picturesque object, which is essentially a technical act (an approach which, as we shall see, contributed to its popularity). The technicality of the picturesque, its reliance on a delineated set of ideas, also precludes it from the Kantian definition of Taste: "Taste is then the faculty of judging *a priori* of the communicability of feelings that are bound up with a given representation (without the mediation of a concept.)" (*Critique* 173).⁵⁹ The fact that picturesque judgement is learned means that it violates the first principle of Taste, which is that one "think for oneself" (Kant, *Critique* 171); moreover, its inconsistency – the fact that the picturesque relies on learning to see that which is productive and useful as aesthetically uninteresting, and that which is abhorrent as pleasing – further distances it from the Kantian concept of Taste, which requires consistency of thought, or Reason, which is the basis of morality (Kant, *Critique* 172).⁶⁰ The foreboding skies and melancholy valleys achieved by

⁵⁹ As I will discuss further below, the basis of picturesque aesthetics in an easily communicable concept contributed both to its popularity and its ridicule. The fact that the picturesque cannot claim to be "perceived as mentally bound up with the mere judgement upon an object, which is represented *a priori* in a judgement of taste as a universal rule for every one" (Kant, *Critique* 165) is evident in Uvedale Price's *Dialogue*, in the character of Mr. Seymour, who fails to perceive many picturesque objects because he is only then being educated in the principles of this aesthetic.

⁶⁰ The specificity of the picturesque standpoint excludes it from the Kantian definition of Judgement, which requires "enlarged thought," of which one is only capable "if he disregards the subjective private conditions of his own judgement, by which so many others are confined, and reflects upon it from a *universal standpoint* (which he can only determine by placing himself at the standpoint of others)" (Kant, *Critique* 172). The picturesque is thus lacking in Kant's three fundamental principles of Taste: "*unprejudiced* thought," "*enlarged* thought," and "*consecutive* thought" (*Critique* 171, emphases in original.)

picturesque techniques of shading and composition are, for Gilpin, simply visually interesting, and rooted not in passion but in pleasure and curiosity – feelings, certainly, but not those of sufficient potency to be related either to the love of life or the fear of death. Hussey argues that because Burke’s concept of the beautiful is based in a physiological response to an object, Burke had “broken away from a moral conception of beauty,” and that he “got only as far as sensuous concept” (60). By contrast, as theorists of the picturesque observe, the picturesque depends on the *absence* of physiological response; it is hard to imagine that Tintern Abbey and its resident would have been so aesthetically pleasing should their dampness and presumable odor have been taken into consideration. Indeed, such considerations would likely intrude upon aesthetic enjoyment not only physically, but also psychologically, forcing the viewer to apprehend his or her subject as suffering continually in the unpleasant conditions under observation. If there is, as Kant believed, “a single ultimate ground for both taste and morality” (Guyer 309), then the picturesque position is beyond its perimeter.

Until the rupture caused by an aesthetics of irregularity and raggedness, taste was not a solely personal preference, but an expression of a moral sense based in an “intersubjectively valid demand or imputation” (Guyer 323). “*Taste*,” Kant explains in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790), “is the faculty of judging of an object or a method of representing it by an *entirely disinterested* satisfaction or dissatisfaction” (55, emphasis in original). Disinterestedness requires the ability to look beyond one’s individual needs, desires, and perceptions: “The condition of necessity which a judgement of taste asserts is the Idea of a common sense” (Kant, *Critique* 92). Like Shaftesbury’s *Sensus Communis*, Kant’s common sense argues for the possibility that people can see beyond their own perspectives, accessing “a larger, more capacious point of view” (Valihora 94). The philosophies presented by both Shaftesbury and

Kant attempt to reconcile a subjective and universal ethics, and this universality is accessible through aesthetic judgement. As Terry Eagleton offers,

[w]hen, for Kant, we find ourselves concurring spontaneously in an aesthetic judgement, able to agree that a certain phenomenon is sublime or beautiful, we exercise a previous form of intersubjectivity, establishing ourselves as a community of feeling subjects linked by a quick sense of our shared capacities. The aesthetic is in no way cognitive, but it has about it something of the form and structure of the rational; it thus invites us with all the authority of a law, but at a more affective, intuitive level. (75)

Such commonly accessible judgments – affective responses that command assent because made from a standpoint we can imagine others also occupying – Shaftesbury is concerned to preserve against odd and irregular aesthetics and the “debauches” they engender. And indeed, as the picturesque became associated with the urban poor, slumming became a kind of disinhibited adventure for the wealthy, one arguably predicated on the refusal of an intersubjective relation to the people aestheticized for the adventurers’ pleasure. For Kant as for Shaftesbury, aesthetics are significant because they provide “an elusive third way between the vagaries of subjective feeling and the bloodless rigour of the understanding” (Eagleton 17). The apprehension of beauty is a spontaneous, felt reaction that also holds the possibility of disinterested judgement, because to find something beautiful is to abstract the object from a personal sense of gratification and consider the object as it might be perceived by others:

under the *sensus communis* we must include the Idea of a sense *common to all*, i.e. of a faculty of judgement, which in its reflection takes account (*a priori*) of the mode of representation of all other men in thought; in order *as it were* to

compare its judgement with the collective Reason of humanity, and thus to escape the illusion arising from the private conditions that could be so easily taken for objective, which would injuriously affect the judgement. This is done by comparing our judgement with the possible rather than the actual judgements of others, and by putting ourselves in the place of any other man, by abstracting from the limitations which contingently attach to our own judgement. (Kant, *Critique* 170, emphasis in original)

Aesthetic judgements are thus an opportunity not only for an individual to perceive himself in relation to an object or a known community, but, more importantly, to consider his judgement in the context of other conceivable judgements. The work of the subject to manifest for himself these other judgements provides a basis for the ethical potential of aesthetics, because they ask not only that the subject places himself in the context of like-minded thinkers but in a multiplicity of contexts beyond his known experience. Because it is created by the viewer's perspective (or the application of a mode of viewing to a particular scene), the picturesque disrupts this process of abstraction from one's point of view; however, it provides instead the opportunity to reflect on the bounded subject position that has created its aesthetic product.

While such reflection has its own moral utility (which I discuss throughout this study), the problem posed by the picturesque is that the abandonment of aesthetic judgements as expressive of a "subjectively universal" position – that is, one that "can claim universal assent (as if it were objective)" (Kant, *Critique* 95) – compromises the moral relation of spectator to object. The moral utility of aesthetics, for both Shaftesbury and Kant, is predicated on the possibility they represent of judgement which has universal validity, on abstraction from a singular perspective, and thus on the suspension of desire. Mary Poovey underscores that

[t]he notion of “disinterestedness” originated in Shaftesbury’s distinction between actions motivated by an agent’s concern for his own well-being and a noninstrumental attitude – that is, a stance concerned neither with consequences nor with actions. “Disinterestedness” in Shaftesbury’s work involves ‘a mode of attention and concern’ that renders the virtuous man a spectator and the object, whether natural or made, the self-sufficient end of the contemplative gaze. Disinterestedness therefore preserves virtue in the individual at the same time that it emphasizes the autonomy and noninstrumental nature of the observed object.

(83)

Whereas the harmoniousness of beauty materializes the disinterested relation to the object, the raggedness of the picturesque manifests precisely the observer’s interest: it is the instrument by which objects become picturesque. There cannot be a passive spectator of the picturesque, because the aesthetic requires not contemplation but active appropriation of objects, which become picturesque in the viewer’s vision. Gilpin writes in the *Three Essays*: “Picturesque composition consists in uniting in one whole a variety of parts; and these parts can only be obtained from rough objects” (19). The picturesque is predicated upon a way of seeing that generates unity from fragmentation: “It emphasizes the imposition of a distinct perspective to create a coherent, unified scene” (Valihora 281). Quite simply, picturesque aesthetics view objects as if they exist for the observer, and this is one way in which they compose for observation the desires of those compelled by the picturesque. The potential for the object to disclose information about the viewer is tantalizingly suggested by Kim Michasiw in his “Nine Revisionist Theses on the Picturesque”: because the picturesque does not elide the power of subjective perception, “[m]ight we then see the picturesque as an aesthetic threatening to give the

game away, one giving no lip service to a kind of equality between perceiver and perceived that cannot exist?” (80). This lack of equality is inscribed in the subjectively rendered picturesque object, and fundamental to it.⁶¹

The instructional nature of Gilpin’s manuals offers a clear route to the creation of picturesque beauty – group objects with certain qualities in certain ways, employ particular shading and sketching techniques – and was not concerned with how or why ugly or disagreeable objects become picturesque. Gilpin was interested in why “the quality of *roughness* should make an *essential difference* between objects of *beauty*, and objects suited to *artificial representation*” (*Three* 17, emphasis in original), but after briefly attempting an answer declares himself “foiled,” suggesting that “[c]ould we even gain satisfaction in our present question, new doubts would arise We should be asked, What is beauty? What is taste?” (*Three* 30). Given Gilpin’s pragmatic approach to aesthetics, and his distinct determination to disentangle it from the metaphysical, his rather humorous disavowal of such questions makes sense; although, as Hipple observes, Gilpin is in fact raising the quite subtle question of why that which is appealing in art can become more so in life (195), a consideration which will gain deeper ethical significance as the picturesque moves into cities.

Two subsequent theorists of the picturesque, Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight, expanded upon and attempted to systematize Gilpin’s theories, and gave greater attention to the processes by which ugly or disagreeable objects can become picturesque.⁶² They disagreed,

⁶¹ The American picturesque as envisioned by Whitman and Hapgood functions as an attempt to elide this disparity, while the works of Bunner, Matthews, and Howells use the picturesque to explore the moral and ethical quandaries this aesthetics manifests.

⁶² The process by which tragic circumstances become aesthetically pleasurable was a major source of debate for eighteenth-century thinkers. Hipple provides a helpful discussion of the various theories (pp. 50-51; 88-89). He notes that, “Hume rejects the idea that the pleasure of tragedy comes from the experience of sympathy which, for Burke, Smith and others, is always pleasurable. Instead he finds that we find pleasure in appreciating the talents of

however, about the means of this transformation. In *A Dialogue on the Distinct Characters of the Picturesque and the Beautiful: In Answer to the Objections of Mr. Knight* (1801), Price counters Knight's argument that there is no distinction between the beautiful and the picturesque. He suggests instead that objects that are neither sublime nor beautiful but still give pleasure must be called picturesque (*Dialogue* 76); such objects are decay, ruggedness, and irregularity – qualities particularly appealing in paintings. Objects which disgust in life, such as “the carcass of an ox” (Price, *Dialogue* 172), can be aesthetically pleasing when represented in painting (as in a Rembrandt), because the painter obscures the offensive details, either by lowering the light and colour, or diminishing the size; “shambles, and such objects,” can be painted in large scale, but the painter has “imagined the spectator at such a distance, as easily to take in the whole together” (Price, *Dialogue* 17). Price's approach is evident in the literary urban picturesque, which depicts rough characters and derelict places, yet suppresses their more unsavoury characteristics. Price also finds that there are objects which are disgusting no matter how skillfully represented, and this too is suggestive of the literary picturesque to come, which cannot be applied to narratives of unrelenting misery, but only to those in which the most sordid details of poverty and decay are left in shadow.⁶³

the rhetorician and in the beauties of the rhetoric itself” (50-51). Such a view accords nicely with eighteenth-century picturesque theorists' insistence that aesthetic pleasure can (and for the picturesque to exist, must) override emotional responses to an object. In the nineteenth century, John Ruskin reframed the relation of the picturesque to sympathy, and this theory will be discussed at length below.

⁶³ I explore the differences between the picturesque and the sentimental in more detail below, but one important difference is the amount of suffering each presents. Like many picturesque narratives, sentimental southern novels such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and slave narratives such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) depict abject characters whose strength allows them to rise spiritually above their circumstances. Tragedy is, however, irreconcilable with picturesque aesthetics, and even despite the (conditionally) “happy ending” to Jacobs's narrative of escape from slavery, the story contains too many harrowing details to be considered picturesque.

In placing parameters around the picturesque, Price differs from Knight, who believed that “mellow and harmonious tints” (Knight, *Principles* 22) could make any object beautiful by appealing purely to the visual sense. For Knight, an ugly or offensive object is picturesque in reality but becomes beautiful in its representation, hence his avowal that the picturesque is an unnecessary aesthetic category. In *The Landscape, a Didactic Poem in Three Books. Addressed to Uvedale Price, Esq.* (1794), Knight defines the picturesque as “that kind of beauty which belongs exclusively to the sense of vision, or to the imagination guided by that sense” (19). This definition expands upon Gilpin’s, which designates the picturesque simply as “a term expressive of that peculiar kind of beauty, which is agreeable in a picture” (*On Prints* xii); only the word “peculiar” suggests that there might be qualities of picturesque beauty that depart from the conventional.⁶⁴ The oddity that sets picturesque beauty apart is the fact that, seen not as art but as part of the natural world, picturesque objects are apt to be offensive:

[...] often still the eye disgusted sees
In nature, objects which in painting please;
Such as the rotting shed, or fungous tree,
Or tatter'd rags of age and misery:
But here restrain'd, the powers of mimic art
The pleasing qualities alone impart;

For nought but light and colour can the eye,

⁶⁴ Price's definition, contrastingly, departs from the purely visual; he “finds a picturesque of sound; there is even picturesque conversation” (Hipple 211). Such a conception is useful in considering the dialects rendered in picturesque characters such as Edward Townsend's Chimmie Fadden and other New York working-class characters, and is most fully developed in Emerson’s theory of picturesque language, which I discuss in Chapter Four.

But through the medium of the mind, descry;
And oft, in filth and tatter'd rags, it views
Soft varied tints and nicely blended hues,
Which thus abstracted from each other sense,
Give pure delight, and please without offence. (Knight, *Landscape* 17-18)

For Knight, the attractions of Tintern Abbey can only be experienced when they are rendered as art; being guided through it, as Gilpin was, by its wretched inhabitant, would not itself be an experience of the picturesque, as for Gilpin it clearly is. Like Price, Knight believes that studying painting makes it possible to perceive objects which are not beautiful as possessing the potential to become so – but only the potential. Sensory information beyond the visual, “if productive of stronger impressions of either pleasure or disgust, will overpower” the picturesque appeal (Knight, *Landscape* 22). Thus, while Knight extends further the definition of potentially picturesque objects than does Price, both set parameters around how disgusting something can be while remaining picturesque.⁶⁵ Much picturesque literature is problematic precisely because it insists on the charm of people and places whose actual existences are marked by tremendous hardship and suffering.

Price's *Dialogue* illustrates why the ugly is picturesque, building on Gilpin's qualifications for picturesque human subjects and providing insight into the types of characters that populate picturesque literature. The characters in Price's dialogue encounter a man with “raven hair, hung over his eyes,” “slouched hat,” and a cloak thrown across him, “as if he were concealing some weapon” (Price, *Dialogue* 118). Mr. Hamilton, the character representing

⁶⁵ Such limits are explored to poignant effect in Howells's writing, which consistently probes the ethical quandary of aestheticizing that which is tragic or offensive. In Chapter Five I give particular attention to a scene in Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes* that plays out the intrusion of sensory repugnance into the enjoyment of a picturesque urban landscape (64-66).

Price's views on the picturesque, then explains that "an object peculiarly and strikingly ugly, is picturesque" (Price, *Dialogue* 118) because an artist's aim is "to fix the attention" (Price, *Dialogue* 119); hence the appeal of "strongly marked peculiarities and effects," even if "mixed with ugliness" (Price, *Dialogue* 120). Price offers this dangerous-looking man in contrast to an ugly but unremarkable man in "a common coat and waistcoat, and a common sort of wig" (Price, *Dialogue* 120), too ordinary to be aesthetically interesting. Both Price and Knight regard the picturesque as a means of breaking up "monotony" – Price, indeed, seems almost obsessively antagonistic towards "sameness," discussing it on seven separate occasions in one essay alone. That disdain for sameness means that the "the idle man or the bandit is pictorially more interesting than the industrious citizen" (Martin Price 263); in other words, that which disrupts social stability or which bespeaks the actual tenuousness of social cohesion is desirable material for picturesque representation. In the urban literary picturesque, characters with "strongly marked peculiarities" will also forestall aesthetic – and in America, especially – social monotony.

Do You Feel What I Feel?

Not only do Gilpin, Price, and Knight focus on sight to the exclusion of the other senses, but they also separate sight from emotion, a distinction which is directly related to their conception of aesthetics as separate from moral concerns. In eighteenth-century texts such as Shaftesbury's *Characteristicks*, David Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), and Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), moral sentiment is not fundamentally the product of intellectual consideration or even religious belief, but instead is rooted in felt responses to the world. In her study of eighteenth-century sensibility, Ann Jessie

Van Sant discusses the importance of what she calls “sympathetic visibility” (16) – that is, the importance of sight in creating pathos, and thus to furthering philanthropic endeavors. She cites a pamphlet by Henry Fielding addressing the problem of poverty and charity, and argues that his writing shows how “[c]ompassion and abhorrence ... depend in great measure on what is seen” (Van Sant 16). Similarly, Samuel Johnson “begins his essay on biography by implying a psychological principle that would have been widely accepted by his readers: sympathetic feelings, which require vividness and proximity, arise through an act of the imagination largely dependent on sight” (Van Sant 16). The picturesque as defined by Gilpin, Price, and Knight is composed of objects manipulated by sight, but it is a sight that stops at the surface level – that quite explicitly is concerned purely with the relation of shapes and light and shadow and not with the propensity of sight to generate feeling. Indeed, sight as generative of the picturesque as they defined it relies on the absence or suppression of any feeling that might arise from the sight of potentially pathetic objects.

Despite the origins of the picturesque, its longevity is attributable to the two aspects of this aesthetic which its first theorists neglected: its relationship to sympathy and to class, which I will discuss in that order. It is significant that the literary picturesque applies both to external and internal qualities; as I discuss throughout this study, picturesque characters in American writing are often those whose simplicity, honesty, and strength render them more noble and more compelling than wealthier people. Working-class characters and communities are picturesque not necessarily because they present rough exteriors, but because they operate outside of the falseness and sameness of the genteel world, and consequently create bonds that genteel writers depict as being stronger and more wholesome, based on more authentic feeling. In *Modern Painters* (1843), John Ruskin describes this sense of the nobility of poverty as a redeeming

quality of the picturesque, claiming that the person who seeks scenes of privation for aesthetic pleasure is nonetheless actuated not by pleasure alone:

Through all his enjoyment there runs a certain under current of tragical passion, – a real vein of human sympathy; – it lies at the root of all those strange morbid hauntings of his; a sad excitement, such as other people feel at a tragedy, only less in degree, just enough, indeed, to give a deeper tone to his pleasure, and to make him choose for his subject the broken stones of a cottage wall, rather than of a roadside bank, the picturesque beauty of form in each being supposed precisely the same: and, together with this slight tragical feeling, there is also a humble and romantic sympathy; a vague desire, in his own mind, to live in cottages rather than in palaces; a joy in humble things, a contentment and delight in makeshifts, a secret persuasion (in many respects a true one) that there is in these ruined cottages a happiness often quite as great as in kings' palaces, and a virtue and nearness to God infinitely greater and holier than can commonly be found in any other kind of place. (11-12)

Ruskin offers what to me is the most compelling explanation for the aesthetic appeal of potentially offensive objects: a moral relation to them, which exalts their humbleness as purity and their raggedness as that which is deserving of sympathy. Like Price, Ruskin argues that such a view of rough objects is possible only with distance – in this case the distance of material comfort, from which to compose an aesthetically compelling image that is not undermined by either offensive sensory information or by too specific a view of the suffering actual poverty entails. Ruskin's theory also, however, offers the possibility that an appreciation of the

picturesque, while dependent on physical and psychic distance, is nonetheless fomented by a desire to bridge this distance.

Ruskin's discussion of picturesque aesthetics acknowledges both their affective and class dimensions, absent from Price and Knight's theories. Like Ruskin, I believe that the picturesque cannot be viewed as separate from social or psychological conditions, and that ragged and derelict objects are captivating because they embody something desired by the viewer, whether a perceived freedom and authenticity of experience or the opportunity to feel compassion for those separate from the viewer's social world and only accessible as aesthetic objects. As Van Sant observes, eighteenth-century charitable ventures relied heavily on the sympathetic responses of potential donors to representations of the needy, who were depicted as "pitiable types, as close to fiction as to life" (Van Sant 27). It is important to note that the same logic operates today: Jill Lepore, in her *New Yorker* article on Robert Putnam's 2015 study of American inequality, writes: "The book proceeds from the depressing assumption that presenting the harrowing lives of poor young people is the best way to get Americans to care about poverty" (28). It is an assumption that, for nineteenth-century realists like Howells, was not depressing but hopeful – compelling narratives depicting lives otherwise unseen or purposefully ignored would generate sympathy, and hence possibly social change. Such a belief could not exist without the underlying knowledge that the poor and the derelict could be made aesthetically appealing.

The realist project as Howells understood it, and which underlies Lepore's statement about narratives of poverty, is predicated upon the principle that the sight of suffering causes an affective response. Burke and other eighteenth-century thinkers like Hume and Hutcheson wanted to explain the cause and moral significance of the fact that distressing sights can evoke pleasurable responses; for Burke, the answer was sympathy, and the pleasure one feels in

experiencing this emotion is of benefit to society: “as our Creator has designed that we should be united by the bond of sympathy, he has strengthened that bond by a proportionable delight; and there most where our sympathy is most wanted,—in the distresses of others. If this passion was simply painful, we would shun with the greatest care all persons and places that could excite such a passion” (24). Instead, “there is no spectacle we so eagerly pursue, as that of some uncommon and grievous calamity,” a pleasure that is always “blended with no small uneasiness” (Burke 25). This theory suggests why pictures of ragged subjects are useful on charity pamphlets, as well as that despite the early picturesque theorists’ insistence on the separation of emotion from aesthetic appreciation, images of poverty and dereliction might be compelling because of the sympathy they engender in the viewer. Burke observes that horror is always fascinating when not actually threatening, and also that tragic or terrifying things make us grateful the calamity is not our own. The picturesque makes calamitous poverty fascinating, yet to observe the poor is also to create a potential relation to them. Charles Lamb, in his 1823 essay lamenting the policy of removing beggars from the streets of London, asserts that beggars, “in their picturesque attire... were the standing morals, emblems, mementos...the salutary checks and pauses to the high and rushing tide of greasy citizenry” (240). Visibility remains the pathway to sympathy, and thus to the viewer’s development of moral feeling.⁶⁶

Ruined castles and shipwrecks are indeed spectacles desirable for picturesque art, but the delight they offer does not, according to eighteenth-century picturesque theorists, engender sympathy. While eighteenth-century articulations of the picturesque do not accord with Burke’s concept of our affective relation to spectacles of suffering – the sympathy he says is evoked by

⁶⁶ It is interesting, too, that Lamb is not concerned whether the poverty one encounters is real or “counterfeit”: “You pay your money to see a comedian feign these things, which, concerning these poor people, thou canst not certainly tell whether they are feigned or not.” Either way, “it is good to believe him” (247) – the moral benefit of the encounter exists regardless.

the sublime – later iterations of picturesque aesthetics are deeply concerned with the connection between seeing and feeling. Burke’s contention supports Ruskin’s position that the picturesque relies upon sympathy and can express it. In his essay “On the Turnerian Picturesque,” Ruskin examines the “modern feeling” of the picturesque which, because it “consists in a delight in ruins” (1), is “the most suspicious and questionable of all the characters distinctively belonging to our temper, and art” (2). The lover of what Ruskin calls the low picturesque takes pleasure in roughness and decay and finds in the physical manifestations of poverty only pleasing colours and shapes. Ruskin contrasts such art, which voids ruined subjects of the difficulty or sorrow associated with their raggedness, to what he terms the “noble picturesque”: paintings that demonstrate a sense both of the suffering associated with dereliction and of the autonomy of the subject from its observer (6-13). The low picturesque fails to capture the emotional tenor of the derelict or ragged objects it represents, yet these objects are nonetheless experienced as compelling because they inspire a sympathetic response.

In nineteenth-century America, picturesque aesthetics emerge both as a means of moral education and potentially as a catalyst for more ethical behavior. As I discuss in the following chapter, the relation of sympathy to the American national identity is as old as the republic itself, a connection forged by the influence of the Scottish Enlightenment on the nation’s founders and intellectual community.⁶⁷ One of the most important of these eighteenth-century works, Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, is fundamentally concerned with how sympathy occurs between individuals, and with defining appropriate expressions and experiences of sympathy. In the

⁶⁷ Neal Dolan observes that, “[s]tarting in the 1970s, historical scholarship has greatly enriched our understanding of the vast influence of the Scottish Enlightenment on the literary and political culture of the young American republic” (54). See especially Henry May, *Enlightenment in America*. Alan Wolfe’s *The Future of Liberalism*, also roots his argument about present-day liberal ideology in eighteenth-century thought, in particular John Locke and Adam Smith.

emergent bourgeois liberalism evident in the texts under discussion here, picturesque aesthetics undergird considerations of how or if seeing aesthetically connects us to others, the degree to which representations of poverty can generate sympathy, and whether such affective responses to others' suffering contributes to mitigating structural injustices.

These questions become particularly urgent in the latter half of the nineteenth century, when urbanization and repeated economic crises made entrenched class disparity an undeniable fact of American life. The picturesque in the Gilded Age is not concerned with uncommon calamity, but rather with the calamitous poverty and financial instability that had become depressingly familiar. While many representations of picturesque ghettos can be classified within the low picturesque tradition, taking pleasure in the ragged and colourful sights of such neighbourhoods without considering either the hardships they contain or the spectatorial position that enables their aestheticization, many others use the picturesque to consider the social problem of poverty and the relation of wealthier Americans to poorer ones. In his section "On the Influence and Authority of Conscience," Smith considers how we restrain our "anxiety about our own affairs, or our natural, and, perhaps, equally improper indifference about those of other men" (196). As for Burke, sympathy is the sentiment that prohibits an excess of self-interest; yet for Smith, excesses of sympathy are equally problematic, as he explains in his well-known condemnation of those

whining and melancholy moralists who are perpetually reproaching us with our happiness, while so many of our brethren are in misery, who regard as impious the natural joy of prosperity, which does not think of the many wretches that are at every instant labouring under all sorts of calamities, in the languor of poverty, in the agony of disease, in the horrors of death, under the insults and oppression of

their enemies. Commiseration for those miseries which we never saw, which we never heard of, but which we may be assured are at all times infesting such numbers of our fellow-creatures, ought, they think, to damp the pleasures of the fortunate, and to render a certain melancholy dejection habitual to all men. But, first of all, this extreme sympathy with misfortunes which we know nothing about seems altogether absurd and unreasonable. [...] This artificial commiseration, besides, is not only absurd, but seems altogether unattainable; and those who affect this character have commonly nothing but a certain affected and sentimental sadness, which, without reaching the heart, serves only to render the countenance and conversation impertinently dismal and disagreeable. And, last of all, this disposition of mind, though it could be attained, would be perfectly useless, and could serve no other purpose than to render miserable the person who possessed it. Whatever interest we take in the fortune of those with whom we have no acquaintance or connection, and who are placed altogether out of the sphere of our activity, can produce only anxiety to ourselves, without any manner of advantage to them. [...] That we should be little interested, therefore, in the fortune of those whom we can neither serve nor hurt, and who are in every respect so very remote from us, seems wisely ordered by Nature; and if it were possible to alter in this respect the original constitution of our frame, we could yet gain nothing by the chance. (Smith 196-7)

It is worth quoting this passage at such length because it articulates two conundrums essential to the picturesque as it developed in America. The first is the question of how much sympathy for strangers can be experienced without becoming mere sentimentality, productive of nothing more

than useless unhappiness for the sympathizer. For Smith, unlike Burke, the answer is clearly very little. Choosing to make oneself miserable about the imagined sufferings of those we do not know simply makes one bad company and worse, essentially inauthentic. Sympathy in this construction is only appropriate in relation to sufferings which one is capable of ameliorating, a contention with interesting ramifications for art which I discuss throughout this study.

Smith's argument is predicated on the presumption that most people are, in fact, living comfortably, and that misfortune, where it does exist, is a personal and not a social problem. Thus, the second issue raised by this construction of the relation between fortunate and unfortunate people is how to feel for strangers that are not "so very remote," but only moderately so, occupying, perhaps, a pleasing space in the middle distance of a landscape – or, yet more problematically, the same city street. The picturesque as Ruskin defines it, and as it functions in American literature, depicts, relies upon, and creates a society in which there are both emotional and material connections between rich and poor – one in which people of means can indeed both serve and hurt those without, and in which a desire or need to at least acknowledge people whose experience is remote from genteel comfort drives aesthetic interest in rough objects. Smith's assertion that the unfortunate are unseen and distant is undermined by a society in which the poor become spectacles for the wealthy, as they did when the picturesque tour became a fad; it is further undermined by urban environments in which the poor are struggling in plain sight of the wealthy. The American picturesque intervenes in this difficult problem by offering a framework for the apprehension of suffering remote from one's experience yet present to one's knowledge. It is also a framework which has the potential to keep in check "extreme" sympathy by funneling sentiment into expressions of cultured gentility, or at least sensationalistic curiosity.

Smith's philosophy contributed to the development of a liberal ideology predicated upon a belief in the essential autonomy of individuals and their need for minimal interference by society. These concepts continue to inform American policies – the current debate over health care being one prominent example – and to divide the nation on issues of class, race, and immigration. Fundamental to these debates is the question of the degree to which the state is responsible for its most vulnerable people, and how this responsibility is enacted. For those whose liberalism derives not only from a belief in individualism but also in equality, and whose political ideals stem from an abhorrence to cruelty, the question of one person's responsibilities toward another is particularly fraught. This project is concerned with the ways in which this sense of responsibility is experienced and expressed aesthetically; beginning in the following chapter with Emerson, I examine how the ability to see any object as aesthetically interesting becomes central to American concepts of class, sympathy, and political agency.

By the late nineteenth century, cultural products aimed at middle-class Americans were beginning to articulate a sense that informed citizenship required at least the awareness of social problems, most significantly poverty. Works that employ the picturesque were often in part efforts to make this problem visible, but they also frequently functioned as critiques of the bourgeoisie. Part of my interest in these texts is the way they articulate a problem which has only in recent years become the subject of critical inquiry:⁶⁸ liberal guilt, or a sense of sympathy for structurally oppressed people and of shame about one's own privilege. Julie Ellison, in her influential essay "A Short History of Liberal Guilt"⁶⁹ defines liberal guilt as being "bound up

⁶⁸ Daniel Born's 1995 *The Birth of Liberal Guilt in the English Novel* is the only book-length study of liberal guilt in literature. Guilt has recently emerged as a topic of critical inquiry into Western or liberal values. See for instance Pascal Bruckner, *The Tyranny of Guilt: An Essay on Western Masochism*.

⁶⁹ This is a significant historical moment for this essay to appear: the same year as Democratic President Bill Clinton signed into law the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, which radically altered and reduced financial

with the feeling of being implicated in systems of domination and with the subsequent awareness of the emotional instability produced by this ambivalent position” (350). This “instability,” which for Smith is merely an unappealing pose, Ellison sees as having the potential to promote more ethical relations between those suffering from institutional violence such as racism and poverty, and those who are not. When a person allows herself to imagine the suffering of another from whom she is remote, and to feel guilt about her implication in this suffering, she can change her relation to herself and others. Richard Rorty, in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, imagines a “liberal utopia” in which human solidarity is achieved “not by inquiry but by imagination, the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers. Solidarity is not discovered by reflection but created. It is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people” (xvi). This is an admirable goal, the same one underlying the tenets of many realist narratives and, as Lepore argues, of Putnam’s present-day depictions of poverty; making an imaginative leap into another’s life mitigates the self-interest inherent in liberal individualism with the effect, writers such as Rorty and Putnam would hope, of engendering civic practices aimed at ameliorating the suffering of which one has been made aware. Yet such imagining – even when based in carefully documented details – is still not knowing, not the same as sharing experiences with an other. We therefore need to be constantly aware of the ethical problems of “creating” a solidarity with other people based in our own desires.⁷⁰ The picturesque can – although very often does not – heighten this awareness,

assistance to the needy. The name of this bill itself speaks to the enduring value Americans place on individual over communitarian approaches to financial security.

⁷⁰ That we see in others what we desire is the basis of the Lacanian concept of the ego ideal, in which the introjection of the *imago* during the mirror stage sets up the ego to identify with others throughout life, seeing in them an unconscious projection of the fantasized ideal other that has become the “rootstock of secondary identifications” (Lacan, *Écrits* 4).

because of the frame the viewer must construct in order to create a picturesque effect. “Although effect appears to be a subjective imposition, it is rather one of the ways in which Gilpin’s subject is bound by rule, a binding that serves to *free the object*” (Michasiw 91, emphasis mine). This awareness of imposition acknowledges that the viewer has not “captured” the object, that the object retains its autonomy and is, itself, a subject.

One weakness of guilt, or a sense of implication in others’ suffering, as a tool to create social change is that, as Smith observes, sympathy for strangers is bound up with the performance of emotion. Ellison argues that liberal guilt “relies on visual practices of seeing pain and being seen to be afflicted by it” (“Liberal” 352); this need to be seen as afflicted by those with whom one would sympathize is intensely problematic, because the sympathizer then demands recognition for her suffering, essentially deflecting her responsibility for the pain she observes and her ethical responsibility to witness it. Such performance makes real sympathy impossible, instead generating a feedback loop in which the sympathizer feels pain not for the other’s actual suffering, but rather for a projection of her own.⁷¹ If, however, the guilty liberal is able to inhabit her guilt not as affliction but as fact, and allow the afflicted other to feel towards her the anger, accusation, indifference, or whatever unknowable emotion he feels, then such guilt may begin to have an ethical purpose. It generates a new relation of the subject to herself – as that which is beheld by an unknowable other in whose suffering she is implicated – and to the

⁷¹ Guilt is also one possible response provoked by “White Fragility,” a concept that has become influential in recent years. In the 2011 article in which she coined the phrase, Robin DiAngelo defines White Fragility as: “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt” (54). The display of such emotions and their attendant avoidance behaviors “function to reinstate white racial equilibrium” (54). As I indicated above, discussions of race have long elided those of class in America; I contend that discomfort about class privilege functions in similar ways to race privilege, with the possible difference that while we now have the concept of the white “ally” to black causes, no similar role exists for the wealthy ally of the poor, possibly because North Americans have not yet developed the language to discuss class.

object, as that which is unknowable.⁷² As Ellison explains, “[g]uilt, in other words, is forced to constitute the subject, the object, and the moral importance of their relation” (“Liberal” 357). Because the perspective of the viewer is always present in the construction of a picturesque image, it places the observed and the observer within the same frame, making possible an awareness of the relation between the two.

Ruskin’s differentiation between the noble and low picturesque is useful here, because the former allows for the alterity of the observed object – the observer is aware of making emotional and aesthetic attributions of the other which are also attempts to sympathize with the other’s experience. The low picturesque does not, but rather renders the object for the observer’s own pleasure. Of Clarkson Stanfield’s painting of a ruined mill, Ruskin writes sarcastically: “[s]o far from being grieved about it, we will make it our principal light;—if it were a fruit-tree in spring-blossom, instead of a desolate mill, we could not make it whiter or brighter; we illumine our whole picture with it, and exult over its every rent as a special treasure and possession” (8). Here, as in Gilpin’s Tintern Abbey, the rendering of the ruin manifests only the viewer’s pleasure in the pleasing colors and contours it presents. The noble picturesque, however, is characterized by:

suffering... poverty... decay, nobly endured by unpretending strength of heart.

Not only unpretending, but unconscious. If there be visible pensiveness in the

⁷² I am drawing here on the Levinasian concept that “[t]he alterity of the other is not determined, not grasped nor comprehended, by the I; alterity weighs on the I with the force, the disturbance, of its passing, its infinite and unrepresentable withdrawal” (Lingis, Introduction xix). While Levinas will be useful for structuring discussion of the problematic self-other relation in picturesque literature, his contention in “Language and Proximity” and “Reality and Its Shadow” that perception is always-already an alteration of the thing-in-itself complicates discussion of artistic representations as a means of acknowledging alterity. It will nonetheless be useful, in the following chapters, to probe the implications of his idea that “The picturesque is always to some extent a caricature” (“Reality” 6) – that is, that what is representable is an elision and also expressive of purpose – in terms of the structures of disavowal that the picturesque offers.

building, as in a ruined abbey, it becomes, or claims to become, beautiful; but the picturesqueness is in the unconscious suffering, [...] the unconscious confession of the facts of distress and decay, in by-words; the world's hard work being gone through all the while, and no pity asked for, nor contempt feared. (Ruskin 6)

Ruskin's characterization, though meant respectfully, is problematic in its suggestion that the working class can be unaware of their hardships; the assertion, however, that people in distress do not necessarily desire or even contemplate the sympathetic response of others is a useful one, because it reminds the observer of suffering that her affective response is neither demanded by the suffering person nor is it his responsibility. Rather, like the old Calais cathedral spire of which Ruskin writes so lovingly (2-3), derelict objects exist independently of a viewer's construction of them and are in some way beyond his reach. The viewer must then take responsibility for the attributions he makes about that object's significance or emotional effect; his effort to understand the circumstances and context of the object will affect both the aesthetic and moral resonance of his experience, but his emotions remain apodictically separate from what he observes.

The picturesque, therefore, problematizes the intersubjectivity claimed for the aesthetic experience by Kant and Shaftesbury, materializing the impossibility of, as Kant writes in the *Critique of Judgement*, "putting ourselves in the place of any other man" (170). Those whom the picturesque claims as aesthetic objects are not accessible to the observer as particularized subjects, and class difference between observer and observed undermines claims for a "collective Reason of humanity" (Kant, *Critique* 170). The benefit offered by the picturesque is that, if it shows intersubjectivity between *all* others to be impossible, then it also foregrounds the conditions that foster shared judgements: in this case, those who can learn picturesque principles

are those who are not living in “picturesque” conditions. As a framework for perceiving a certain type of object, the picturesque brings into view the mediations necessary for such objects to become art. These mediations, as Ruskin identifies, expanded beyond the merely sensual to encompass those of the sensibilities.

While the eighteenth-century picturesque required simply the application of specific aesthetic principles, the noble picturesque that Ruskin describes is generated not only by an aesthetic but by an affective response; it relies on moral sentiments. Smith claims that “Generosity, humanity, kindness, compassion, mutual friendship and esteem, all the social and benevolent affections, when expressed in the countenance or behavior, even towards those who are not peculiarly connected with ourselves, please the indifferent spectator upon almost every occasion” (52). Thus, if picturesque aesthetics depart from the disinterestedness integral to eighteenth-century morality, they also move towards a sense of responsibility about how an object is perceived, imbuing this perception with moral weight. Ruskin’s formulation of the picturesque identifies the fact that to perceive suffering as purely aesthetic is a less moral response than to feel compassion for the objects of picturesque observation and – more problematically – to maintain an understanding of their integrity. As the picturesque moves into nineteenth-century urban landscapes, the cultural significance of displaying such compassion for unknown others will become more prominent, and the parameters of picturesque viewing will help to reify bourgeois Americans’ emergent class consciousness.

The Parts and the Whole: Picturesque Aesthetics and Class Divisions

The appeal of picturesque aesthetics has persisted, with ebbs and flows, for more than two centuries – it is most popular in times of economic instability. The picturesque’s first flush

of popularity in England occurred during the Napoleonic Wars, and it gained purchase in America during the Gilded Age. Bourdieu's influential assertion in *Distinction* that aesthetic taste is a major factor in demarcating social class helps to explain this correlation of financial flux and picturesque aesthetics. Economic instability produces social unrest, often around class boundaries, and the picturesque is uniquely useful in revealing – and helping to generate – these boundaries. The construction and defence of middle-class identity and social position through picturesque aesthetics begins with Gilpin's handbooks, and gains significance as picturesque taste emerged in America. The utility of the picturesque in that context is best understood as arising from the social and political environment in which this aesthetic first thrived, one in which the relationship of need, privilege, and an emergent middle class made a romantic view of both the wild and the wretched deeply desirable.

The departure of picturesque aesthetics from classical notions of beauty and from the belief in social harmony such an ideal expresses mirrors a changing relationship between class and aesthetics. Bermingham has written in detail about how the picturesque emerged during “the period of accelerated enclosure (roughly 1750-1815)” (*Landscape* 10) that made formerly public land private. In this context, Price's and Knight's landscaping principles were not only aesthetical, but also political – they were intended to tighten slackening bonds between landowners and tenants. In *Landscape and Ideology*, Ann Bermingham notes that in the later eighteenth-century, landscape gardens became unpopular because too obviously anti-democratic; their aggressive domination of the natural world displayed in smooth lines and controlled vegetation was too great a display of the whims of power (67-8). In “Picturesque Landscaping and Estate Management: Uvedale Price and Nathaniel Kent at Foxley,” Stephen Daniels and Charles Watkins argue that Price saw “connection” as an important concept in estate

management. The picturesque landscape, with its “natural” relations between physical features, “denoted a condition of social and geographical interdependence, both a common interest and a coherent context for thought and action. A well connected landscape integrated a variety of physical, social and economic features in a model polity” (15). John Brewer chronicles the same phenomenon:

Later in the century, especially when enclosure was proceeding apace, many authors, including such influential writers on the picturesque as Price and Gilpin, argued that virtuous landowners should treat their tenants with Christian benevolence and create an organic community centred on their estates which aimed to alleviate the rigours of rural life. Such commentators were ... critical ... of the improving landlord who not only made the landscape ugly but, in a ruthless pursuit of profit and in his failure to fulfil his Christian obligations, shaped a morally tainted society. Picturesque critics of improvement, advocating a return to a rural economy of small proprietors, had a moral as well as aesthetic preference for picturesque cottages with healthy loyal labourers rather than for grand estates surrounded by high walls. They believed a natural order had been subverted by the ruthless pursuit of improvement. (650)

This sense of urgency about a properly interconnected society was heightened by the French landing on the Pembrokeshire coast in 1797, which fueled fears that revolution would spread to England (Daniels and Watkins 16). With class unrest growing, picturesque landscapes presented the reassuring ideal of a harmoniously interconnected world, one that could even encompass its rougher objects.

The picturesque served wealthy British landowners by offering an aesthetic that reinscribed unity onto a fragmenting social order – a role it will also play a century later in American cities rent by class divisions and labour strife. At the same time, for members of the emerging middle class, the picturesque offered a means of differentiating themselves from the working class. The picturesque flourished in, and was shaped by, economic conditions that expanded access to the arts and to leisure; because its principles could be easily disseminated and understood, it helped to provide this access to those eager to define their place within the growing bourgeoisie.⁷³ John Brewer, in *The Pleasures of the Imagination* (a title taken from the influential series by Joseph Addison in *The Spectator*) traces the modern concept of “high culture” to the mid-eighteenth century, when theatre, music, literature, and painting were given a “special collective identity,” and, alongside theories of beauty and sublimity, became the focus of newly rigorous philosophical enquiry (xvi). The term “high culture,” with its exclusionary overtones, is misleading in the context of its eighteenth-century efflorescence; while the fine arts were distinguished from “mechanical skills” (Brewer xvi), they flourished because the arts in the eighteenth century ceased to be “the preserve of kings, courtiers, aristocrats and clerics and became the property of a larger public,” one which congregated in coffee houses, commercial theatres, literary and philosophical societies, art dealer’s shops and auction houses in cities and towns across Europe (Brewer xvii).

Who precisely constituted this public is difficult to know. Addison, in the first paper in his series “On the Pleasures of the Imagination” (1712), contends that “A man of a polite imagination is let in to a great many pleasures that the vulgar are not capable of receiving” (188).

⁷³ As Hipple notes, the picturesque is an art for the unpracticed: “The painter’s love of the shaggy stems partly from the encouragement a rough subject gives to a sketchy facility of execution” (194).

Addison goes on to say that the “polite imagination” “gives him indeed a kind of property in everything he sees, and makes the most rude uncultivated parts of nature administer to his pleasures” (188). The idea that “vulgar” people cannot take possession of the “rude uncultivated parts of nature” has clear significance for the picturesque, considering that claiming as aesthetic property such uncultivated spaces was a means by which those seeking genteel status could assert their qualification to be recognized as such. That said, this activity itself may well have been perceived as “vulgar” to Price and Knight. Bermingham observes that, “it is significant that both Price and Knight saw the picturesque primarily as a taste granted to only a few and inaccessible to vulgar minds” (*Landscape* 70). It is therefore interesting that, although “scholars like Martin Price perceive Gilpin as the creator, but Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight as the theorists of the picturesque” (Michasiw 81), it is Gilpin’s democratizing practices that have carried the picturesque into the twenty-first century. Martin Price is arguably following Hipple, who contends that “Gilpin exerted a profound and lasting influence upon the taste not only of England but of Europe, though his analysis of the picturesque was soon superseded by the more subtle and philosophical studies of Uvedale Price and Payne Knight (192).⁷⁴ Hipple contends that Uvedale Price’s “works on the picturesque remain the principal monument of picturesque doctrine” (202). While this claim may be valid as concerns the philosophical inquiry into picturesque principles and their relation to eighteenth-century aesthetics, the expansion of the picturesque into the exploration of, and writing about, cities is directly the product of Gilpin’s handbooks, which made both the pursuit and appreciation of picturesque objects available to those whom wealthy landowners like Price and Knight may well have viewed as possessing “vulgar minds.”

⁷⁴ It is telling that Hipple’s chapter on Gilpin, “the earliest exponent” of the picturesque (192), is eight pages long, while those on Price and Payne Knight are twice and three times as long, respectively.

Addison's definition of the polite imagination presupposes a similarity of condition amongst those capable of good taste, yet, as Brewer observes, the *sensus communis* envisaged by Shaftesbury and Kant was a surprisingly heterogeneous one:

Taste became one of the attributes of a new sort of person – the “sociable man” of Addison and Steele's *Spectator*... who was literate, could talk about art, literature and music and showed off his refinement through agreeable conversation in company. It is difficult to define what social groups are referred to here ... but it is clear that they do not include the urban poor or rural peasants, most of whom lacked the wealth, leisure and literacy to enjoy such pleasures. ... The community was emphatically not confined to the aristocracy: all over Europe artisans and merchants, shopkeepers and farmers, lawyers and doctors and minor clergy bought books, collected prints to display in their parlours and dining rooms and, when they could, attended dances, plays and concerts. (Brewer xviii)

It is significant that this “sort of person” is not described as someone with an inherent capability to perceive beauty or to reflect upon its mental or spiritual effects; this person is fundamentally a consumer, someone capable of imbibing cultural products and sharing his or her experience with others.

As the middle class expanded,⁷⁵ the picturesque helped to foster the creation of Addison's sociable men – and women – in two ways.⁷⁶ First, Gilpin's handbooks provided

⁷⁵ The rise of the English middle class in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries has been well documented. See Barry and Brooks, *The Middling Sort of People*; Earle, *The Making of the English Middle Class*; Hunt, *The Middling Sort*; Young, *Middle-Class Culture in the Nineteenth Century*. Less work has been done on this topic in an American context, and I will therefore go into greater detail about the relationship of the picturesque to the formation of the American middle class in following chapters.

⁷⁶ “Women of appropriate rank and virtue were included in the community of taste but kept out of some of its most important institutions, notably clubs and associations; their habitat was the drawing room and salon rather than the

instructions for perceiving and sketching picturesque objects, effectively offering guidelines for joining the genteel community: perceive the aesthetic value of physical roughness and irregularity; celebrate simultaneously the natural and the construction of the natural as art. The tremendous popularity of this aesthetic quickly became a source of humour, presumably for more established members of the gentility offended by the pretensions of newly-minted bourgeoisie; it spawned a popular satire, William Combe and Thomas Rowlandson's *The Tour of Doctor Syntax in Search of the Picturesque* (1813), in which a bumbling picturesque traveler expresses what were quickly becoming platitudes about the landscape.⁷⁷ The popularity and potential fatuousness of picturesque appreciation is most famously depicted in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817), when her inexperienced, middle-class heroine, Catherine Morland, receives a crash-course lecture on picturesque principles from her more sophisticated love interest Henry Tilney. Austen portrays to great comic effect Catherine's rapid acquisition of these principles, which leaves her teacher, "perfectly satisfied of her having a great deal of natural taste" (Austen 90) – a typically Austen sentence which satirizes an aesthetic school associated with Romantic notions of feeling but in fact inextricable from bourgeois consumption and social display. This tension between sensibility and social convention has remained a problematic aspect of picturesque appreciation throughout the nineteenth century and into the present. An aesthetic taste for rough objects is often a demonstration of sensitivity toward the existence of dereliction

tavern or coffee house" (Brewer xviii). Both the proliferation of the picturesque through paintings and prints (which I discuss further below), and its association with sensibility made it very much the provenance of the parlour and its inhabitants. Ann Bermingham's "The Picturesque and Ready-to-Wear Femininity" provides a fascinating analysis of how this aesthetic infiltrated genteel women's dress and mannerisms.

⁷⁷ "The complex relations between nature and culture or nature and art are summed up in the term 'landscape.' Originally used in the seventeenth century to denote a pictorial representation of countryside, it quickly came to describe a chunk of nature, a piece of the countryside itself: the land – country, nature, the environment – was viewed as if it were a picture.... It is as if nature had become a thing of human artifice, even a commodity. What unites these two ideas of landscape – as piece of land and as a representation of it – is the idea of seeing it from a single point of view" (Brewer 620).

or want, but the display of this feeling through the consumption of picturesque objects also functions to identify the consumer's social status.

Such social display was particularly necessary in the context of economic flux and crisis that pervaded the latter eighteenth century and post-war years. David Worrall observes that the economic context of English Romanticism "was starvation and famine ... 1795-6, 1800 and the immediate post-war years were times of particularly bad harvests and/or food price rises: wartime England had its agricultural economy stretched to breaking point" (242). Given these conditions, "Henry Tilney's 'lecture on the picturesque' undergoes an entirely intelligible sequence of declension, from 'the picturesque,' to 'waste lands' and 'crown lands' 'until he shortly found himself arrived at politics'. The waste lands signify the dilapidated redundancy of land-use which supplied the picturesque with its aesthetic" (Worrall 241). Tilney thus makes us consider the desire for waste lands as "food for the eye rather than for the body" (Worrall 241). Participating in the cult of the picturesque therefore demonstrates not only belonging to a particular class, but the interests of that class as separate from those suffering economic hardships.⁷⁸ The absence of sensibility required by an aesthetic supposedly arising from a "natural" taste or inherent appreciation for nature, and the basis of this taste in explicit rules, underlies Austen's satire of the picturesque and also explains how this aesthetic category helped to democratise both the subjects and the patrons of art.⁷⁹ As the genteel classes expanded, the picturesque contributed to a shift from a *sensus communis* based in a community of feeling

⁷⁸ Whereas Burke's beautiful and sublime were most often described as categories, the picturesque was usually spoken of as a 'cult' or 'taste'" (Birmingham, *Landscape* 70). This distinction suggests both the sense of belonging conferred by the appreciation of this aesthetic, as well as its contingency upon its adherents for its existence, as opposed to the transcendental quality of the sublime or the beautiful.

⁷⁹ In their study "Images of Decay: Photography in the Picturesque Tradition," Wolfgang Kemp and Joyce Rheuban claim the picturesque contributed to the "democratization of the subject" which they call "the great artistic project of the nineteenth century" (111).

subjects to a nascent community of perceiving subjects, whose connection resided in their common ability to identify aesthetic potential in objects formerly considered ugly or offensive.

In order to proclaim true allegiance to the cult of the picturesque – and to most effectively display one’s status as a “sociable” man or woman – members of the genteel classes could undertake a picturesque tour, following Gilpin into the rugged regions of England, Scotland, and Wales. “Picturesque touring was suited to the pockets and moral sensibilities of the middle classes. In short, Britain became for the middle classes what the Continent had been for the wealthy, that is a spectacle to be consumed” (Bermingham, “Ready-to-Wear” 86). The popularity of these tours owes some debt to the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815), which made problematic the traditional Tour of the Continent; moreover, celebrating the natural and historic qualities of Britain became both an expression of patriotism and a means of colonizing outlying areas of the expanding British Empire.⁸⁰ While the broader ideological work of the picturesque is to subsume within an aesthetic framework marginal or oppositional elements of society, its immediate and material manifestation is a particular aesthetic vision which enables those of moderate means to impress their perceptions upon their own surroundings and to display the fruits of this conquest in their possessions and conversations. As Bermingham argues, “[t]he Picturesque’s most important and abiding effect was that it encouraged the middle classes to aestheticise their lives” (“Ready-to-Wear” 87). As urban centres expanded and generated ghettos of working-class and poor residents, wealthier citizens would turn to these unknown regions for new experiences of picturesque variety and roughness; crooked streets replaced

⁸⁰ Anne Janowitz, in “The Chartist Picturesque,” observes that the landscape is “often the representation of the concept of the *nation*” (261). Her essay unearths a connection between the picturesque and the radical proletarian movement of the 1830s. Several other essays in Copley and Garside’s anthology *The Politics of the Picturesque* also consider the national and colonial significance of picturesque aesthetics.

crooked lanes, tenements replaced thatched cottages. Such urban expeditions in pursuit of the natural and the derelict were an outgrowth not only of the picturesque tour, but also of the widespread availability of picturesque scenes made possible by the commoditization of art and the taste for moody, rugged views which it popularized.⁸¹ “What [Price and Knight] defined as the delicate and sophisticated taste of a select few became the popular pastime of the bourgeois” (Birmingham, *Landscape* 83). When novels and newspaper “sketches” began to provide encounters with the rough and uncultivated, this taste – and the sensibilities which they putatively signified – became available to a new and even larger generation of bourgeois consumers.

While the association of introspection and moral reflection with aesthetic taste diminished as access to artistic products expanded, this change was not perceived by cultural critics as entirely negative. If the community of feeling subjects became a broad community of perceiving subjects, able to identify and discuss objects associated with good taste, then the perceptions that generated such discussion could themselves be a unifying force. John Barrell, in *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt*, chronicles the efforts of influential painter and critic Sir Joshua Reynolds to find a new moral framework to encompass the changing functions of art:

[Reynolds] attempted to ground public spirit not on virtue but on a particular kind of social knowledge. To this end he replaced the rhetorical with a philosophical

⁸¹ As John Brewer extensively documents, the taste for picturesque aesthetics was spread by new printing technologies that vastly expanded access to reproductions of picturesque landscapes. Inexpensive “views” of various English landscapes were being printed by the 1750s; “the first ‘coffee-table book on the Lakes appeared in 1789... Guide and travel books included more and more plates. The two volumes of William Gilpin’s extremely influential *Observations, relative chiefly to picturesque beauty ...* (1786) contained thirty; Thomas Newte’s *Prospects and Observations*, published five years later, had twenty-four” (Brewer 458). See also Copley and Garside, 7.

aesthetic, which attempted to promote, in the doctrine of the “central forms,” a uniformity of perception: by central forms we are enabled to discover, not how to act in the public interest, but what our individual characters have in common; and thus the ‘public’ is made a visible object, as is the basis of our affiliation to it. (63)

Art thus retains its ability to connect private citizens to one another, by manifesting common ways of seeing and encouraging reflection upon the social values these perceptions represent. Shaftesbury held a similar view: “the study of the liberal arts is the study of public virtue” (Barrell 11). The newly expanding public learning to appreciate the liberal arts represented “a symptom of a healthy political order, uniquely modern and British” (Brewer 95). This health derived from greater numbers of people able to join in public life and to reflect upon the “wider whole” of which they were a part. Despite this optimism, Shaftesbury’s apprehensions in *The Characteristicks* about “wild and whimsical” art were not unfounded; if the picturesque made available for discourse a unified viewing position of an ascendant middle class, it was a position of dominance – or an attempt at dominance – over that which it viewed. Yet this perspective also shows, if perhaps inadvertently, how the perspective determines what is seen.

Picturesque aesthetics manifested the class divisions inherent in industrial capitalism, and helped to reify a nascent bourgeoisie’s social position.⁸² Michasiw straightforwardly calls the picturesque “a central instrument of class warfare” (79). This aesthetic certainly did – and does – express and promote class stratification, yet in both British and American contexts its social significance is more complex. The popularity of the picturesque in its first iteration attests to a

⁸² “During the period of the picturesque, as agriculture boomed, the relationship between landowners and their dependents shifted from a paternalistic, quasi-feudal system of reciprocal rights and duties to an industrial employer-employee relationship, bonded only by a cash nexus.” This led to “increasingly wide and rigid class divisions” (Birmingham, *Landscape* 74).

fascination among genteel citizens with the decay of rural life, and a need to romanticize this loss, which is arguably a way of inserting an affective distance from the real claims of those dispossessed by the changes. The “sympathy” Reynolds identifies in Discourse IV as the driving force behind the appreciation of a piece of art (100) was called forth by images of a lost England, a romanticized recent past which genteel consumers desired both distance from and connection to. Picturesque art and the picturesque tour offered opportunities for the bourgeoisie to exercise its aesthetic disposition on a countryside falling into decay due to rising rents, high taxes, and industrialization.

An appropriately elegiac background for the laborer dispossessed by the agrarian revolution was the picturesque landscape, whose preindustrialized character demodernized his plight and whose charms compensated him for it. The derelict habitations, mills, and so forth established the picturesque landscape as a largely abandoned one. The pathos of such a landscape cut two ways. On the one hand, the picturesque landscape celebrated a rural way of life as that which had been, or was being, lost. On the other hand, the manifest desolation of the landscape could work as a justification for transforming it to a more efficient, vital one.

(Birmingham, *Landscape* 68)

In both British and American contexts, the aesthetic appeal of dereliction arises from a need to grapple with landscapes and people in distress; the picturesque romanticizes this distress precisely so that it can be contained – the “charms” of picturesque landscapes mitigate concern about the potential suffering such conditions would entail, while images of dereliction also represent to bourgeois citizens a social condition in need of attention.⁸³

⁸³ The relation of abandoned spaces to the picturesque continues today, most notably in images of Detroit and other inner-city areas. Part of the interesting transmutation this aesthetic underwent in the nineteenth century, however, is

Indeed, such attention often came in the form of interventions that expanded domination over dispossessed classes, exacerbating class conflict. Yet, as Bermingham observes, “the inscription of loss inevitably betrays the discomfort it would erase” (*Landscape* 11). The popularity of the picturesque – the “sympathy,” or affinity, it calls forth – may superficially be inspired by the charming lights and shadows, but it also suggests that the loss of particular ways of life, and the discomfort this creates, have claims upon the viewer of the picturesque as well. The unease inscribed in picturesque aesthetics derives from the loss of communitarian modes of existence that are related to ideals of authenticity, simplicity, and ruggedness; these often idealized virtues stand in contrast to the artifice required of refined, genteel life. As Copley writes in “William Gilpin and the black-lead mine”:

The tourists’ journey from city to country, sophistication to simplicity, civilization to nature, are articulated largely in relation to the trope of luxury. The Picturesque tour is presented as an escape both from the privileges and from the impositions of the luxury economy. The tourist visibly – if temporarily – renounces city luxury and domestic security for rural simplicity, and beyond that, for exposure to, and confrontation with, an imagined Other, the natural, outside the realms of the social and the economic. However, the tour journey is potentially compromised at every stage, involving as it does a search for aesthetic pleasure beyond the bounds of the moral, and so, at an extreme, offering a route to illicit gratification. (50)

The expansion of the luxury economy in both Britain and America quickly begat concerns about an enervated and socially constrained bourgeoisie, disconnected from nature and from each

its appropriation of the urban ghetto, often depicted as teeming with life. The ways in which loss and social change are inscribed on such populous landscapes will be discussed in detail in following chapters.

other. This is the other kind of discomfort inscribed in picturesque aesthetics – that which derives from the smothering luxuries and social demands of genteel life, and which seeks its remedy in images or experiences of a world perceived as more natural and vibrant. The complex class dynamics this aesthetic contains proceed from this conflict: the picturesque romanticizes and thereby seeks to elide the suffering generated by social changes and economic disparity, yet this romanticization also bespeaks desire for the positive qualities of these “rough objects.”

The transmutation of the picturesque from country to city is also the change from an aesthetic of desolation to one of vibrancy, and from distance to possible contact. It was a change inaugurated by Pierce Egan’s wildly popular novel, *Tom and Jerry: Life in London, or The Day and Night Scenes of Jerry Hawthorne and His Elegant Friend, Corinthian Tom* (1821), which offers “A Camera Obscura View of the Metropolis, with the Light and Shade attached to ‘seeing Life’” (Egan 46). Published in Paris under the title *The English Diorama, or Picturesque Rambles in London* (Egan 11), Egan’s tale is “rooted ... in urban realities that seem not to have been portrayed before in books of this sort... And as Dickens and others would soon understand, it was just this kind of knowledge that readers were coming to appreciate ... in the livelier form of the reality-grounded, fictional ‘urban sketch’” (Blumin, *New York* 21). The first picturesque tour into an urban ghetto is one of Tom and Jerry’s charming romps, when they attend a dog-fight in London’s east end. The urbane Tom explains to his country cousin that, “it is from such meetings as these, notwithstanding they are termed very *low*, that you have a fine opportunity of witnessing the difference of the human *character*. In the circles of fashion you scarcely meet with any contrast whatever” (Egan 259). By seeking out the picturesque, Tom is introducing some colour into the monotony of his upper-class life. Malcolm Andrews writes of nineteenth-century London that “natural Picturesque variety and individuality in the *social* ... context was

thought to have survived only outside the culturally dominant middle classes, and particularly among the poorer classes, where there were apparently no homogenizing cultural constraints” (287). In *Life in London*, as in the later works of American literature, contact with people of various classes is meant to educate the affluent about the world beyond their immediate experience, so that they should “not look down upon their fellow-creatures with contempt” (Egan 64). Egan’s book popularized the idea that being a gentleman of taste means possessing knowledge of “real life” – which means knowledge of the lower classes. The pursuit of such cultivation and excitement sparked the fashion for “slumming” that persisted throughout the nineteenth century.⁸⁴ By the time Howells wrote *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, in 1889, taking a picturesque tour of New York’s Mulberry Bend or the Bowery was a mark of cultural elevation, much as a tour of the Lakes was two generations earlier.

Gilpin explains that “[f]rom *rough* objects [the artist] seeks the effect of *light and shade*” (*Three* 20). In their first iterations, picturesque aesthetics sought these effects purely for their visual interest, and if the shade served any purpose beyond visual contrast, it was as a means of obfuscating aspects of a potentially picturesque image that would tip it into the domain of the grotesque. As it began to encompass urban landscapes, the picturesque language of light and shade would become a popular metaphor for the contrasts of wealth and poverty, genteel life and social marginality which writers increasingly portrayed, both for their aesthetic value and as expressions of social and moral concern. The curiosity of Gilpin’s original vision and the sentimentalism satirized by Austen combined to generate sensationalistic accounts of urban

⁸⁴ Seth Koven’s *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* examines this phenomenon in detail; he does not, however, historicize the aesthetic tradition behind this practice, focusing instead on its psycho-social dimensions. See also Deborah Epstein Nord, “The Social Explorer as Anthropologist: Victorian Travellers Among the Urban Poor.” My discussion of American picturesque literary excursions draws on these works, expanding upon their discussions of cross-class sympathy by theorizing the significance of the picturesque discourse prevalent in American slum literature.

poverty, often leavened with characters whose “animation and spirit” (Price, *Essays* 211) turn their hardships into visions of self-reliance and hardiness. It is notable that the low picturesque did not persist in British literature; while picturesque tropes, such as unique and independent working-class characters, animated the works of writers such as Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell, such depictions were never ends in themselves but served explicitly to chastise apathetic middle- and upper-class citizens for their lack of sympathy for the poor.⁸⁵ In both Britain and America, works attempting to document the plights of the poor, such as James Grant’s *Sketches in London* (1840) or Ned Buntline’s *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York* (1849), carried the picturesque appreciation for rough objects into the domain of social criticism, aestheticizing suffering in an attempt to make visible and therefore real to wealthier citizens suffering of which they had no direct experience. Such works, while proceeding from the picturesque assertion of the aesthetic value of poverty and dereliction, depart from its insistence on contrast and variety, becoming instead tragedies of unrelieved suffering, a distinction I will probe further in the following chapters.

Distinctly American was the creation of the picturesque sketch devoted to the aesthetic pleasures of crooked tenements, the lusty cries of fruit-sellers, and the unconstrained grace of working-class girls – insistently positive accounts of ghetto life that, as I will show in Chapter Three, nonetheless intervened in difficult social questions. Even the most lighthearted accounts of American ghettos are depictions of problematic class divisions that belie the narrative of equality and opportunity such literature often attempts to convey. Moreover, the positive

⁸⁵ Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* is an excellent example. Using the noun “picturesque” once (3) to describe the garb of her main characters, Gaskell’s story is fundamentally one about the sympathy between these characters, and an exhortation to genteel readers to sympathize with them. Dickens’s Betty Higden in *Our Mutual Friend*, whose idiosyncratic working-class speech and refusal of help can be read as expressive of picturesque traits, also points to the limitations of this aesthetic in British realism: her self-reliance is repeatedly presented as a terror of the work-house, the emblem of genteel charity without compassion.

qualities picturesque writers find in their rough objects perpetuate Egan's tradition of seeking "real life" among the poor in contrast to the constraint and monotony of genteel society; and much like the nostalgia for British rural life inscribed in picturesque paintings and landscaping, the openness and warmth between characters in picturesque literature, their strength of community, suggests the lack of these qualities among those who seek out such representations. Where the forging of British middle-class identity was performed in part through the consumption of derelict rural space, the emergent American gentility would consolidate through their aestheticization of urban dereliction: a new "variety of parts" that required unification – not in response to a lost imagined whole, but to generate a coherent society from a collection of fragments. And in this new context, the camera obscura of picturesque vision would not only frame new moral, spiritual, affective, and social relations between subjects and objects, but also bring new focus to that viewing position itself.

Chapter Two

The Mystical Picturesque

In the previous chapter I traced the influence of picturesque aesthetics on the dissolution of the ideal of the *sensus communis*, a community of feeling subjects bound by common, disinterested judgements, into a more loosely associated community of perceiving subjects for whom social distinction was conferred by the perception of rough objects as beautiful. This chapter examines the reconstitution of a community of feeling subjects in the mid- to late-nineteenth-century United States, and the reanimation of moral sentiment within aesthetic judgement actuated by the writing of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Walt Whitman. Each of these writers, with the exception of Hawthorne, constructs in his work a type of aestheticized seeing which simultaneously defines the perceiving subject and engenders his absorption into the world beyond himself: sight becomes a site of communion, one which Hawthorne's use of the picturesque complicates. In the Transcendental iteration of picturesque beauty, rough objects are not merely aesthetically pleasing if properly framed, but also morally enriching if properly seen. I call this type of pictorial sight the mystical picturesque, because in its navigation of distance and absorption, its emphasis on perception and its interest in rough objects, this way of seeing spiritualizes picturesque aesthetics. As in eighteenth-century aesthetic theory, beauty once again becomes a sign of virtue, but in their articulations of the spiritual value of pictorial sight these nineteenth-century writers expand the definition of beauty beyond proportionality and harmony to include roughness and decay. Pictorial sight, as fostered by transcendentalist philosophy, is a facet of the spiritually revivifying union with the natural world, and this world includes objects and people who fall into the

category of the picturesque. Combined with the critique of bourgeois constraint and genteel convention evident in the works of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, their aestheticizing – and in some cases sacralising – of roughness initiates two important tropes in American culture: the vibrant, authentic, autonomous poor and the middle-class liberal whose aesthetic engagement with roughness and decay is an expression of moral sentiments.

This chapter begins to chart the role that the picturesque has played in the creation of an American bourgeois liberalism in which compassion is a definitive component. In *The Liberal Imagination*, Lionel Trilling contends that “liberalism is concerned with the emotions above all else, as proof of which the word happiness stands at the very center of its thought” (x). Eighteenth- and early-nineteenth century versions of liberalism “affirm the increase of personal liberty in the world as a response to diagnosed social and political ills” (Born 11), an affirmation evident in the American constitutional right to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Later iterations of liberalism, “including Mill, the Edwardian New Liberals, and liberal theorists of our own time, become more and more preoccupied with problems of cruelty and injustice in the world that are deterrents to liberty concretely realized” (Born 11-12). The centrality of emotion to this latter version of liberal ideology has in the last thirty years become the subject of intense critical attention, from Judith Shklar’s influential *Ordinary Vices*, which considers the abhorrence of cruelty as a primary facet of liberalism, to the work on the cultural politics of emotions by, most prominently, Martha Nussbaum, Lynne Henderson, Elizabeth Spelman, and Lauren Berlant. The questions these theorists consider concern the “social relation between spectators and sufferers” (Berlant, *Compassion* 3), and specifically the socio-political contexts

and ramifications of affective responses to suffering.⁸⁶ If compassion for suffering contains an obligation to try and ameliorate it, then what specific acts can and should an individual perform to this end? Can representations of others' suffering serve to engender concrete action, or do they primarily function "to bind persons to the nation through a universalist rhetoric not of citizenship per se but of the capacity for suffering and trauma at the citizen's core" (Berlant, "Poor Eliza" 636), and thus to consolidate membership in a liberal bourgeoisie defined by its capacity for shared emotional responses to others' pain?

I claim that picturesque aesthetics are inextricable from such discussions for two reasons: first, the apprehension of roughness and decay as aesthetically pleasing facilitated the delineation of a bourgeois subject position in relation to the poor; second, in the later nineteenth-century the aestheticization of poverty became a display not only of bourgeois taste but also of the sentiments such taste conveyed – a sympathetic interest in the suffering of the poor combined with a sense that poverty fostered strong communities, self-reliance, and greater intensity of experience. By generating a relation of privileged spectator to picturesque sufferer, this aesthetic necessarily engages questions about the ethics of this viewing position, the emotions that drive and arise from it, and the intersections of such emotions with projects of social justice and reform. The construction of pictorial sight formulated by Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman is

⁸⁶ In "Calculating Compassion," Kathleen Woodward observes that in making "the case for compassion," Henderson and Nussbaum's work, while arguably "pre-ideological and naïve" are nonetheless "preeminently reasonable, if not crucial, and promising of practical consequences," whereas "Spelman and Berlant offer a more critical, if not severe, view of the uncertain relation between feeling and action or the limits of what [she calls] liberal compassion." (In *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*, p. 63). My position falls between these two camps. The limits of liberal compassion to effect social change and its potential to be coopted by consumerist, individualist, or nationalist behaviours and ideologies seem irrefutable; at the same time, it feels unbearable to relegate the guilt, anxiety, and sorrow that wealthier people so often feel about socially constructed suffering to the domain of individual and national *pathology*. It may well be one – but what cure exists other than for wealthier people to analyze these emotions and find ways in which they can be productive of more ethical sentiments and, possibly, actions?

particularly significant to considerations of liberal compassion: the mystical picturesque is a uniquely American version of picturesque aesthetics in which aestheticization functions as unification, as a way to expand the self to encompass others' experience and thus to absorb the positive qualities attributed to the poor and also to sympathize with their suffering.⁸⁷ Moreover, the visions of liberal America that emerge in these authors' works create links between picturesque seeing and moral feeling, between the moral imperatives to see all objects as beautiful and to create a nation that harmonizes difference through shared feeling and a vision of unity in multiplicity. Within this context, Hawthorne's use of what he terms "the moral picturesque" indicates the ethical hazards of aestheticizing others, problematizing the unification of self and other which the Transcendentalists posit as arising from pictorial sight. Despite the lack of moral sentiments in the earliest theories of the picturesque, I follow Ruskin and contemporary theorists like Ann Bermingham in believing that aesthetic interest in poverty and dereliction is most often driven by a need to acknowledge these conditions and to inscribe them into some manageable affective and epistemic structure. In an American context, the ability to aestheticize roughness was introduced as an aspect of a fully developed moral self, one able to transcend the limits of its subjectivity not through a disinterested consideration of others' points of view, but through a spiritualized union with everything beyond the self. This new *sensus*

⁸⁷ Gillian Silverman, in "Sympathy and its Vicissitudes," draws on psychoanalytic thinker Jessica Benjamin's theory of subjectivity in her discussion of the fluidity of power relations in sentimental novels. "According to Benjamin, the intersubjective perspective focuses on the space of interaction between individuals and argues for a mutual dynamism in which the self is capable of both transforming and being transformed by the other" (Silverman 8). Like the sympathetic exchanges figured in sentimental novels, pictorial sight in the works of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman opens a space for the transformation of the self by a structurally distanced other, but the mutuality fostered by intersubjective relations in sentimental novels is impossible in the dynamic structured by the viewer/viewed relation of the mystical picturesque. As Hawthorne's sketch indicates, in picturesque aesthetics the other is always objectified, but in its most ethical iterations contains within its representations the other's alterity and essential evasion of representation. Once the picturesque moves to the city, however, the *taste* for picturesque representations does indeed generate transformations for the objects they depict, in forms ranging from social programs for the poor to plays in which Bowery toughs play themselves.

communis helped to define a bourgeois liberalism in which pictorial sight and the moral sensibilities it expresses functioned as a centripetal force within a rapidly changing and increasingly heterogeneous United States.

Inquiries into the politics of emotions in a contemporary American context often draw on the sentimental literature of the nineteenth century which in the past three decades has sparked new critical engagement. Jane Tompkins, for instance, in her ground-breaking 1986 work *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790-1860*, reads sentimental novels such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and *The Lamplighter* (1854) as “a political enterprise, halfway between sermon and social theory, that both codifies and attempts to mold the values of its time” (126). Picturesque literature, like the sentimental novel, similarly expresses and shapes readers' conceptions of class and social responsibility; the picturesque is rarely, however, part sermon – and when it is, the tone is half-ironical, a self-indicting meditation by the perceiving bourgeois subject whose vision generates the picturesque scene with which the bourgeois reader is invited to identify. While picturesque writing, like sentimental literature, conveys a combination of sympathy and admiration for the poor, the picturesque also often contains a critique of negative or problematic aspects of bourgeois culture. Such a critique separates picturesque narratives from nineteenth-century sentimental novels that uphold middle-class life – especially genteel domesticity – as the highest moral and social good. Moreover, sentimental literature's predominant form is the novel, in which the conclusion provides a moral. The picturesque, whose main form is the sketch, rarely offers narrative events as instruction; even in novels that employ the picturesque, such as *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, the moral dimensions of the picturesque emerge primarily in moments of perception rather than through the characters' fates. Crucially, such moments of perception do not provide any answers to the ethical

quandaries they raise. The sentimental novel shows how it is good to live; the only injunction in the picturesque is to observe – and sometimes, to feel compassion.

The following chapters engage further with the intersections of picturesque and sentimental literature, and with the cultural and economic conditions that informed the aestheticization of poverty by an emergent middle class. This chapter initiates an understanding of how and why pictorial sight – the ability to see any object as aesthetically pleasing instigated by picturesque aesthetics – became for nineteenth-century American liberals a means of engendering both sympathy for suffering strangers and also a sense of identity linked to this sympathetic responsiveness. I will note that in using the term “pictorial sight,” I am deliberately avoiding the use of Bourdieu’s term “aesthetic disposition,” because the latter is fundamentally dispassionate, a gaze which aestheticizes an object dissociated from social or emotional context and productive of “distance” (Bourdieu 54). As an outgrowth of picturesque aesthetics, pictorial sight shares with the aesthetic disposition its ability to aestheticize any object and its function in delineating bourgeois subjectivity (Bourdieu 29). In the works under discussion here, however, seeing aesthetically becomes a means of emotional and even spiritual attunement to the world and a condition of moral sentiment, albeit one which, as Hawthorne shows, is not perfectly productive of such sentiments or of ethical actions. Pictorial sight, then, is a way to designate an ability to see any object as aesthetically pleasing which is productive not of distance but of connection. The ambivalent nature of this connection is a central problem of picturesque aesthetics.

In considering the significance of the picturesque for American liberals specifically, I am operating with a definition of liberal culture as one that struggles with a profound uncertainty about what, morally and politically, persons ought and are able to do about the entrenched inequality that has existed in their nation since the mid-nineteenth century.⁸⁸ I am particularly interested in the insufficiently understood phenomenon of liberal guilt, which, as Daniel Born observes in *The Birth of Liberal Guilt in the English Novel*, we are more likely to associate “with rueful cocktail hour confessions than systematic or scholarly attention; the phrase invites expressions of wry self-deprecation or else righteous, contemptuous dismissal” (1). Tracing the roots of this experience to the latter nineteenth century, Born contends that the late Victorians had “lost their belief in the efficacy of individual action to erase social misery and want,” yet still retained “a strong allegiance to what Bullock and Shock call ‘the twin pillars of Liberal theory throughout its development’: freedom and conscience” (13). Born identifies in English novels of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries an attempt to grapple with the contradictions created by an ideology that values freedom above all else yet sees the ability of individuals to

⁸⁸ Many scholars have identified the economic instability that emerged concurrently with industrial capitalism in America. “In an early publication of the National Bureau of Economic Research, Wesley Mitchell identified fourteen depressions between 1790 and 1870 – in 1796-98, 1803, 1808-9, 1815-21, 1829, 1834, 1837, 1839-43, 1846, 1858, 1854-55, 1857-58, 1861, and 1866-67 – seventeen if the depression of 1785-86 and the panics of 1791-92 and 1825 are included” (Fichtelberg 11). By the end of the 1880s, Trachtenberg estimates that “[a]bout 45 percent of the industrial laborers barely held on above the \$500-per-year poverty line; about 40 percent lived below the line of tolerable existence, surviving in shabby tenements and run-down neighborhoods by dint of income eked out by working wives and children. About a fourth of those below the poverty line lived in absolute destitution” (90). After the Civil War, “Poverty was recognized as a pervasive crisis that provoked a range of responses, from the private efforts of so-called organized charities and settlement houses to public moves that institutionalized relief and sought to reform the alleged breeding grounds of destitution. Highlighted too was the influx of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe whose overcrowded tenements came to epitomize the middle-class view of squalid urban living. Homelessness became a much more widely recognized problem in the 1870s and 1880s, with the emergence of an aggressive and overwhelmingly male class of tramps and vagrants – individuals displaced by the Civil War and by a series of economic downturns. The slumps of the antebellum era were magnified into major cycles of depression, most notably the ‘great depression’ of the 1890s, centered on the crisis winter of 1893-94, which helped create a new public consciousness of unemployment as an inherent problem of industrial capitalism rather than a result of personal handicaps” (Jones 65).

effect change as profoundly circumscribed. I am suggesting that a similar anxiety about the individual's power within an increasingly stratified society and expanding market economy dominated by bureaucratic corporations pervades American literature of the same era. As Jackson Lears documents in fascinating detail, Gilded Age America was haunted by "a sense that individual causal potency had diminished, a growing doubt that one could decisively influence one's personal destiny" (34) – and by extension, the destiny of their nation.⁸⁹ Guilt is the feeling that arises from a sense of privilege bounded by inefficacy, from a sense that one is benefitting from an injustice one cannot ameliorate. The popularity of picturesque aesthetics, with their reliance on subjective perception and individual responsiveness, their ability to confer social distinction and express moral sentiment through the formation of aesthetic judgements, and their spectatorial relation to the poor, was a response to the cultural and economic crises of the latter part of the nineteenth century. The astounding profusion in the last two decades of the century of writing about picturesque poverty, and its roots in the mid-century writing under examination here, document a desire for class definition within the economic uncertainties of the era. This writing also expresses anxiety about the strictures and failings of this genteel class, bewilderment about the degree of class stratification and entrenched poverty evident in American cities, and guilt about the suffering of others in which individual action appears only minimally able to intervene.

It may seem odd to introduce a discussion of Emerson and Thoreau, in particular, with the assertion that nineteenth-century middle-class Americans felt politically powerless. These writers, after all, employed powerful rhetoric in the service of social change and individual

⁸⁹ Fichtelberg reads sentimental fictions as "having arisen in response to doubts about individual autonomy during market crises... By midcentury, critical fictions had refigured republican probity as active accommodation and turned autonomy into a refined defense of social class" (236).

conscience, and they are still heralded as voices of dissent against tyranny and cruelty. Indeed, as Neal Dolan observes in *Emerson's Liberalism*, Emerson's belief "that an immutable moral law bound nature, God, and the soul into one great, harmonious, and intelligible cosmos" (13) underwrote Emerson's work to resist "the removal of the Cherokee Indians from Georgia in 1838," "[h]is resistance in the 1850s to the enslavement of Africans... [and] his support for the enfranchisement of women" (14). Eduardo Cadava, in *Emerson and the Climates of History* (1997), reads the "immediate and unfailing sentiment of justice" evident in, for instance, Emerson's 1854 address on the Fugitive Slave Act, as appealing to "a rhetoric that historically has been associated with the issues of conscience and passion...in order to involve us in an impassioned struggle against slavery, in the name of conscience" (66-7). Thoreau is "rightly famous" for being "an outspoken abolitionist [who] condemned the Fugitive Slave Law, served as a conductor on the Underground Railroad, championed John Brown's raid on Harper's Ferry, and refused to pay the poll tax in Massachusetts, partly on the ground that it sustained the institution of slavery" (Shultz). And Whitman's compassionate involvement in the Civil War speaks to a politics of engagement that is upheld in his writing, so celebratory of individual experience and its nation-building potential, and which offers a potent vision of "a robustly transformative democratic politics" (Frank 402).⁹⁰ Emerson, and Whitman's work in particular, presents aesthetic and moral responsiveness to the world as fundamental both to an ethical life and to a democratic America in which individual liberty upholds universal freedom.

⁹⁰ Frank finds in Whitman's writing, particularly in *Democratic Vistas*, Whitman's embrace of political action as "constitutive of the self" (411).

I am not disputing these readings or seeking to invalidate the legacy of progressive thought and action these writers' works may have inspired.⁹¹ I am, however, invoking the possibility that within the context of nineteenth-century social and economic instability, particularly for the urban middle class in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the "sentiment of justice" promulgated by Emerson and others became precisely that – a sentiment, a felt response that leads not to direct action for a cause but to the creation of a self on the right side of a cause.⁹² The moral imperative that emerges in the works of Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman to find beauty in all things, alongside their critique of bourgeois culture as enervating and hollow, makes pictorial sight fundamental to the conception and expression of moral sentiments. In so

⁹¹ Even Christopher Newfield, in his pessimistic reading of Emerson's cultural legacy, acknowledges that "Emerson continues to inspire a remarkable range of optimistic protest in those who believe that everyone can be far freer than they are right now" (14).

⁹² The potential for sentiment to displace action, or at least its circumscribed field of action, is a topic of fervent debate among scholars of sentimental and antislavery literature. Michelle Burnham provides a useful summary of the central positions in *Captivity and Sentiment: Cultural Exchange in American Literature, 1682-1861*. Beginning with James Baldwin's scathing critique of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for whom the novel's sentimentality rendered it both ineffectual as antislavery literature and aesthetically insipid, Burnham goes on to observe that the critique of Stowe's representations of race central to Baldwin's argument has receded in more recent scholarship, which focuses on "the literary value [and] the feminist potential of domestic sentimental fiction" (119). Defences of Stowe have tended to elide the problems with her text. Ann Douglas, for instance, has argued both that sentimentalism contributes to "a consumer culture that impedes effective political change" but also that "Stowe's Christianity redeems her characterizations of passive and infantilized Blacks" (Burnham 119). For Jane Tompkins, Stowe's conservatism is, paradoxically, what gives *Uncle Tom's Cabin* its "revolutionary potential" (Burnham 120). For Burnham's discussion of the imperialist dimensions of Stowe's novel, and particularly its problematic ending, see pp.118-146. Even in the moment of its publication, Stowe's appeal to sentiment had ambivalent results. In *Family, Kinship, and Sympathy in Nineteenth Century American Literature*, Cindy Weinstein discusses "the many supporters of slavery who, in their review of [Stowe's] novel and in their own fictional rebuttals to it, claimed that they did indeed 'feel right', and the benevolent institution of slavery was the result of their sympathies" (66). As Weinstein aphoristically observes, "Tears...registered one's feelings but not one's politics" (66). See also Greg D. Crane, "Dangerous Sentiments: Sympathy, Rights, and Revolution in Stowe's Antislavery Novels," for a discussion of the unresolved conflict in Stowe's novels between "moral emotion as a spiritual form of power and moral emotion as a license for the seizure, possession, and exercise of material power" (178). What the picturesque brings to this discussion is the active participation it requires from the viewer to aestheticize the object, which alters the relation of individual to sentiment. In the context of the mystical picturesque, right feeling is not something that one finds within oneself, but something one finds in communion with the world: it is closer to taste than religious feeling, in that it draws on individual capacity but is actuated only in contact with external objects. This makes it both potentially less ethical than the moral emotions called upon by Stowe, because, displaced from its religious roots right feeling can more easily or completely become a form of cultural capital, and, in a complicated way, more useful, because in choosing to engender moral sentiments through aestheticized sight, the individual must be aware of her own position, and therefore can, if willing, see the desires and prejudices that reside there.

doing, they initiate the transformation of picturesque aesthetics from being a means for the bourgeoisie to acknowledge – and often to impose dominion over – structurally distanced others, to becoming a way to *know* them, to signal awareness of their conditions. Like the British picturesque, its American iteration helped to consolidate an emergent middle class, but the attribution of positive qualities to the poor becomes far more pronounced in its latter version and expresses a far greater ambivalence about the social position of the middle class.

In constructing this genealogy of the picturesque as it functions within the American bourgeoisie, I am bringing into conversation two influential visions of nineteenth-century culture, that of Christopher Newfield in *The Emerson Effect* and of T. J. Jackson Lears in *No Place of Grace*. Both of these works examine the ways that in the latter nineteenth century the individualism central to liberal culture was increasingly felt to be circumscribed by a complex web of cultural and economic forces.⁹³ Newfield focuses on the way that transcendentalist thought contributed to “the pervasive presence of surplus submission in the constitution of the quasi-secular middle-class political psyche” (28); in tracing antimodern impulses in the Gilded Age, Lears examines various reactions among the educated bourgeoisie to “a spreading sense of moral impotence and spiritual sterility – a feeling that life had become not only overcivilized but also curiously unreal” (5). What remains in this forlorn landscape of moral and political

⁹³ My sense of liberal culture follows that which Newfield outlines as belonging to “the professional and managerial middle classes.... They were until very recently almost entirely white and male, but they almost never attribute their mobility to these qualities. Though their occupational structures are usually traced to the rise of professionalization in the decades following the Civil War, their sensibility and philosophy go back well beyond that and, in particular, to the liberal Christian clergy of the northeastern United States who elaborated their generic politics as a postrevolutionary, progressive centrism.... This middling class experiences itself as neither ruling nor ruled, and has been described by Pierre Bourdieu as the dominated fraction of the dominant class. Dwelling perpetually in a psychic and social middle zone, it is especially susceptible to mixed Emersonian modes like individualism without self-determination and democracy without group sovereignty” (13). I am, however, including white middle-class women in my definition of liberal culture. While I see the utility in relating liberal ideology to profession, in the nineteenth century the wives and daughters of such professionals were tremendously influential in promulgating liberal values through various cultural institutions, from social work to literature.

paralysis is a variety of cultural and aesthetic proclivities derived from the desire to re-engage with social conditions too complex to meaningfully effect. The aestheticization of poverty, and its American roots in the creation of a community of perceiving subjects, is one such response.

In bringing together these readings and connecting them to an aesthetic vision that expresses sympathy with suffering others, I am compelled by a pervasive and contradictory sense in the current moment that the individual ability to manifest social change is both tremendously potent and utterly null. As information about others' suffering becomes not only accessible but almost unavoidable, as petitions against every imaginable cruelty flood our inboxes, the sheer number of atrocities of which we are aware at any moment can make the duty to know and to help seem impossible to fulfill. This phenomenon can be traced at least as far back as the 1980s, when the term "compassion fatigue" came into popular use, first within relief agencies and subsequently in the popular press (Garber 17). What such a phrase suggests is both a sense of duty in liberal societies to care for the suffering of others and the concurrent frustration, or existential exhaustion, of never being able to do enough to ameliorate it. I am thus trying to forge a connection between the problematic relationship to autonomous selfhood that has dogged corporate liberalism since its inception and a liberal culture in which affective responses to suffering can appear as being the only ethical response available.⁹⁴ The popular taste for the picturesque in America emerged in the same historical moment as both the crisis in selfhood and autonomy and the economic crises that made poverty constantly visible and threatening to members of the middle class. It thus seems clear that in making available a viewing position that

⁹⁴ "Susan Sontag argues that compassion is what you feel when you feel impotent, overwhelmed by the enormity of painful spectacle; but one could also say the opposite: that when suffering is presented to you in a way that invites the gift of your compassion, compassion can feel like the apex of affective agency among strangers" (Berlant, *Compassion* 8).

both reifies cultural status and expresses moral sentiment, the picturesque was – and, I am arguing, remains – a significant facet of the bourgeois response to economic inequality.

The moral and spiritual significance of beauty, and the necessity of apprehending it everywhere, is at the heart of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Nature” (1836), one of the definitive texts of the nineteenth century. Conron calls this text “a picturesque manifesto” (xix), and there are good reasons for this assertion, although I will draw attention to the ways in which Emerson’s thinking departs from earlier theorists of the picturesque. I wish to show how his vision is uniquely American and also particularly significant for a genteel class whose interaction with the poor was characterized by the need for both communion and distance. Conron characterizes “Nature” as follows:

Fruit of the marriage between picturesque theory and the New Thought from Germany and England, [“Nature”] re-imagines the very terms of the transaction between forms and consciousness that constitutes picturesque effect. For Emerson, nature, by definition picturesque, is at once a material design; an inexhaustible picture, textual polysemous; and “an apparition” of its divine fabricator. (40)

In contrast to the British version, Emerson’s picturesque is innate, rather than learned (albeit necessarily conditioned in significant ways by class); most importantly, connecting pictorial sight to the divine makes the apprehension of the world as picturesque a moral act in a way that it was not for previous theorists of this aesthetic. By feeling the world’s beauty, Emerson argues, we are connected more fully to it; we strip away the ossifying constraints of sociality and material life. While the picturesque as it emerges in cities does not possess the same mystical qualities,

the ability to view ghettos and their inhabitants as picturesque does impart an invigorating sense of the realness of life, which was felt as a profound absence in the Gilded Age.⁹⁵ If, as I hope to show, viewing poverty as picturesque becomes an instrument for the reification of class position, a bulwark against the slipperiness of class identity, and a means of expressing compassion for the poor, it also allows bourgeois spectators to imbibe from poorer neighborhoods some of their perceived vibrancy and authenticity with which to flavour the blander realities of genteel life. The belief that material comfort was spiritually and morally debilitating is present in “Nature,” and even more so in Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*; in both texts, the ability to see beauty in the common – the essence of picturesque sight – serves as antidote to this bourgeois illness. Hawthorne introduces the possibility that the picturesque is only another manifestation of bourgeois solipsism, and that this aesthetics attests to the desire for, but cannot produce, unity with others. In the poetry and prose of Walt Whitman, with which I conclude this chapter, the distinction between picturesque spectator and subject is collapsed in the figure of a distinctly American *flâneur* who not only observes but absorbs the vitality and roughness of the working class, a union Whitman figures as essential to the health of the nation. Each of these writers also introduces the picturesque through a distinct literary genre: philosophy, life writing, short story, and poetry. The evolution of the picturesque through these different forms mirrors its journey from the rural to the urban, suggesting how different authorial perspectives influence the moral and social work performed by aestheticized sight.

⁹⁵ Lears discusses many expressions of “the disintegrative effects of bourgeois culture – the diffusion of identity, the pervasive feeling of unreality” (41). Bourgeois culture in the late-nineteenth century had entered “what Nietzsche had called a ‘weightless’ period.... A weightless culture of material comfort and spiritual blandness was breeding weightless persons who longed for intense experience to give some definition, some distinct outline and substance to their vaporous lives” (Lears 32). See also pp.66-73 for a discussion of “the antimodern impulse” in “modern bourgeois culture” as deriving from “half-conscious yearnings for ‘real life’” (Lears 73). Discussing bourgeois drives to work among the poor, Lears asserts that for “late Victorians, the word ‘reality’ had a talismanic significance” (210).

The Eye that Integrates all the Parts: Emerson's Picturesque Vision

For Emerson and Thoreau, and also for Whitman, albeit in slightly different fashion, picturesque aesthetic principles take on mystical qualities: communion with nature and its composition within a singular perspective are acts of purification and transcendence. The most significant way in which Emerson's thinking in "Nature" might be seen to promulgate a previous version of picturesque aesthetics is the delight it expresses in the harmonization of parts by the perceiving mind. One of the basic principles of Gilpin's picturesque is that, "Picturesque composition consists in uniting in one whole a variety of parts" (*Three* 19). Emerson, at the beginning of Chapter One of "Nature," explains that he is speaking of nature in terms of "the integrity of impression made by manifold natural objects" (9), an integrity formed by pictorial sight. His assertion that "[t]here is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts" (9) echoes precisely Gilpin's unifying vision. Moreover, Emerson claims the horizon for any man [sic] whose ownership is dependent on sight rather than deed or title. Like the earlier iterations of the picturesque, Emerson's vision of the landscape makes perception, rather than ownership, the integral aspect of a man's relation to the natural world. Also reminiscent of Gilpin is Emerson's dismissal of labour as part of the picturesque vision: the "charming landscape" he surveys is "made up of some twenty or thirty farms," but "the best part of these men's farms" is their aspect when seen by "the poet," not what they might yield for their merely legal owners (Emerson 9). Emerson's picturesque, like that which preceded it, is democratic in so far as any person with a sufficiently poetic – or practiced – eye can claim a landscape as her own, but this vision is juxtaposed against one in which land is an instrument of monetary gain. Emerson's vision, while putatively an inherent trait and thus universal, still requires a view of landscape detached from considerations of utility.

This detachment is not necessarily the province only of the well-to-do, but it does require a degree of leisure and freedom from labour: “you cannot freely admire a noble landscape, if laborers are digging in the field hard by. The poet finds something ridiculous in his delight, until he is out of the sight of men” (Emerson 42). Implicit in this statement is that the labourers themselves are not admiring the landscape, and that to be a labourer is antithetical to being a poet. This is a problem that haunted mid-nineteenth-century writers (particularly liberal northeastern ones), and which was most famously depicted in Hawthorne’s *The Blithedale Romance* (1852); tellingly, the two characters on Blithedale farm who might themselves be picturesque in their vitality and intensity, Zenobia and Hollingsworth, do not survive their efforts to repudiate the genteel society from which they have fled; they require the drab bourgeois narrator/spectator Coverdale, who retreats to the comforts of his city life, to tell their stories, proof of the incompatibility of farm and creative work.⁹⁶ Emerson tries to combat this division, insisting that “[a]ll men are in some degree impressed by the face of the world; some men even to delight. This love of beauty is Taste” (18). Departing from eighteenth-century conceptions of taste as a faculty which requires instruction, Emerson asserts that all men are capable of being moved by beauty. Yet the immersive experiences of nature that Emerson describes are available only to those whose primary interaction with it is not practical, since “[e]mpirical science is apt to cloud the sight, and, by the very knowledge of functions and processes, to bereave the student of the manly contemplation of the whole” (Emerson 43). The composition of nature as a “whole” and the immersion into nature such contemplative sight makes possible, is not available to those who are immersed in its particularities. Emerson’s view presents an interesting problem

⁹⁶ Proof possibly also of the need for a detached bourgeois spectator who obtains the proximity of observation but remains at a sufficient distance to tell the tale, another instance of Hawthorne’s interest in the ethical implications of observing others to render them as art.

for the mystical picturesque, because it suggests that those who are connected to the land most intimately through knowledge about and dependence upon it are in fact debarred from spiritual communion with it. Where Thoreau and Whitman will offer spiritual regeneration through intercourse (mental or physical) with the poor, Emerson remains characteristically aloof from others, insisting on the individual's ability to generate his own transcendental experiences. Emerson offers the genteel direct access to the transformative powers of the picturesque landscape: the cultured man need not try to encompass the (problematically inaccessible or inarticulable) experiences of the laborer in order to know nature; he need only use his tasteful eye to appreciate and integrate its parts.

As picturesque manifesto, "Nature" introduces a new aspect to this aesthetic, because Emerson does not articulate principles for seeing, but for being. Emerson's potent exhortation to "Build, therefore, your own world" (48) requires more than sight, more even than poetic vision: "virtue ... animates me to create my own world through the purification of my soul" (42). The picturesque as previously understood was not concerned with the purification of the soul; the apprehension of objects or landscapes as picturesque neither required nor fostered virtue. Gilpin, in his prefatory inscription to *Three Essays*, explains that, while he admires many types of beauty both moral and physical, those objects which he specifically terms picturesque are in another category: "we reverence, and admire the works of God; and look with benevolence, and pleasure, on the works of men.... At the expense of no other species of beauty, we merely endeavor to illustrate, and recommend, *one* species more" (ii-iii). Writing within the eighteenth century aesthetic tradition, Gilpin claims for the picturesque a facet of beauty that is outside of and perhaps at odds with the type of beauty commensurate with virtue. We have seen that Gilpin explicitly exempts the seeker of the picturesque from moral intentions or effects; although the

“natural climax” of the search for beauty should be meditation on “the great origin of all beauty” (*Three* 46) he has “scarce ground to hope that the lover of *picturesque* beauty, is an admirer also of the *beauty of virtue*” (*Three* 47). Gilpin is not arguing that the picturesque is antithetical to the moral; on the contrary,

[i]f, however, the admirer of nature can turn his amusements to a higher purpose; if its great scenes can inspire him with religious awe; or its tranquil scenes with that complacency of mind, which is so nearly allied to benevolence, so much the better.... It is so much into the bargain: for we dare not *promise* him more from picturesque travel, than a rational, and agreeable amusement. Yet even this may be of some use in an age teeming with licentious pleasure; and may in this light at least be considered as having a moral tendency. (*Three* 47)

The search for the picturesque may lead to moral sentiments, but they are neither its aim nor its necessary end, and Gilpin – even less so Price or Knight – does not use his treatises on this aesthetic to advocate for the moral benefit of communing with nature or to assert the inherent relation of beauty to virtue. For Emerson, there is always a higher purpose to beauty, which is ultimately a spiritual, not an aesthetic imperative: “art cannot rival” the magnificence of nature (Emerson 16). Despite the influence of Emerson’s picturesque vision on the American manifestations of this aesthetic, Gilpin’s advocacy for an aesthetic separate from moral considerations will remain important for literature that revels in the aesthetic pleasures available in impoverished neighbourhoods without necessarily finding in their aestheticization any “higher purpose.” At the same time, Gilpin’s rather coy suggestion that the search for the picturesque *may* be said to have a moral tendency, and its echo in Ruskin’s concept of the low picturesque as being motivated by sympathy despite its primary drive being aesthetic, remain significant for

members of the genteel classes for whom the picturesque can represent both good taste and the moral and spiritual good inherent in the perception of beauty in poverty.

If all objects are potentially beautiful and thus part of the virtuous aspect of the world, then this condition changes the relation of the viewer to art. The mediation of aesthetic principles is no longer necessary for raggedness or decay to be beautiful, and these received principles, rather than making such objects available for representation, obscure their potential to enlarge the sympathies and foster spiritually corrective sight. For Emerson, “all natural objects make a kindred impression, when the mind is open to their influence” (9); his project in “Nature” is to correct the “superficial seeing” that glances off forms and does not receive their impressions. This “integrity of impression” (Emerson 9) constituted by the mystical picturesque requires a vastly different relation of viewer to viewed than that which emerges in earlier picturesque texts. In both British and Emersonian versions, the integrity of a scene relies upon a viewer to compose it, but for Emerson, to see nature only as potential art, or to alter its aspect for representation, is to remain superficial. Earlier iterations of the picturesque required only the appearance and not the reality of naturalness. As Knight writes in his didactic poem: “every pleasing object more will please, / As less the observer its intention sees; / But thinks it form’d for use, and placed by chance / Within the limits of his transient glance” (*Landscape* 55). For Emerson, however, art is not only inferior to nature, but may also falsify and denigrate it. In a statement that could be read as a rebuke to the picturesque traveler, Emerson contends: “The shows of day, the dewy morning ... and the like, if too eagerly hunted, become shows merely, and mock us with their unreality. Go out of the house to see the moon, and ‘t is mere tinsel” (16). The studied negligence for which Price advocates is visual sophistry that leads away from the emancipatory experience of beholding the natural world.

Emerson's concept of beauty echoes that of Shaftesbury, for whom "the *beauty* of Virtue" is "*the Supreme and Sovereign BEAUTY*" (Cooper 292): "Beauty is the mark God sets upon virtue" (Emerson 16).⁹⁷ Picturesque beauty is unique because it embraces objects which are in themselves "disgusting," such as "[t]he dirty and tattered garments, the disheveled hair, and general wild appearance of gipsies [sic] and beggar girls" (Knight, *Principles* 156). Yet such object depictions are, for Knight, "merely *picturesque*; that is, they have only the painter's beauties of harmonious varieties of tint, and light and shade" (*Principles* 155). These aesthetic harmonies do not make picturesque objects virtuous, merely pleasurable if represented properly. They are candidates for picturesque representation simply because of their roughness, their variety of shape and hue. For Gilpin, picturesque beauty is that which is suitable for representation as art. Knight refined this definition further, by tracing the etymology of the word picturesque to the Italian *pittoresco*: "after the manner of painters" (*Principles* 148). Knight therefore saw picturesque beauty as accessible only through the "Association of Ideas": the "whole pleasure" of the picturesque, "can, therefore, only be felt by persons in a certain degree conversant with that art. Such persons being in the habit of viewing, and receiving pleasure from fine pictures, will naturally feel pleasure in viewing those objects in nature, which have called forth those powers of imitation and embellishment" (Knight, *Principles* 152-3.) If the picturesque is fundamentally a mode of seeing that is referential to works of art, then Emerson's conceptualization of nature as the basis of transcendental experience renders the picturesque as articulated by Gilpin and Knight inherently falsifying, making the natural world mere spectacle. The mystical picturesque is defined by the fact that the pleasurable apprehension of objects which might be classed as picturesque because of their propensity to disgust becomes not only an

⁹⁷ Dolan observes the influence of Shaftesbury on Emerson's belief that sentiment underlies moral education and thus one's harmonious integration into a cosmic whole (60-61).

aesthetic, but also a moral capacity. In Emerson's work, pictorial sight – that which can make any object, however foul, beautiful – is a capacity not of education or even natural taste, but of the soul.

In "Nature," the responsibility of the picturesque viewer becomes not the editing out of unsavory details, but an appropriate orientation towards all objects, including those that might offend. For Emerson, "there is no object so foul that intense light will not make it beautiful.... Even the corpse has its own beauty" (14). This intense light is not the wash applied by the skilled painter, appreciated by the tasteful viewer, but the "better light" (46) of reason married to understanding. The unification of these qualities in each individual is necessary if one is to be "permeated and dissolved by spirit" – a dissolution into nature that makes nature pliant to the individual will, expressive of individual sight:

The problem of restoring to the world original and eternal beauty, is solved by the redemption of the soul. The ruin or the blank, that we see when we look at nature, is in our own eye. The axis of vision is not coincident with the axis of things, and so they appear not transparent but opaque [sic]. The reason why the world lacks unity, and lies broken and in heaps, is, because man is disunited with himself. He cannot be a naturalist, until he satisfies all the demands of the spirit. Love is as much its demand, as perception. (Emerson 47)

As does Kant, Emerson finds in reason the foundation of the good will, the basis of moral action which derives from essential laws of nature; it is not a purely intellectual reason, but one which is felt, and which directs the felt experience of natural laws – or, as Kant calls them, *principles* (*Groundwork* 24) – through moral acts. Emerson repeatedly describes the process of transcendental union with the laws of nature through the imagery of sight – to "*feel right,*" as

Harriet Beecher Stowe exhorted her readers to do in the conclusion of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (525),⁹⁸ one must see right. Emerson's image of man united with himself is a type of sympathy within oneself that extends to the world, and it is this unity which corrects the vision of the world as fractured. Sympathy, "historically a condition of equality or affinity, whether between the body and the soul, between two bodily organs, or, increasingly, between persons with similar feelings, inclinations, and temperaments" (Garber 23), is what makes the corpse beautiful, because it is not outside the self or the universe that creates and contains it. Thus, when Emerson tells us that in those without reason the axis of vision is askew, he does not mean that it fails to accord with the essential reality of a thing. As Newfield observes, Emerson is "an antifoundationalist about the status of knowledge"; "Emerson avoids a standard understanding of truth as a representation of a reality that is independent of the thought and language of the observer(s). He ignores the project of developing settled criteria by which objective knowledge can be distinguished from subjective opinion" (154). To "be a naturalist" is not to acquire "objective certainty" (Newfield 154) about the natural world (this, indeed, might be the practical knowledge that bars the laborer from poetic, and thus spiritual, vision), but rather to "love," to see oneself in all aspects of nature, and encompass all nature in oneself. Apprehended within the vision of the mystical picturesque, the ruin is not beautiful in itself, nor as symbol of the past or as disavowed but reconstituted-as-beautiful corrosion: it is restored to the wholeness of which all are part.

⁹⁸ Stowe characterizes feeling as a form of intervention: "But, what can any individual do? Of that, every individual can judge. There is one thing that every individual can do, – they can see to it that *they feel right*. An atmosphere of sympathetic influence encircles every human being; and the man or woman who *feels* strongly, healthily, and justly on the great interests of humanity, is a constant benefactor to the human race. See, then, to your sympathies in this matter!" (525, emphasis in original).

Yet this “tranquil sense of unity” (Emerson 43) that allows for or generates picturesque vision requires, like earlier iterations of this aesthetic, sufficient distance from the objects it apprehends to make them “emblematic” (Emerson 24) – to make them art. In “The Poet,” Emerson writes, “every man is so far a poet as to be susceptible of these enchantments of nature: for all men have the thoughts whereof the universe is the celebration... The people fancy they hate poetry, and they are all poets and mystics!” (453). This celebration of the innate call to beauty through nature is less ecstatic, however, than that for “the beauty of things, which becomes a new, and higher beauty, when expressed. Nature offers all her creatures to him as a picture-language. Being used as a type, a second wonderful value appears in the object, far better than its old value” (Emerson 452). All men love and are moved by nature, but in “The Poet” Emerson argues that he who “express[es] this affection through his ‘choice of life’ rather than ‘his choice of words’” (453) has access only to what Emerson defines as a lesser type of beauty – and by extension, the moral sentiments it speaks and fosters.

This symbolization of the world raises that thorniest question of picturesque aesthetics: for whom is the natural world symbolic, and of what? The question is particularly problematic because of the derelict, decaying, neglected objects particularly designated picturesque, as are those people outside the parameters of traditional beauty: the old, the foreign, the poor. What type of vision does pictorial sight impose, or what epistemic structures underlie the symbolic forms the viewer apprehends? In urban contexts, the picturesque often serves uncritically to frame marginalized subjects; occasionally, as in Howells’s work, the viewer’s vision is occluded by the presence of his own form within the scene he has composed – Carlyle’s “black spot in our sunshine: ... the *Shadow of Ourselves*” (*Sartor Resartus* 144, emphasis in original). Because taste for Emerson is primarily exercised on common objects and not on pieces of artwork or in

relation to them, his version of pictorial sight foregrounds the act of viewing, the subject's position in relation to the object. His writing interestingly navigates aesthetic distance and spiritual proximity, vision as productive of distinction and absorption. As Conron discusses in detail, Emerson's picturesque foregrounds the duty of human consciousness to behold the world in its manifold meanings, and to draw "layers of signification" (Conron 40) from the images thus produced. This signification at times appears as a form of communion between "Nature" – "the NOT ME" – and the "Soul" (Emerson 8). At others, it is an imposition, one that makes possible a perceived or felt union between self and other. "Nature is thoroughly mediate. It is made to serve"; "the world becomes, at last, only a realized will" (Emerson 28).

Read in light of the latter position, Emerson's picturesque as it emerges in "Nature" unifies subject and object in a manner commensurate with subordinating objects to the person who views them: "the poet [who] conforms things to his thoughts" (34). His thinking might then be considered a kind of spiritualization of the principles laid out by Price and Knight, the landscape artists, for whom the natural world is so much canvas and the highest artistry that which disguises itself most perfectly. In Emerson's concept of creativity, art is born from a similar merging of mind and world: "The remotest spaces of nature are visited, and the farthest sundered things are brought together, by a subtle spiritual connection" (35). This artistry is one with particular class implications. Kim Michasiw, in his "Nine Revisionist Theses on the Picturesque," draws an important distinction between the concepts of nature advanced by the three primary theorists of the picturesque.⁹⁹ Gilpin writes for "the Catherine Morlands, the travelers and tourists [whose] separation from any agency in [the landscape] is everywhere apparent" (Michasiw 82). Gilpin teaches such travelers how to see and appreciate what is not

⁹⁹ In fact, he points out that "prominent scholars of the picturesque like Martin Price see Gilpin as the originator but Knight and Price as the theorists of the picturesque" (Michasiw 81).

and cannot be theirs. “Gilpinian travelers become sensationalist nomads moving through a world over which they have no control, a striated space marked by other hands – whether those of Nature or of landowners. Such travelers see at a crucial remove from the scene” (Michasiw 82). Knight and Price write for local improvers. For them, remaking the landscape is “the highest form of art” because rather than claiming to capture an instant, as Gilpin’s sketches were meant to do, or representing an ideal, as Claude Lorraine’s paintings were seen to do, they impose upon the landscape a series of “effects obedient to the design of the skilled landscaper” (Michasiw 83). Emerson’s transcendental vision, while it scorns the physical alteration of the landscape, nonetheless can be read to imply the same potent agency, in his assertion that nature is inherently available to perception as art.

In other parts of “Nature,” however, and in other essays, particularly “Experience” (1844), Emerson troubles his previous assertions about the possibility of self-knowledge and immersion into the world, discussing instead the “evanescence and lubricity of all objects,” and the subjective vision in which we are trapped: “Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and, as we pass through them, they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world with their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus” (473). Far from the all-encompassing poetic vision articulated in, for instance, the chapter in “Nature” on Beauty, the world here is painted by a subjectivity through which we are only tourists, passing through. Such thinking suggests that there is in nature an “unrepresentable haecceity immune to but determinative of the act of the perceiving mind” (Michasiw 90). Michasiw is interested in the ways that Gilpin’s writing insists on the separateness of subject and object; he discusses in detail Gilpin’s “key term ‘effect’” (90), which Michasiw reads as a mark of “[t]he unknowability of the object and the falsity of any representation [...] The effect represents not the scene itself but the trace of the

scene's impact on the perceiver, and it assumes the form of an artificial focal point that arrests the eye but attests also the scene's resistance to encapsulization and its ineluctable defeat of the eye" (Michasiw 90). For effect Gilpin relies upon the sketch and the wash: the sketch catches immediate impressions of natural phenomena; the wash records the moment of their perception – an imposed unity that does not get at the true unity of the natural world.

Like Emerson's colored lenses which create their own artificial focal points, Gilpin's artistic techniques reveal the fundamental breach between subject and object. Where "Beauty" provides "terms [that] evoke what we might call the fundamental liberal inheritance... a characteristically romantic and rhetorically robust version of the doctrine of natural right" (Dolan 91), "Experience" is built from moments in which our relation to others appears "slippery, evanescent, and obscure" (Dolan 14). Emerson's picturesque might then be seen to mediate between the subsuming, shaping power advanced by Knight and Price, and Gilpin's more transitory and contingent vision which recognizes implicitly the alterity of the natural world and which was written for those with no ownership over the landscapes they viewed. Emerson's repeated evocations of pictorial sight bring these ways of seeing into contact, affirming both the right to symbolize the world according to one's will and the mutual determination of subject and object. Over the course of the century, the aestheticization of the poor by the bourgeoisie will be shaped by both positions; the picturesque thus figures the ambivalent position of an unstable middle class that feels it has not received the entirety of its inheritance, and which is struggling to determine its position in relation to those who have been disinherited entirely.

The final two paragraphs of "Nature" promise that when we learn "to see the miraculous in the common," then "shall we come to look at the world with new eyes" (Emerson 47-48). Picturesque vision in its mystical iteration is almost the opposite of the Claude glass – not a

miniaturizing, tinting mirror, but a “transparent eye-ball” into which the particulars of subjective being disappear. Such an eye can “see all” (Emerson 10), and makes all sensory experience and all the questions it engenders accessible through sight. It is not surprising that the philosopher who preached the necessity for Americans to “enjoy an original relation to the universe” (Emerson 7) did not feel that taste required being “conversant” with artistic progenitors. “For Emerson, the connotation of *picturesque* is not the body of paintings in the picturesque canon but the kinematic pictures formed effortlessly by the eye and then, ‘instinct’ with effect, read by the consciousness. A good memory constitutes the mind’s own picturesque canon” (Conron 40). Indeed, the world might, at any moment, transform itself into art. In a passage in “Nature” that is unnervingly prescient of future picturesque descriptions, Emerson describes the way in which perspective can render the familiar aesthetically interesting; here, though, it also becomes spiritually valuable:

The least change in our point of view, gives the whole world a pictorial air. A man who seldom rides, needs only to get into a coach and traverse his own town, to turn the street into a puppet-show. The men, the women, – talking, running, bartering, fighting, – the earnest mechanic, the lounge, the beggar, the boys, the dogs, are unrealized at once, or, at least, wholly detached from all relation to the observer, and seen as apparent, not substantial beings. What new thoughts are suggested by seeing a face of country quite familiar, in the rapid movement of the rail-road car! Nay, the most wonted objects, (make a very slight change in the point of vision,) please us most. In a camera obscura, the butcher’s cart, and the figure of one of our own family amuse us [...]

In these cases, by mechanical means, is suggested the difference between the observer and the spectacle, – between man and nature. Hence arises a pleasure mixed with awe; I may say, a low degree of the sublime is felt from the fact, probably, that man is hereby apprized, that, whilst the world is a spectacle, something in himself is stable. (33-4)

This is a more democratic version of the picturesque than that conceived of by Knight, for whom taste depends on a mental store of expensively acquired images and is best exercised on land over which one has complete control. Yet Emerson's mode of address still assumes an audience of a particular class. Notably, the camera obscura, instrument of picturesque vision, is trained on a butcher's cart, recalling Price's "carcass of an ox" (*Dialogue* 528); laborers and the very poor become part of the show. Although in Emerson's writing, the camera obscura is created by the individual eye, and thus could potentially be available to anyone with sight, the "us," implied in this passage is not the laborers or beggars, but those who can view them from a carriage.

This passage also conveys part of a significant dynamic in Emerson's work, an ontological dance in which the individual undulates between union with and division from others. In "The Over-Soul" (1841), Emerson writes:

We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE. And this deep power in which we exist, and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one. (386)

This passage offers almost a precise contradiction to the one above, from “Nature,” in which the stable subjectivity the carriage view evokes is “wholly detached” from others. This paradox not only permeates Emerson’s work¹⁰⁰ – perhaps most poignantly where it concerns relations of one human to another – but also suggests how pictorial sight in America involves both connecting to and withdrawing from others. In one movement, individual perception is but one perspective of an all-seeing whole; in another, to make the world a spectacle is to frame it as separate from one’s self. The moment of picturesque vision in “Nature” is productively read alongside the essay’s famous passage on the “transparent eye-ball”: “I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental: to be brothers, to be acquaintances,—master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty” (10). The community formed by lovers of beauty is one which recognizes no structural differences. The question of master or servant becomes trifling, an impediment to the moral self, and absorption within the whole also ensures one’s distinctness from others. To see right and feel right simultaneously makes one “nothing” and allows one to “see all”: aesthetic distance is not different from the transcendental experience that dissolves the self, a distance so total that it applies even to the viewer’s own family. This means that the closest bonds, the deepest affection, are not incompatible with the perception of the world as spectacle, and that this perception does not preclude a universal love or wholeness.

This paradox will have profound implications for the American liberal bourgeoisie, because it allows the perception of others as spectacle to become a moral act, one that expresses

¹⁰⁰ Kerry Larson’s “Emerson’s Strange Equality” examines the fundamental tension in Emerson’s thought, and in Transcendentalism more generally, between universal love and particular affections. “Even by Emerson’s standards, the essay on ‘Friendship’ is riddled with contradiction and paradox” (318).

rather than forecloses sympathy with others. To see right and feel right is enough, and this seeing and feeling requires neither the apprehension of others in their unknowable particularity, nor a consideration of one's relation to them. Where this moral relation concerns those suffering from what, by the late-nineteenth-century, began to be understood as structural economic inequality, this distanced, spectatorial relatedness sets the stage for social and political inaction. Newfield, in his study of the influence of Emersonian thought on liberal ideology, finds that, "Emersonian agency repeatedly involves the effacement of agency. Emerson calls for resistance to a conformist social law the better to conform to spiritual law. Private power consists of external, higher powers and is obtained through merging with a metaphysical corporate body" (72). For a middle class imperiled by chronic economic instability, and particularly for those members of the bourgeoisie living in cities and constantly confronted with the poverty they are scrambling to avoid, the possibility that personal agency is enacted by yielding it to a higher authority must have been tremendously appealing – it allows, for instance, the belief that market forces will solve poverty, and that all that is required of individuals is sympathetic observation. Newfield is interested in the ways in which this yielding contributed to anti-democratic tendencies in liberalism, by generating what he calls "Corporate Individualism," which valorizes the meritorious individual yet upholds a system of unaccountable forces that undermines both personal and political agency. As private interests gained power in antebellum America, Emerson's philosophy encouraged the perception that their incorporation was not only beneficial, but destined:

[Emerson's work] insures that an individual's submission to a sufficiently gigantic and inaccessible collective instrument will seem like a spiritual triumph. His metaphysics of the One allows the community system controlled by private

interests to seem literally providential. This metaphysics also allows personal agency to see being directed by a “transcendental” agency as coherent and individuating. Thus in our still-transcendentalist America, individuals compete in unending labors of self-differentiation while their social relations are managed from somewhere else. (Newfield 86)

The mystical picturesque is an important aspect of this self-differentiation. As we saw in the introduction, picturesque aesthetics in the early nineteenth century offered a foundation both for middle-class identity to be distinct and individual sight to be valued as the essential component of taste. Emerson’s picturesque sight extends this formative power to the realm of moral values. Individual perception becomes crucial to the creation of both an aesthetically and morally attuned self; the reunion of these qualities in an American context via picturesque seeing means that those capable of appreciating beauty are once again inscribed within a community of similarly perceiving subjects. Now, though, good taste provides a form of social distinction that also yields spiritual elevation, conferring a meritorious identity that depends not on engaging with social and political structures, but on bearing witness to them.

Pictorial sight thus demonstrates its ability to acknowledge inequality and to mitigate affective and effective responses to the suffering it creates. The lack of agency Emerson situated within transcendental experience spiritualizes the sentimental interest in poverty, which Ruskin was to define later in the century as underlying the character of the low picturesque. The lover of the picturesque is “nowise sure that [poverty and suffering] can be mended at all, and very sure that he knows not how to mend them, and also that the strange pleasure he feels in them must have some good reason in the nature of things” (Ruskin 12). The mystical picturesque assures the viewer that the circumstances that have created the picturesque object are beyond his control,

but that the aesthetic pleasure it produces is a sympathetic response, and thus one which emerges from and affirms the unity of all things. This unifying vision might be read as the marriage of Eastern mysticism with eighteenth-century theories of morality, which held that this sympathetic response undergirds not only personal morality but also social cohesion. Indeed, the basis of Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* is the idea that "How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others" (3), and that these principles are integral to the proper functioning of society. Andrew Burstein, in "The Political Character of Sympathy," offers that "sentiment/sympathy has been a distinguishing component of America's national self-image" (602); he traces "the politicized culture of sympathy" (611) in America to the influence on its founders of Scottish Enlightenment philosophy, "which placed 'magnanimous' feeling in opposition to unjust or tyrannical unfeeling" (608). This construction of the oppositional power of sentiment makes clear the potential for personal moral orientation, experienced as feeling, to serve as active participation in civic life and especially matters of social justice. In the Gilded Age, rapid cultural transformations occurring in religious and economic life and magnified by a sense of "a newly evanescent selfhood" (Lears 37) would contribute to profound doubts about the autonomous self and its ability to effect social change. Within this context, pictorial vision as sympathetic response to others provides a reassuring sense of both the validity of subjective experience and of the ethicality of these aesthetic and affective responses.

The absorption of socio-political concern into personal response is today a question central to progressive liberalism which, as Lauren Berlant and others observe, relies on the belief in the social value of moral sentiment. The fundamental problem, which Berlant addresses in

“The Subject of True Feeling” and “Poor Eliza,” and which is addressed from a variety of perspectives in *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion* is, in simplified form, this question: “In a given scene of suffering, how do we know what does and what should constitute sympathetic agency?” (Berlant, *Compassion* 3). The visual language in this question presumes pictorial sight as always already implicated in questions of sympathy, particularly for those whose suffering is structural and structurally distanced from the witness/sympathizer. The mystical picturesque intervenes in this question by collapsing the categories of seeing, feeling, and doing, making witnessing itself an act of sympathetic agency. More problematically, Emerson’s construction of aesthetic distance as unification and his related depiction of the individual’s lack of power to act on broader social structures function to deracinate both sufferer and witness. The social context of suffering, inequality, is dissolved into the transcendental whole.

Emerson was, as many critics have observed, not an egalitarian. He was an abolitionist who believed in the superiority of the white race, and a proponent of liberty who was horrified by what he perceived as the masses’ independence from civilizing culture.¹⁰¹ In “The Conduct of Life,” Emerson writes: “Masses are rude, lame, unmade, pernicious in their demands and influence, and need not to be flattered but to be schooled. I wish not to concede anything to them, but to tame, drill, divide, and break them up, and draw individuals out of them” (907). This sentiment echoes that of many social reformers of the mid- to late-nineteenth century, for whom urban ghettos were nightmarish dens crammed with lives indistinguishable from the filth

¹⁰¹ Newfield has “found no indication that Emerson ever conceived of the possibility of black-white social equality” (197). There have been several extended explorations of Emerson’s abolitionism and white supremacy; see for instance Lewis P. Simpson, *Mind and the American Civil War: A Meditation on Lost Causes*; Anita Haya Patterson, *From Emerson to King: Democracy, Race, and the Politics of Protest*.

and debasement of their environments. Newfield observes, however, that the fear of the mob expressed by the era's writing is not primarily directed at its poverty and vice, but at the possibility of "a mob with a mind" (103). It is significant for the purposes of this study that the anxiety Newfield identifies about the poor in nineteenth-century middle-class writers is not about social revolution, but about the independence from elites that tenement life fostered:

The neighborhoods boast an abundant array of locally controlled, conflictual but stable working-class organizations that serve nearly every social purpose – mechanic's lyceums, workingmen's unions, grocery cooperatives, political parties, voluntary organizations like the fire companies and tavern gangs, events like festivals and parades, and a host of more informal practices, extensive kin and friendship networks, and innumerable other forms of life and thought unlike those of the middle classes and functioning well without them, in spite of the neighborhoods' widespread poverty and brutalizing work. (Newfield 103-4)

In response to the increasing documentation of these neighborhoods, charities and settlement-house societies worked to provide relief and education to the poor, projects which provided relief not only to those suffering from poverty, but also to members of the middle class anxious about what that semi-autonomous population of immigrants and working-class people might mean for their cities and nation. "The settlement-house movement, made famous by Jane Addams, based itself on [the] principle that middle-class missionaries living in the slums could remodel the poor in their own image and neutralize their un-settling difference" (Kaplan, "Knowledge" 70). Such remodeling would create the "individuals" that Emerson insisted must be hewn from the masses and, more importantly, would ensure that the communitarian principles active in poor communities were dissolved within the broader national identity.

Yet even as this work was gaining intensity, the Emersonian vision of multiplicity unified, and of separation within union, was operating in middle-class culture and reveals itself in its literature. The mystical picturesque provided another approach to the problem of difference presented by urban poverty, and this was a sense of identification with the poor – at least, the poor as constructed by the bourgeoisie – through aesthetically compelling representations of both their suffering and their self-reliance. As the next chapter shows, narratives of the urban picturesque fetishized the autonomy of the poor, simultaneously celebrating and neutralizing its ability to instil fear in the bourgeoisie. Amy Kaplan and Carrie Tirado Bramen suggest the ways that picturesque aesthetics functioned to contain the potentially threatening heterogeneity of American cities, a critique I also explore in more detail in the following chapters. What I wish to introduce here, however, is the possibility that the picturesque, as received through Emersonian Transcendentalism and the work of Thoreau and Whitman to which I will shortly turn, allowed middle-class readers to express and combat a sense of the instability and emptiness of their own lives by making poverty beautiful, and thus morally valuable to observe. To view the poor pictorially was not only to inscribe their unknowable lives within an accessible bourgeois aesthetic framework, mitigating their problematic autonomy and difference, but also to express sympathy with them; the construction of the poor as spectacle thus helped to create the liberal bourgeois subject as one who perceives and is moved by suffering.

Life Near the Bone: Thoreau's Vision of Virtuous Poverty

As does Emerson's "Nature," Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) makes transcendental union with nature the basis of a moral orientation towards the world and presents pictorial sight as an important aspect of this unification. Like Emerson, Thoreau privileges the natural world over its

aesthetic representation (Conron 291), and thus for him the picturesque is best experienced not as an aesthetic but as an ontological structure. Several scholars have been interested in Thoreau's relationship with the picturesque, which is well-documented in his journals.¹⁰² My purpose in discussing Thoreau is, however, extremely specific. First, the direct influence Gilpin exercised on Thoreau is significant as an illustration of the prevalence of picturesque aesthetics in American thought: for "more than six years, Thoreau studied Gilpin...and so it is Gilpin who presides over the conversion of Thoreau's journals from commonplace books to verbal sketchbooks" (Conron 291). More important for this study, however, is the fact that Thoreau ultimately rejects this aesthetic, "as expounded by Gilpin, on account of its superficiality and lack of a moral basis" (Boudreau 358). Conron's reading of *Walden* as "a radically new" manifestation of "picturesque principles of mise-en-scène, discourse, and scenic sequencing" (293) reveals the metaphysical possibilities offered by the natural world as seen through this aesthetic frame. Yet it seems equally important to consider the fact that Thoreau found this frame, in its original construction, restrictive, namely its inability to "inspire moral or spiritual thought" (Templeman 881), which was, for Thoreau, the ultimate purpose of communion with nature. As filtered through Transcendentalist thought, however, the picturesque in *Walden* becomes a means of unification with otherness and a celebration of roughness that continues to impact liberals' perception of authenticity, poverty, and morality. As memoir, it also becomes the first instance of the American picturesque narrative, making personal and specific the principles Emerson theorizes in his work.

Conron's conclusion to his detailed discussion of *Walden* – the climax of his book – clarifies the uniqueness of Thoreau's picturesque; it is a version of this aesthetic which, as we

¹⁰² See for instance Walter Harding and Michael Meyer, *The New Thoreau Handbook*.

will see, has complex implications for its later manifestations in urban environments. Conron reads the final image of “Walden as sentient being” as representative of the ultimate union of the pond and its “rapt, rejuvenated witness” (305). The picturesque for Thoreau, as for Emerson, was an injunction to attend closely to the common objects of nature, and to perceive the harmony within multiplicity, irregularity, and the palimpsestic temporalities of the natural world. For these thinkers, this harmony is not only imposed by a perceiving subject, it absorbs the subject as well. Such absolute absorption is both anathema to the principles of the picturesque and also its lurking, seductive possibility. As Michasiw observes of the original, Gilpinian, picturesque, this aesthetic “preserves the gap between mind and world, and so violates post-Kantian aesthetics, which claim mutual determination of subject and object in the act of perception” (79). In its mystical manifestations, however, the picturesque transcends this gap, making it possible for the picturesque object to alter the viewing subject, a dialectical relationship that defines the spiritual potential of this aesthetic. The possibility for – or concern about – such transcendence came into existence with picturesque aesthetics. David Punter, in “The Picturesque and the Sublime: Two Worldscapes” (1994) observes that “[w]hat is at stake here in this [picturesque] discourse of boundaries and frames is, as always, a negotiation of the bounding line between self and other, whether the other be conceived in the outer world or the inner” (225). Ann Bermingham focuses on the ways in which the “picturesque eye established a scopic dominion over what it viewed, and in doing so differentiated itself from the object of vision” (“Ready-to-Wear” 93). Bermingham’s observation still makes clear, however, that differentiation was perceived as necessary and desirable, thus suggesting the imminent possibility of fusion or the transcendence of boundaries. Michasiw, for instance, reads Walter Scott’s character Waverley as representative of the colonialist’s fear of “going native,” a transformation associated with his appreciation of

the picturesque, “the portal through which the Other enters” (85).¹⁰³ The version of the picturesque evident in Emerson’s writing produces both distance and absorption; in Thoreau’s, this ambivalence is abandoned – along with any consideration of the subjectivity that claims the natural world as his to absorb.¹⁰⁴ The virtue of beauty is meant to be absorbed and absorbing. “Every morning was a cheerful invitation to make my life of equal simplicity, and I may say innocence, with Nature herself” (Thoreau 95). Thoreau sees the natural world as calling to him to unify himself with it, and thus, through his ministrations to nature, he seeks the transformation which its otherness makes possible.

This picturesque is indeed radically new, one which will make it possible for Americans to understand poverty as not only aesthetically but also spiritually beautiful. *Walden*, one of the most famous and influential works in American literature, preaches the sloughing off of convention, materialism, and worldly ambition.¹⁰⁵ As in original iterations of the picturesque

¹⁰³ Mark Pittenger, in his discussion of Progressive-era writers, journalists, and social scientists who went to live and work among the lower classes in order “to observe and to write about them” records the concern among these intellectuals that “going down-and-out might result in going native, becoming addicted to tramping, or disappearing forever into the teeming urban ‘underbrush’” (10).

¹⁰⁴ The minutiae that makes up so much of *Walden* also speaks to this impulse to claim; Thoreau classifies not only the flora and fauna he encounters, but also the cost of everything he uses and the furniture in his house. While his descriptions of nature are often beautiful, and remain one of the attractions of this text, their presence within what is in part a survival manual along with their intense detail suggests that the objects are there entirely for his use – for his enjoyment, his nourishment, and his moral enrichment.

¹⁰⁵ In the Forward to the 150th Anniversary Illustrated Edition of *Walden*, Walter Harding records that “it took five years, until 1859, to sell out the first printing of two thousand copies. And it was 1862, the year of Thoreau’s death, before *Walden* was brought back into print. The book has never been out of print since then. It has been reissued in hundreds of editions, from inexpensive paperbacks to leather-bound limited editions. It has been translated into virtually every major modern language. It is one of the best-selling American non-fiction classics” (viii). It feels like a uniquely American irony – and illustrative of the possibility that *Walden* has had greater aesthetic than spiritual impact – that this text embracing authentic experience and the rejection of materialism has itself been rendered an object of aesthetic desire. The location is also now a tourist site. In *Walden*, Thoreau worries that the path his feet had worn from his door to the pond was being kept “distinct” by the “others [who] may have fallen into it,” using this image as a figure for the “ruts of tradition and conformity” (303). Now, “[v]isitors can visit a replica of Thoreau’s one-room cabin and are welcome to swim, picnic, hike, use canoes and rowboats, fish, cross-country ski and snowshoe at the pond” (*Poets and Writers*). In the *Encyclopedia of the Environment in American Literature*, the editors observe that, “Walden Pond is now a tourist spot littered with beer cans: Thoreau’s attempts at conservation have turned it into a commodity” (Hamilton 312). More bizarrely, Walden Pond is a location in the

in which tourists sought out rugged parts of Britain “as an escape both from the privileges and from the impositions of the luxury economy” (Copley 50), Thoreau’s pilgrimage to the pond is a repudiation of society’s physically and spiritually destructive “luxuries and comforts” (Thoreau 14) and “the dead dry life of society” (Thoreau 312). Immersion into nature is escape from “this restless, nervous, bustling, trivial Nineteenth Century” (Thoreau 309), in which the “noise” (Thoreau 308) of society garbles communication with God and His works. As the century progressed, the enervated, superficial, morally and physically unhealthy qualities of modern life become a predominant theme in American culture. And while few members of the bourgeoisie threw off the shackles of social convention and moved to the woods,¹⁰⁶ the popular literature of the era shows that these conventions themselves came to include a belief in the vitality, the authenticity of experience, and the self-reliance Thoreau preaches in *Walden*. Crucially, he perceives these qualities as existing more readily among the poor: “If you are restricted in your range by poverty, if you cannot buy books and newspapers, for instance, you are but confined to the most significant and vital experiences; you are compelled to deal with the material which yields the most sugar and the most starch. It is life near the bone where it is sweetest” (Thoreau 308). Thoreau unapologetically presents the rural poor as symbols of a simpler and more virtuous life. Like the pond, they are there for his and other Americans’ rejuvenation. This

recent video game *Fallout 4*; a series of posts on *reddit* respond with joyous cynicism ([reddit.com/r/Fallout/comments](https://www.reddit.com/r/Fallout/comments)).

¹⁰⁶ Kathryn Shultz, in her analysis of Thoreau’s place in contemporary American culture, observes that Thoreau did not escape these shackles either: “Walden Pond in 1845 was scarcely more off the grid, relative to contemporaneous society, than Prospect Park is today.... Thoreau could stroll from his cabin to his family home, in Concord, in twenty minutes, about as long as it takes to walk the fifteen blocks from Carnegie Hall to Grand Central Terminal. He made that walk several times a week, lured by his mother’s cookies or the chance to dine with friends. These facts he glosses over in ‘Walden,’ despite detailing with otherwise skinflint precision his eating habits and expenditures. He also fails to mention weekly visits from his mother and sisters (who brought along more undocumented food) and downplays the fact that he routinely hosted other guests as well—sometimes as many as thirty at a time” (“Pond Scum”). This fact is pertinent to what Shultz identifies as his romanticization of poverty, which exalts in a condition of scarcity that he himself never experienced.

perception of the rawness and the sweetness of lives on the edge has come in contemporary liberal culture to coexist with compassion for the suffering generated by inequality,¹⁰⁷ a combination which has created the ethically confounding situation of fetishizing underprivileged communities while also deploring their conditions.

To apprehend beauty is to absorb its virtue, but Thoreau believes this apprehension is available only to those who can renounce worldly desires. In *Walden*, the beauty, vitality, and authenticity of nature are entwined with the hard need of life at its most basic. Thoreau argues that “many of the so-called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of life. With respect to luxuries and comforts, the wisest have ever lived a more simple and meagre life than the poor. [...] None can be an impartial or wise observer of human life but from the vantage ground of what we should call voluntary poverty” (15-16). The word “voluntary” here is important: while Thoreau wishes to find valour in those who possess only “the gross necessities of life” (12), his actual attitude towards the poor belies his admiration. “In what is by now a grand American tradition, Thoreau justified his own parsimony by impugning the needy. ‘Often the poor man is not so cold and hungry as he is dirty and ragged and gross. It is partly his taste, and not merely his misfortune. If you give him money, he will perhaps buy more rags with it’” (Shultz).¹⁰⁸ In this attitude towards the poor Thoreau initiates another grand American tradition, that of simultaneous attraction to and revulsion from poverty. In their aestheticized version, the poor’s hardiness, self-reliance, and closeness to “real life” are available for consumption by the spiritually impoverished bourgeoisie; in their actuality, their

¹⁰⁷ This is not, it should be noted, a compassion felt or promulgated by Thoreau himself. His views on aiding the needy are stark and unforgiving: “I confess that I have hitherto indulged very little in philanthropic enterprises,” Thoreau writes; he had “tried it fairly” and was “satisfied that it does not agree with my constitution” (68-9). His views on charity accord with the belief in self-reliance that pervades his work.

¹⁰⁸ This quotation appears on page 71 of the Modern Library Edition (2000) which I am using.

raggedness is not a symbol of moral purity but of debasement from which the meritorious individual protects both his privacy and his pocketbook.

Indeed, charity for Thoreau is one of the things which his “neighbors call good,” but he “believe[s] in [his] soul to be bad” (11). Echoing Smith’s scorn for “whining and melancholy moralists,” Thoreau voices his suspicion that “what so saddens the reformer is not his sympathy with his fellows in distress, but, though he be the holiest son of God, is his private ail” (86). More subversively, Thoreau argues that society sees charity as virtuous because it allows individual selfishness to persist unchecked, a critique that accords with his generalized critique of society’s hypocrisy as well as the well-known austerity of his temperament. As Jedediah Purdy observes in his 2017 article “A Radical for All Seasons,” “[p]hilanthropists, abolitionists, and reformers of all kinds filled him with a sort of queasy disgust, as if, by claiming the moral high ground, they were trying to get their clammy hands on his soul” (*The Nation*). Indeed, Thoreau expresses dismissiveness and disgust towards people of all classes; what I find problematic about his descriptions of the poor is the way that Thoreau appropriates their conditions. Although he asks, early in *Walden*, “Who shall say what prospect life offers to another? Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other’s eyes for an instant?” (11), he nonetheless has no scruples about asserting the sweetness of being too poor to afford books or newspapers.

In his article assessing Thoreau’s economic philosophy, Brian Walker points out that Thoreau is aware of “the grimness of poverty” (74), citing the passage in *Walden* about the people in shanties by the railroad tracks. It is indeed important to note that he presents poverty arising from industrial work not as spiritually valuable at all, but rather as morally and

intellectually degrading.¹⁰⁹ For the rural poor, however, poverty is the only condition in which a man can be truly unified with his environment, and thus merit Thoreau's moral and aesthetic approbation. In a caustic paragraph excoriating the gentleman farmer who sees no beauty in his land but the money it yields, Thoreau concludes:

Give me the poverty that enjoys true wealth. Farmers are respectable and interesting to me in proportion as they are poor – poor farmers. A model farm! where the house stands like a fungus in a muckheap, chambers for men, horses, oxen, and swine, cleansed and uncleansed, all contiguous to one another! Stocked with men! A great grease-spot, redolent of manures and buttermilk! Under a high state of cultivation, being manured with the hearts and brains of men! As if you were to raise your potatoes in the churchyard! Such is a model farm. (186)

A house and its uncleansed inhabitants are very picturesque, more so than the shores of Flint's Pond that have been so "ruthlessly laid bare" (185); but unlike Gilpin, who would agree with Thoreau's aesthetic assessment, Thoreau finds that work itself is picturesque, so long as the men are themselves as nearly in a state of nature as their land. Their very hearts and brains are fertilizer, their only acceptable use for the farmers to be interesting to Thoreau. Despite his ultimate rejection of Gilpin's theory of the picturesque, this passage closely resembles Gilpin's

¹⁰⁹ Brian Walker offers a more sympathetic reading of Thoreau's discourse on poverty in "Thoreau's Alternative Economics: Work, Liberty, and Democratic Cultivation." Walker calls *Walden* "a work of democratic advice literature" in which "Thoreau sees the conditions of American employment as the most stubborn obstacle to the enactment of real freedom" (42). This is a compelling and well-supported reading, and I am sympathetic to Walker's view that Thoreau aims to teach people to live outside of the created wants of capitalist society. While it is true that Thoreau's focus on ancient philosophers and on the importance of autonomy shape his attitude towards poverty, I am not sure that his depictions of "life near the bone" make it "clear that Thoreau does not romanticize poverty" (Walker 60), or that a text in which poor men's brains and hearts are conceived as being best used as fertilizer supports the assertion that Thoreau wanted to "democratize... the experience of liberty, leisure, and self-cultivation formerly monopolized by the upper classes" (Walker 48). What does seem clear is that Thoreau's critique of modern society as having forfeited autonomy and authenticity for dubious comforts remains a staple of American thought, and that his evocation of rural poverty functions as symbolic counterweight to lives ensnared in endless cycles of meaningless having and getting.

depiction of Tintern Abbey, whose inhabitant is fascinating purely as an emanation of the fungus and rot among which she lives. Thoreau's excoriation of the conditions endured by American laborers helped to raise middle-class consciousness and concern about the hardships inflicted by industrialization; at the same time, his insistence on the virtues of simplicity and closeness to nature remain a prominent trope in which poverty figures as a necessary alembic for lives clouded by privilege.

The revitalizing powers of other people's poverty, as portrayed by Thoreau and later by writers of urban picturesque narratives, is a domestic version of what Edward Said identifies, in *Orientalism*, as "the *idée reçue* 'Europe-regenerated-by-Asia'" (115). This "very influential Romantic idea," is evident in the work of "Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis, for example, [who] urged upon their countrymen, and upon Europeans in general, a detailed study of India because, they said, it was Indian culture and religion that could defeat the materialism and mechanism...of Occidental culture" (Said 115). The combination of anthropological interest, religious zeal, and fetishization that Said identifies as the Occidental attitude toward the Orient (as constructed by the West), is mirrored in the approaches taken by wealthier people towards poorer ones in Gilded Age America.¹¹⁰ The picturesque makes it possible to see the ways in which wealthy Americans located in the poor traits that the wealthy both demonized and desired.

¹¹⁰ This onslaught of bourgeois interest in poverty is evident in the panoply of writing about it in Gilded Age and Progressive Era America. For example, sociological studies like Charles Loring Brace's *The Dangerous Classes of New York* (1872) and Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives*, (1890); undercover investigative journalism, such as Nellie Bly's seminal "Ten Days in a Madhouse" (1887); and newspaper stories about the settlement-house movement made famous by Jane Addams, which appear as old news in sketches by Brander Matthews that I will examine in the next chapter. Many scholars have discussed the Victorian classification and documentation of poverty in both England and America. Peter Stallybrass, for instance, suggestively describes the multiplicity of publications about the poor as a "hysteria of naming," (72). Mark Seltzer sees American realism and naturalism as forms of "regulation," ("Statistical Persons" 84). Joseph Entin offers an intriguing counter-argument, in which "scenes of tramping and urban looking...destabilize the relation between seeing and social power" (314). The picturesque represents both of these positions, that which frames and distances, and that which navigates the uncertain boundary between viewer and viewed.

As Pittenger observes, “in a peculiar dialectic of attraction and repulsion, they often saw the poor both as more vital and alive than themselves, and as a devolving, degenerating threat to civilized order” (29). The picturesque represents the desire to frame this attraction as safely aesthetic, making observation of – and even interaction with – the poor a source of cultural capital and of pleasure; but in its compulsion to look and its attribution of positive qualities to the poor that are perceived as lacking among the bourgeoisie, it also expresses a desire to be changed by contact with them. This paradox is most strongly evident in American iterations of the picturesque, which emerged through texts that preached the moral edification of aestheticizing rough objects and depicted poverty as offering the potential for moral and spiritual salvation. The agency felt lacking among middle-class citizens could thus be exercised not by attempting to rectify structural inequality (though many efforts were and are made to ameliorate its effects, albeit with problematic motives and results), nor by personally repudiating one’s class privilege, but rather by cultivating individual aesthetic and moral sensibilities.

This possibility that the picturesque offers for the wealthy to be transformed by contact with the poor (either physical or, more often, aestheticized) is one of the qualities which makes American manifestations of this aesthetic ethically and politically significant. It is also one of its most durable. Slavoj Žižek, in the film *The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology*, discusses at length the “old favorite imperialist myth” of the wealthy individual revitalized by contact with a poorer one. In a caustic critique of *Titanic*, he explains that, “when the upper-class people lose their stability they need a contact with the lower classes, basically ruthlessly exploiting them, vampire-like, as it were sucking from them their life energy,” so that they can “rejoin the secluded upper classes.” Žižek is referring to the romance between the picturesque Jack – hearty, full of life and fun, and, interestingly, American – and the British rose Rose, whose

propensity to shirk the codes of gentility is early signaled by her insistence on smoking at the dinner table. In this enormously popular film we have one of the more recent, and blatant, examples of the picturesque poor being sought after for qualities lacking in genteel life. Two older films, Disney's *Lady and the Tramp* (1955) and *The Aristocats* (1970) present almost exactly similar narratives: in both, pampered and sheltered pets are thrown onto the wide world and survive by the grace of stray animals whose toughness, self-reliance, and courage are combined with instinctual goodwill toward the vulnerable. After adventures through derelict buildings and neighborhoods lined with tenements, flapping laundry, and exuberant immigrants, the pets are restored to their owners alongside their newly-domesticated – but still scrappy – mates.¹¹¹ The 2013 film *Frozen* also features an aristocratic family opened up to the saving power of love and loyalty by a working-class hero. Union with the poor, literalized. I bring up these examples simply to show the profound impact on American culture of this image of the poor, so articulately depicted by Thoreau and also, as we shall see, by Whitman, as closer to the heart of life and vitally necessary to the health of the rich. Crucially, not only is the picturesque character desirable on the basis of his virtuous roughness, but the appeal of the wealthy character is related to her (and the gendered pronouns are telling) desire for the qualities possessed by her ragged savior.

The mystical picturesque sees simplicity, close attention to the commonplace, and the aestheticization of one's environment as morally virtuous, uniting picturesque aesthetics with the mode of eighteenth-century aesthetic thought that held that aesthetic experience is an aspect of

¹¹¹ Fascinatingly, both films feature musical scenes in which the tramp/tomcat retire to an abandoned house where a mélange of picturesque (and racialized) animals play jazz and have a swinging good time, to the pampered pets' wonder and delight. In *Titanic*, the musical scene is an Irish jig through which Jack twirls the flushed and ecstatic Rose. These scenes indicate the exuberant freedom associated with racialized others, a significant trope in the picturesque literature of the Gilded Age.

moral education. An important distinction remains, however: while the picturesque object might now be seen to represent qualities valued by a *sensus communis* (making not only proportionality and harmony but also irregularity and raggedness signs of moral beauty),¹¹² the disinterestedness claimed by Shaftesbury as necessary to the virtuous contemplation of art is still absent.

Necessarily so: picturesque objects apodictically require to be designated as such by a viewer, a designation that registers the presence of desire in the picturesque.¹¹³ As Lacanian theory tells us, desire is lack; Marie-Hélène Brousse helpfully explains in her lecture on libidinal objects that, “[w]hen you desire something, you only desire it because you do not have it. When you have it, you no longer desire it; or you still desire it, but it is not the same thing” (8).¹¹⁴ This sense of something missing within bourgeois culture is articulated (often, though not always, unwittingly) in representations of poverty as picturesque. The missing thing is, at its most basic,

¹¹² Conron describes the way in which the picturesque, for Emerson, is an experience of cosmic wholeness: “A picture in the eye, however much detail it includes, takes on a complex and elusive unity...because its constituent forms, all beautiful, originate in the harmonious unity of the universe, as the word *universe* (going toward a oneness) itself signifies” (44).

¹¹³ This, it should be noted, is a dramatic departure from the Kantian concept of the *sensus communis*, in which it is precisely the ability disinterestedly to judge beauty – an appreciation of beauty separate from desire – that constitutes the subject. The moral ambivalence of the picturesque derives in part from the very fact of a *sensus communis* in which judgement necessarily excludes the perspective of those whom pictorial sight aestheticizes. The picturesque thus relies on the elision of this perspective for the constitution of the bourgeois subject – but, paradoxically, constructs a version of the aesthetic object’s *experience* as the beautiful object, or the object of desire.

¹¹⁴ “In psychoanalysis, when one speaks of an object, one is speaking of a lost object” (Brousse 1). The dynamics of the picturesque would be rewardingly theorized through psychoanalytic concepts, in particular Lacan’s theory of the gaze: “In our relation to things, in so far as this relation is constituted by the way of vision, and ordered in the figures of representation, something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it—that is what we call the gaze” (Lacan, *Four* 73). An area of particular interest would be interactions with the picturesque poor in which the object returns the viewer’s gaze, a phenomenon which has a variety of effects, from transcendental union in Whitman, to overdetermined blitheness in many popular sketches, to anxious resentment or guilt in Howells. However, my focus in this project on historicizing the transfigurations of the picturesque and on the cultural, ethical, and political functions of pictorial sight makes a sustained psychoanalytic reading impossible. Further analysis of the picturesque as psychic necessity for the bourgeois subject would examine, among other things, the interaction of “idealization” and “scotoma” (Lacan, *Four* 82-83) present in representations of the poor as picturesque – that is, in what way do picturesque objects function as object a, the object cause of desire in Lacanian discourse?

a sense of the realness of life, which the precarious middle class locate in those who struggle to maintain not just an appearance of bourgeois decency but life itself. To aestheticize suffering is thus to make available others' trauma for consumption, or, in the language of the mystical picturesque, to absorb and unify oneself with the beautiful object, and thus to remedy the fragmented and insubstantial experience of bourgeois life.

Seeing What We Can't Know

The mystical picturesque makes the perception of beauty in the common a spiritual act, one which Emerson and Thoreau understood as essential to living a moral life. Both, however, navigated picturesque distance and absorption without articulating any scruples about how pictorial sight imposes on its objects of perception. It is, therefore, fascinating that one of the earliest – if not the earliest – occurrences of the term in American literature¹¹⁵ is “the moral picturesque,” a term which in fact rebukes the possibility of collapsing distance through sight. The phrase appears in the first line of Nathaniel Hawthorne's sketch, “The Old Apple Dealer” (in *Twice Told Tales*, 1837), an odd little piece in which the picturesque draws attention to the inability of the artist to understand fully the objects he seeks to depict, and to the moral dubiousness of making art of others, particularly others' suffering. Hawthorne's picturesque is an intermediary stage between its first popularity in America and its appearance in literature in the second half of the century, one that briefly if suggestively illuminates the central questions of this aesthetic: the degree to which a picturesque frame elides or distorts the object under view, and the ethics of perceiving ragged objects – particularly other people – as picturesque. In his detailed analysis of several of Hawthorne's sketches, Dana Brand contends that the author

¹¹⁵ In visual art, picturesque aesthetics had become part of the popular lexicon in America by the 1830s. Conron finds the first usage of the term in a verbal sketch by the artist Thomas Cole in 1836 (2).

“reaffirms the opacity of the world by showing how little an honest *flâneur* or panoramic spectator would actually accomplish. Such a reaffirmation would be of a piece with Hawthorne’s well-known suspicions and doubts about the moral and epistemological character of the activity of the artist” (113). Buford Jones similarly reads Hawthorne’s sketches “The Prophetic Pictures” and “The Man of Adamant” as dealing with “fundamental aesthetic problems with which Hawthorne was struggling” (34), which Jones sees as Hawthorne’s rejection of “much of the ‘naturalistic aesthetic’ relating to the concept of sublimity – so much in evidence among Hawthorne’s contemporaries – for a new mode Hawthorne termed the ‘moral picturesque’” (34). Jones does not, however, explore what exactly the moral picturesque is, except to define it against “the grandeur and sublimity” (35) evident in American painting and literature in the early- to mid-nineteenth century. Nor does Brand’s insightful reading connect Hawthorne’s moral doubts to his use of the picturesque, discussing the sketches in relation to the tradition of the *flâneur*; this connection is helpful, though, because it elucidates one of the avenues that this figure took to the streets of New York City, which we will come to presently with Walter Whitman, journalist.

Hawthorne’s subversion of the *flâneur*’s omniscience, expressed as doubts about the relation of artist to object of representation, is foregrounded by the narrative form: the brief sketch or vignette, a first-person meditation on a single scene or object. Kristie Hamilton demonstrates that the emphasis on subjective experience in the literary sketch is an important facet of its role in discussions that were defining American society throughout the nineteenth century. She makes the compelling case that

the literary sketch operated as a medium for the invention of mass-market intimacy. The genre’s association with spontaneous, private communication

enabled authors to articulate and debate, with public informality, their “mixed feelings” about the changes discernible in the experience of “everyday life.” The proliferation of sketches thus made less strange the shifting grounds of consensus, the contradictions, the social struggles, and the fragmenting mobility of early modernity. (Hamilton 8)¹¹⁶

If the visual sketch, as Michasiw identifies, catches immediate impressions of natural phenomena and the wash imparts a sense of the viewer’s perceptions of them, then the literary sketch builds into its depiction the necessarily bounded subjectivity that renders it like a spotlight on an otherwise dark stage. Hawthorne’s narrator struggles to depict the object of his perception, demonstrating social, ethical, and artistic relations in flux, lacking consensus. Discussing sketches by prominent American authors such as Irving, Hawthorne, and James, Thomas H. Pauly reads many of Hawthorne’s works as depicting the “challenge of determining the nature of his relation to his subject. Yet, through an imaginative exploitation of the freedom the sketch afforded...this by-product of interest in the picturesque afforded a method of presentation that would accommodate the author’s uncertainties while offering a valuable opportunity for testing them” (503).¹¹⁷ In “The Old Apple Dealer,” Hawthorne probes the deep uncertainty underlying the depiction of others; the sketch is interesting precisely because it foregrounds the “exploitation” that makes it possible.

In “The Old Apple Dealer,” the picturesque – both the term and some of its conventions – functions to signify and undermine the genteel narrator’s presumptuous knowledge of others.

¹¹⁶ The sketch certainly played a role in the establishment of such a consensus around middle-class moral and ethical duties towards classed others, a process I discuss in the following chapter.

¹¹⁷ Pauly contends that the sketch “became...a[n] exercise of the artistic sensibility in the act of appreciation” (490) that was particularly helpful to authors who felt dissociated from European literary traditions. The sketch form, with its “complex interaction of perception and recognition, conception and execution, furnished the insecure American author with a method of determining a disposition appropriate to the experience he wished to portray” (Pauly 491).

The sketch begins with the line, “The lover of the moral picturesque may sometimes find what he seeks in a character which is nevertheless of too negative a description to be seized upon and represented to the imaginative vision by word painting” (Hawthorne 454). Very few scholars have paid attention to the term “moral picturesque.” Darrel Abel’s book, *The Moral Picturesque: Studies in Hawthorne’s Fiction*, in fact never parses the term at all. Other than his assertion that, “[t]he moral picturesque was an attempt to express meanings through figures rather than in explicit statement” (2) – which seems the definition of an image or of figurative language as such – Abel never attends to the phrase. He contends that for Hawthorne, “*Picturesque* meant strikingly graphic and extraordinary, either in its intense typicality, or its irregularity and variety, or its eccentricity” (Abel 2). While this meaning accords with the established aesthetics of the picturesque, and may offer insight into Hawthorne’s aesthetic concerns, it does nothing to expand on Abel’s only other assertion, the most interesting, that Hawthorne’s “picturesque mode enabled him to cognize perceptions that were not reducible to explicit statement” (3). The unstated perception, which Abel does not articulate, is that to make art of others is ethically dubious and may function to preserve the artist from painful affective responses to others; this problematic dynamic inherent in depiction is precisely what picturesque aesthetics make available for analysis. As David Marshall writes in “The Problem of the Picturesque,” the fundamental ethical conundrum it raises is that “[t]he picturesque represents a point of view that frames the world and turns nature into a series of living tableaux. It begins as an appreciation of natural beauty, but it ends by turning people into figures in a landscape or figures in a painting” (414). The picturesque in “The Old Apple Dealer” serves as the fulcrum for the push-pull of sympathy/objectification or knowing/unknowable. By presenting the “moral picturesque” as a tool with which to see into and feel for the lives of others, and then

undermining both its efficacy and its ethicality, Hawthorne foregrounds the social and epistemological problems around class, subjectivity, and compassion that later writers will encounter through their use of the picturesque.

One of the only critics to examine the moral picturesque, John Conron, describes it as evidence of character manifested on the face and body:

In the paradigm of the moral picturesque, the values of beauty and sublimity are extended to the immaterial phenomena – moral and intellectual character – that work behind and express themselves through the visible mask of the body. Moral picturesqueness is “the mark God sets on virtue” – a state of virtuous (or vicious) feeling made manifest in facial expressions and body language, even in tones of voice. Its presence elicits love or sympathy or respect from viewers even before they understand what they are seeing. (29-30)

Hawthorne’s opening sentence asserts, however, that the human canvas can be so muted that the moral and intellectual character it might bespeak is essentially illegible. More oddly, the construction of the sentence suggests that this illegibility is what the lover of the picturesque “seeks.” There is, it seems, something in the shabbiness of “this almost hueless object” (Hawthorne 454) under scrutiny that compels the narrator, so that “unconsciously to myself and unsuspected by him, I have studied the old apple dealer until he has become a naturalized citizen of my inner world” (Hawthorne 454). The apple dealer has moved, within the first four sentences, from being a person inhabiting a corner of a train station to one who resides in the inner world of the narrator. The picturesque figure is, from the outset, one created by the narrator’s perception, and despite all his careful documentation of the apple dealer’s dress, aspect, and habits, the narrator remains obliged to speculate about his subject’s inner life. The

destitution inscribed on the apple-dealer's body calls forth a sympathy the viewer suppresses; the "respect" Conron suggests the moral picturesque engenders arises only from the narrator's ultimate concession that for all his observation, the apple-dealer remains unknown to him. This concession illustrates a central aspect of the dynamic of viewing constructed by picturesque aesthetics: its unavoidable return to the perception of the viewer, and the awareness this restriction makes possible of how the viewer is constructing the object she depicts, the appropriation such construction necessitates, and the existence (not always acknowledged, but always lurking beyond the margins) of the object uncontained by its representation.

Hawthorne's sketch traps representation within a desiring subjectivity the language of the picturesque exposes as the subject's desire for an elusive aesthetic and moral coherence. Unable to be known, the man is picturesque, and this designation signifies both his availability for representation and the moral resonances he can convey. By writing a sketch about a man attempting a literary sketch based in a specific aesthetic tradition which translates raggedness into art, Hawthorne's piece demonstrates artistic hubris and the ability of aesthetic appreciation to displace sympathy into sentimental objectification. "Throughout the sketch, the language of the narrator implies that virtually all of his 'perceptions' are acts of creation and appropriation" (Brand 112). The old man's picturesqueness derives from his age, his poverty, and the pathos these qualities evoke; he is precisely Ruskin's "old man [who] has at last accomplished his destiny, and filled the corner of a sketch, where something of an unshapely nature was wanting" (10). Except, of course, rather than filling the corner of the sketch, he is its principal subject, and rather than being satisfied with his work, the narrator continually points out that, "it is not the easiest matter in the world to define and individualize a character like this" (Hawthorne 459). The difficulty of representing the man is tied to his muted quality, the "subdued tone"

(Hawthorne 459) that for the narrator is not only physical but also mental. Thus, although the narrator begins by stating, “there is nothing venerable about him: you pity him without a scruple”

(Hawthorne 455), at any point when the narrator approaches pity, he immediately retreats:

At times, by an indescribable shadow upon his features, too quiet, however, to be noticed until you are familiar with his ordinary aspect, the expression of frost-bitten, patient despondency becomes very touching. It seems as if just at that instant the suspicion occurred to him that, in his chill decline of life, earning scanty bread by selling cakes, apples, and candy, he is a very miserable old fellow.

But if he think so, it is a mistake. He can never suffer the extreme of misery, because the tone of his whole being is too much subdued for him to feel anything acutely. (Hawthorne 456)

Attentive observation for a moment yields a sympathetic response, not only to the man’s appearance, but also to the misery the viewer apprehends in it. The reversal, oddly and awfully, is not attributed to the viewer but to the man himself. Even his unhappiness as constructed by the narrator is too much to concede. The man is not allowed by the viewer even to think himself miserable, and this makes it possible to continue to study him without having to extend compassion to the man.

Both this emotional distance and the man’s perceived unconsciousness of suffering are necessary for the man to remain picturesque. Ruskin’s prototypical picturesque object, the tower of Calais church, gives pleasure because of “its carelessness of what any one thinks or feels about it, putting forth no claim, having no beauty nor desirableness, pride nor grace; yet neither asking for pity; not, as ruins are, useless and piteous, feebly or fondly garrulous of better days; but useful still, going through its own daily work” (3). Hawthorne’s narrator assures

himself that the old apple dealer is a “meek, downcast, humble, uncomplaining creature” (458) for whom “[i]ntense grief appears to be as much out of keeping with his life as fervid happiness” (459). Precluded from any pride or grace, from the memory of better days, the man is liberated by his viewer from any quality that might impede his use as a picturesque object. Like Wordsworth’s leech-gatherer, the apple-dealer’s self-sufficiency places him “beyond tragedy” (Modiano 207). It also places him beyond representation. As Raimonda Modiano argues, the picturesque “cancels in advance all illusions of attaining the object of desire, and thus it protects the observer from falling into the trap of potentially tragic experiences” (198). The narrator fails in his desire to capture artistically the object he views, but this failure preserves him from the potential sadness such apprehension might entail. The object, unattained, also retains the possibility of a self inaccessible to others – his own, private experience. This is the ethical possibility to which Hawthorne’s sketch points: the sketcher’s failure to render the man in “word painting” acknowledges the private interior world of another and its unavailability to representation, even to one’s own “imaginative vision.”

The temptation to symbolization is too strong, however, and the sketch’s conclusion interjects an ironic tone that can be read as deepening its critique of picturesque sight. When the narrator sees the apple dealer not as an individual man, but as the “antipode” to the train rushing into the station, then he proclaims: “I have him” (Hawthorne 460). The man becomes an object “representative of that melancholy class who, by some sad witchcraft, are doomed never to share in the world’s exulting progress. Thus the contrast between mankind and this desolate brother becomes picturesque” (Hawthorne 460). Now it is not simply the man who is a compelling if impossible object for depiction, but the constructed contrast of this imagined object and his opposite, the modern world, which has become the narrator’s new subject. As a picturesque

object representative of impersonal social forces, the man can remain a point of aesthetic interest, a relic resonant of a past forever being overtaken by “progress.” Yet the sketch ends with the narrator’s claim that, could he “read but a tithe of what is written” in the man’s “mind and heart,” “it would be a volume of deeper and more comprehensive import than all that the wisest mortals have given to the world” (Hawthorne 460). The statement both reintroduces the man’s unknowability and also, in its rather overwrought and sentimental tone, undermines the validity of its claim, parodying the sanctimonious supposition that the poor possess an experience or understanding of life denied to the well-off. The narrator seems neither entirely sincere nor completely insincere: he acknowledges his inability to “read” the apple dealer but continues to insist that what he cannot read would, if deciphered, function as symbol, as lesson for those less humble. The ambivalence in this statement both undermines the artist’s insistence on his ability to create the world and, in its position at the sketch’s conclusion, upholds the desire to do so, testifies to its strength. What is certain is that the moral picturesque in this sketch is not, as Conron suggests, a quality that exposes character, but an aesthetic taste that indicates the desire for appearance to reveal essence. Hawthorne’s moral picturesque is essentially a joke on the desiring subject: neither moral nor able to access the moral(s) of another, the picturesque is for Hawthorne imposed on an essentially unknowable object. This imposition is both a pleasurable – if problematic – artistic endeavor, and a means of containing the potentially painful appeal the old man might make to the viewer’s sympathy had a less impersonal moral not been garnered from his picturesque appearance. Ironically, many subsequent American writers took the surface meaning of Hawthorne’s sketch, and applied the idea that character could be divined through physical appearance. The limitations of picturesque representations to elicit sympathy in its viewers are, as I discuss in the Chapter Four, evoked in sketches by H.C. Bunner and Brander

Matthews, but the ambivalent and morally questioning position inhabited by Hawthorne's narrator would not be taken up again until William Dean Howells's work at the end of the century.

The Right to a Sight: Difference and Unity in the work of Walt Whitman

For Emerson and Thoreau, the virtuous beauty of all objects, even the most ordinary or derelict, becomes morally and spiritually awakening. Whitman's writing sacralises not only the act of looking, but also the common objects from which he takes most pleasure. The word "picturesque" when it appears at significant moments in his work connotes a rough beauty found in places not conventionally perceived as aesthetically valuable, and often also the moral or spiritual necessity of apprehending them. The writing itself, in its looseness, vitality, and seeming artlessness, is picturesque, and gives form to his "effort at democratic expansiveness" which unites "images from every realm of experience, juxtaposing city and country, past and present, upper-class people and street types, idealism and grit, the divine and the sexual" (Reynolds, *Whitman* 12). Placing "the gentleman" in a "ballroom" and a "youth" in his "cedar-roof'd garret" next to each other, "immigrants," "squaw," "connoisseur in a gallery" (Whitman, *Leaves* 40) occupying the same page, Whitman makes picturesque the contrasts between wealth and poverty; picturesque vision becomes democratic vision, in which hierarchies of virtue are erased. In "Democratic Vistas," he writes that "[t]he splendor, picturesqueness, and oceanic amplitude and rush of these great cities" derive from their "tumultuous streets, Broadway, the heavy, low, musical roar, hardly ever intermitted, even at night; the jobbers' houses, the rich shops, the wharves" (Whitman, *Complete Prose* 211). His insistence on the picturesqueness of rough people and places asserts their value both for poetry and for national unity – the wharves

and the rich shops are equally beautiful, of equal importance to a city's splendor. In his view, the American nation is itself picturesque: "To my mind America, vast and fruitful as it appears today, is even yet, for its most important results, entirely in the tentative state; its very formation—stir and whirling trials and essays more splendid and picturesque, to my thinking, than the accomplish'd growths and shows of other lands, through European history, or Greece, or all the past" (Whitman, *Complete Prose* 377). Its youth makes it rough, chaotic, and vital, and thus more aesthetically compelling than the classical beauties of Europe. His use of the word picturesque helps to foment the sense of America as a nation that needs to be beheld in order to come into existence – and he depicts himself as the poet whose vision will create it.¹¹⁸

This sense of the need to look at and document all aspects of American life in order for the nation to realize its democratic potential radically extends – in ways seen neither before nor since – the democratizing potential of the picturesque. Gilpin's handbooks asserted the pleasure to be found in pictorializing common, even ugly, objects; in this way, the picturesque contributed to the "democratization of the subject" which was arguably "the great artistic project of the nineteenth century" (Kemp and Rheuban 111).¹¹⁹ Whitman is the great bard of the common, for whom "no monuments exist to heroes but in the common words and deeds" (*Leaves* 152); and thus in "common words" he praises the "common farmer," "beautiful and vigorous" in "I Sing the Body Electric" (*Leaves* 83); the "leaves and flowers of the commonest weeds" in "A Song of

¹¹⁸ Jason Frank notes, however, "Whitman's political and stylistic departures from earlier forms of political romanticism, departures which shape his claim to be a democratic poet.... The highly individualized Romantic vision of the poet-legislator—best captured by Percy Bysshe Shelley's rapturous account of poets as the "unacknowledged legislators of the World"—attracted Whitman, but he ultimately rejected this vision, along with the lyric poetry associated with it, as didactic, elitist, and antidemocratic" (415-416). Indeed, it is in part Whitman's creation of himself as picturesque character, aesthetically and morally equal to those he represents, which keeps him from this elitist position. The visions he sings are those which are available to everyone.

¹¹⁹ This democratizing process can be seen in visual art ranging from the Ash Can painters to Andy Warhol; in literature, the virtue – the necessity – to document the "common" person is a definitive aspect of the realist mode, as I discuss in greater detail in the final chapter.

Joys” (*Leaves* 143); and the “Common Prostitute” to whom he dedicates a poem (*Leaves* 299). Casting himself in “Song of Myself” as what is “commonest, cheapest, nearest” (*Leaves* 39), Whitman immerses himself into the American landscape and populace, insisting on their aesthetic value and the need to celebrate their beauty. In the Preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman proclaims that

the genius of the United States is not best or most in its executives or legislatures, nor in its ambassadors or authors or colleges or churches or parlors, nor even in its newspapers or inventors ... but always most in the common people. Their manners, speech, dress, friendship—the freshness and candor of their physiognomy—the picturesque looseness of their carriage ... their deathless attachment to freedom.... (*Portable* 331)

What is common is what is picturesque – that is, worthy of observation, the honest, comradely, and unconstrained. Roughness and lack of cultivation represent freedom from the constrictions of institutions and the social codes that uphold their power. By chronicling the common in America and aligning himself with it, Whitman democratizes aesthetic judgment and asserts common people and objects as the essence of American democracy itself.

The connection between democracy and Whitman’s evocation of American multiplicity and social equality is well established. F. O. Matthiessen calls Walt Whitman “the central figure of our literature affirming the democratic faith” (90); George Kateb describes Whitman as “perhaps the greatest philosopher of the culture of democracy” (*Inner Ocean* 240). In “Aesthetic Democracy: Walt Whitman and the Poetry of the People,” an article which makes a moving argument for the regenerative potential of aestheticizing the common, Jason Frank asserts that “Whitman is one of America’s greatest theorists of the relationship between aesthetics and

democratic politics” (403). Frank sees Whitman’s writing as sublime in its “call...for an embrace of a world always in the process of becoming other than it is” (404), and pays particular attention to Whitman’s “attempt to capture poetically the sublimely polyphonic voice of the people” (418). Expanding on Kateb’s influential article “Aestheticism and Morality: Their Cooperation and Hostility” (2000),¹²⁰ Frank finds in Whitman’s writing not only the “democratic aestheticism [that] strains to submit the unbeautiful and the unsublime to aesthetic attitudes and feelings” (Kateb 33), but also a “radically democratic vision” based in his “understanding of the transformative poetics of citizenship, where the quotidian and embodied dimensions of democratic life, its ethical organization, are essential to democracy’s ‘real gist’ and meaning” (Frank 405).

I would like to add to these compelling and politically useful arguments, first by focusing attention on Whitman’s use of the picturesque as the aesthetic principle that makes possible his representation of the sublime. The picturesque was initially conceived as that which mediated between the infiniteness of the sublime and the pleasing quality of beauty; Kateb defines the sublime as

refer[ing] to such aspects of artworks, nature, and human social phenomena as the unbounded or boundless; the indefinite, indeterminate, or infinite; the transgressive; the overwhelming or overpowering; excess or extravagance; the massive; the massively ruinous; the oceanic; the abyssal; the overweening or

¹²⁰ This article would yield a productive interrogation of the current Donald Trump phenomenon. Arguing for the unacknowledged work that aesthetics performs in everyday life, Kateb writes: “In the grip of undeliberate aestheticism, people act immorally, unconsciously, and, as it were, innocently” (19). I would like, in a future project, to theorize Donald Trump as picturesque object, and explore how his roughness, the visceral and unpolished nature of his language, and his perceived vitality make him what his supporters are calling “real.” The fact of his immense wealth, of the actual distance between his image and his reality, makes the analysis of his aesthetics that much more compelling and necessary.

overreaching; the awe-inspiring, wondrous, astonishing, or unexpectedly mysterious; and the uncanny. (“Aestheticism” 18)

Frank finds these qualities evoked by Whitman’s polyvocality and depiction of America as a nation continually in the process of becoming. Yet Whitman’s writing performs a kind of transubstantiation of unrepresentable boundlessness into a democratic vista – a view of the populace as people fascinating in their variety, roughness, and vitality. In aestheticizing the common, Whitman locates the sublime in the everyday, making what is “cheapest, commonest” also what is boundless and promising of infinite possibility. I do not disagree with Frank that Whitman’s language itself performs a version of the sublime, but wish to suggest that Whitman’s recourse to the imagery of the picturesque – his use of the word as well as his emphasis on the common, on variation, on light and shade, and on sight itself – is part of his democratizing vision. By terming the American nation and its citizens picturesque, Whitman makes their sublimity accessible through aesthetic vision, calling for the necessity to unify them, and make them knowable, through representation. Crucially, Whitman’s vision of America is not a view from beyond the scene, but from within it, and this distance-within-absorption is the position of the picturesque seer. Moreover, because the picturesque can make art of anything and is, theoretically at least, available to anyone, this position is the birthright of all its citizens, one which Whitman’s writing makes available. In his writing, the “right to a sight” (*Leaves* 85) is the right to freedom, to self-determination achieved through communion with the common and with others, no matter how different from oneself.

Second, I would suggest that the aestheticizing vision fundamental to Whitman’s work is predicated on the aesthetics of the picturesque. Kateb argues that

[a]s practiced by Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau, and others, democratic aestheticism tries hard to show that nearly everyone and everything is worthy of aesthetic attitudes and feelings. They try to show, first, that there is far more beauty and sublimity in the world than either conventional opinion or aristocratic or elitist canons of taste countenance[....] Second, these writers move in the direction of saying that many things and conditions, even if they are finally not interpretable as beautiful or sublime in any plausible sense, are nevertheless worthy of attention and also worthy of the aesthetic feelings that may grow by means of attention. (“Aestheticism” 32)

What Kateb calls democratic aestheticism is the founding principle of the picturesque as introduced to America through these three writers. Their emphasis on pictorial sight and on the beauty of all objects advanced “the ugly...the ill-defined...the disorderly” as “worthy of attention, and from attention, appreciation” (Kateb, “Aestheticism” 33), and their works made such appreciation virtuous. Those who cultivate the “aesthetic feelings” necessary for any object to be beautiful become a community of feeling subjects; they are, as Emerson terms them in “Nature,” “lover[s] of uncontained and immortal beauty” (10). In Whitman’s writing, aesthetic feeling is inseparable from sympathy with others, a sense of cosmic wholeness that unifies a nation of multitudes.

Whitman praises the virtues of the common in opposition to the corrupting influences of luxury, “the fossil and unhealthy air which hangs around the word *lady*” (*Complete Prose* 225). Whitman’s exaltation of roughness, especially in “Democratic Vistas,” is counterpoised by his criticism of the unwholesome elegance, materialism, and aimlessness of “fashionable life” (*Complete Prose* 210), the “repression of spontaneity” caused by the “overcivilization” (Lears

69) many in the Gilded Age feared. One way this fear manifested was a movement in which Whitman's writing played an important role: his critique of modern American society was central to the Arts and Crafts movement that took root in the 1890s, "primarily among the educated bourgeoisie" (Lears 60).¹²¹ Promulgated by "professional people who felt most cut off from 'real life,' and most in need of moral and cultural regeneration" (Lears 61), the Arts and Crafts movement extolled, "the sacrament of common things" (Lears 73). The appeal of the common, local, and artisanal – today experiencing a tremendous resurgence – is a product of picturesque aesthetics, both in their predilection for artifacts of pre-industrial culture and in their exaltation of the humble and simple over the finely wrought and elegant. More broadly (and perhaps ironically), the ability to view the common as aesthetically pleasing is an aspect both of the democratization of wealth and of cultural distinction. As Ann Bermingham observes, "aestheticising the natural and often commonplace scenery of Britain, the Picturesque awakened a large segment of the population to the realization that aesthetic judgment was not the gift of the privileged few but could be learned by anyone and applied to just about anything ("Ready-to-Wear" 87). The capacity to exercise aesthetic judgement on any object, and the belief that perceiving beauty in common things mitigates the corrosive effects of bourgeois life, are two of the most enduring facets of the mystical picturesque.

In his journalism, and more acutely in his poetry and later prose, Whitman envisages a nation capable of unifying a vast multiplicity, and offers his own vision as a unifying force: "(I am large, I contain multitudes)" (*Leaves* 78). The brackets around the line that asserts his containment of others functions both visually to suggest this containment – the speaker as a

¹²¹ One of the leaders of the movement, Horace Traubel, was an admirer and lifelong friend of Whitman, whose critiques of genteel falseness and materialism played a definitive role in the articulation of Arts and Crafts ideology (Lears 73).

container of multitudes – and also to signal his own suspension within that multitude. “Song of Myself” thus sings of the self amongst others and of the self *as* others. Whitman’s writing makes clear the democratic possibilities within picturesque aesthetics: seeing the other opens the possibility of communion, even union, with them, dissolving barriers of class and race and manifesting instead the absolute equality of humanity. “Whitman had a messianic vision of himself as the quintessential democratic poet who could help cure the many ills of his materialistic, politically fractured society. Having absorbed America, he expected America to absorb him and be mended in the process” (Reynolds, *Whitman* x). The unifying vision necessary to the picturesque thus serves as a means to foster democracy, which in Whitman’s telling is at its best a tumultuous but gorgeous harmony.

Where in Emerson’s work the individual only achieves unity with others through the dissolution of the self, becoming “nothing,” in Whitman’s work the poet-as-eyeball is a very specific self – one composed of all the objects he beholds. Whitman repeatedly returns to images that unify individual and environment: in “Song of Myself,” “My tongue, every atom of my blood, form’d from this soil, this air” (*Leaves* 29); in “A Song for Occupations,” “Objects gross and the unseen soul are one” (*Leaves* 173). In “Song of the Redwood-Tree,” Whitman is “*absorb’d, assimilated*” (*Leaves* 167, italics in original); identity is, for Whitman, identification: in “A Song of Joys,” he is “receiving identity through / materials and loving them, observing characters and absorbing them” (*Leaves* 146). To observe is to absorb and be absorbed; throughout his oeuvre he is “absorbing, viewing” (*Leaves* 385). Like the Transcendentalists from whom his philosophy partially derives,¹²² Whitman aligns pictorial sight with moral and

¹²² “Charles Eliot Norton, in the very first review of *Leaves*, ...described him as ‘a compound of the New England transcendentalist and New York rowdy’” (Warner xvi).

spiritual expansion. Unlike either Emerson or Thoreau, however, for Whitman this sight gains its most intense clarity when focused on individuals. Dana Brand, in *The Spectator and the City in Nineteenth Century American Literature*, discusses the way that Whitman's writing generates both subjectivity and abstraction from this position. In his discussion of Whitman's celebrated poem "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," Brand finds that Whitman's "self-consciousness about the gaze of invisible future generations resembles nothing so much as the self-consciousness of someone being photographed. In 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,' Whitman represents himself as *both subject and object*" (168, emphasis added). This self-consciousness is, paradoxically, achieved through unification with the others Whitman describes; he identifies both with the people on the ferry and with those who will read his poems in future generations, and thus achieves the double vision that creates himself as both viewer and viewed. His very self-inclusion in his poetry generates this duality, as in his self-portrait in "Song of Myself," which is written in the third person: "what I am, / Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary [...] Looks with its side-curved head curious what will come next, / Both in and out of the game, and watching and wondering at it" (*Leaves* 32). He has no greater distance from others than he has from himself, and thus his spectatorial position towards them is never detached, never without the desire to know and feel what others do. Whitman's picturesque is unique in its insistence on the transcendence of self through contact with particularized, often suffering, others. "All sorrow, labor, suffering, I, tallying it, absorb in myself" (*Leaves* 339). Seeing others, especially those in distress, Whitman first observes and chronicles, and then identifies. In "Sparkles from the Wheel," he observes "The sad sharp-chinn'd old man with worn clothes and broad / shoulder-band of leather, / Myself effusing and fluid, a phantom curiously floating, now here / absorb'd and arrested" (*Leaves* 302). A traditionally picturesque

character, Whitman's old man incites in his viewer not sympathy but identity: the object creates the viewer, who was insubstantial until fixed and given form by the vision that absorbs him.¹²³

One of the most notable occurrences of the term "picturesque" potently depicts the way that sight creates the seer. Part 13 of "Song of Myself" begins with a description of "The negro that drives the long dray of the stone-yard" – a conventionally picturesque figure both because of his subaltern position in society and because, "His glance calm and commanding," he is an object neither of contempt nor pity. Rather, in "the slouch of his hat" and "his polish'd and perfect limbs" he is presented as possessing tremendous aesthetic appeal. Unlike other iterations of the picturesque, however, Whitman's poem is not content simply to depict this picturesque object: "I behold the picturesque giant and love him, and I do not stop / there, / I go with the team also [...] Absorbing all to myself and for this song" (*Leaves* 38). To aestheticize is, in Whitman's poetry, to love, and this love is expressed as a "going with" – a desire for shared experience.¹²⁴ The presence of the picturesque in Whitman's writing signals not simply a rejuvenating, mystical union with an aspect of nature, or the "not-me," but also an experiential union with others' labors and emotions, an expansion of the self that engenders both self-identity and identity with others. In this way, Whitman's writing is the apotheosis of picturesque aesthetics, which are "predicated...on absorption. Picturesque theory makes the correct view a product of holding a certain, clearly defined position *within* the landscape, rather than from some

¹²³ In *Moral Imagination*, David Bromwich writes: "How often Whitman's ecstasy, his standing outside himself, becomes a standing in some other kind of being, or an inhabiting of a man or woman apparently far from him in society. His originality is to insist that such changes of feeling do not point to the inconsequence of a mind adrift. They offer occasions for a sympathetic imagining that is identical with self-invention" (105).

¹²⁴ The evolution of *Leaves of Grass* over four decades is a record of this desire. While I am discussing Whitman's work and persona as professing and enacting a collapse of absorbing self and picturesque object, I would not wish to suggest that I am referring to Walt Whitman as an individual, but rather to his poetic self-representation.

place beyond it” (Valihora 281). However, if previous versions of the picturesque “emphasiz[e] the imposition of a distinct perspective to create a coherent, unified scene” (Valihora 281), Whitman’s picturesque shows how that perspective and the coherence it creates are themselves aspects of the scene. The enduring appeal of Whitman’s poetry derives in part from “its miraculous air of inclusiveness” (Bromwich 106), and this is not only the multitudes he sings and contains, but also the way “the poet seems in contact with the reader” (Bromwich 106). His perspective is constructed as one we might share, and thus the landscape he perceives appears not only his, but ours.¹²⁵ Unlike the “I” of Thoreau’s life writing, Whitman’s poetic picturesque enfold into its depictions the mutuality of the relations between self and others; like the picturesque sketch, his work foregrounds the subjective position from which it is written, but by writing into the scene the perceiving subject’s desire to behold and *to go with* his object of depiction, the view he represents yields not only aesthetic coherence but also unity between poet, subject, and reader.

Whitman draws attention to the distinct perspective of the poet and the unifying power this perspective possesses. He also marks its limitations. In the section of “Song of Myself” following the one depicting the “picturesque giant,” the poet confesses that the objects he loves “scorn the best I can do to relate them” (*Leaves* 39). Later in the same poem, a similar revelation: “I know perfectly well my own egotism, / Know my omnivorous lines and must not write any less, / And would fetch you whoever you are flush with myself” (*Leaves* 69). Here, even as he admits the imposition of his perspective implicit in his writing, he asserts not only the

¹²⁵ William James, an admirer of Whitman’s work and vocal critic of the excessive refinement and confinement of bourgeois life, saw Whitman’s expansiveness as offering an emancipatory vision: “Walt Whitman owes his importance in literature to the systematic expulsion from his writings of all contractile elements. The only sentiments he allowed himself to express were of the expansive order; and he expressed these in the first person, not as your mere monstrously conceited individual might so express them, but vicariously for all men, so that a passionate and mystic ontological emotion suffuses his words” (*Varieties* 84, qtd. in John Higham, “The Reorientation of American Culture in the 1890s,” p. 193.)

need for this aestheticization but also that observing and making art of others fosters mutuality of experience, and thus social harmony. Whitman's admissions of failure to capture fully the objects he represents function similarly to Gilpin's focus on "effect": they are the "mark[s] in representation signing the singularity of the aspect and its coupure from the scene itself" (Michasiw 90). Whitman's recognition of the haecceity of objects goes a step beyond Gilpin's: that the objects Whitman represents "scorn" his efforts to relate them not only marks the boundaries of his subject position, but also suggests an active repudiation of the aesthetic vision he would impose and the possibility of a returning gaze from those whom he observes. Nor does he claim to have access to the subjectivity of the objects he views and loves. "The eye that gazes, in a photograph or in an urban crowd, does not surrender its mystery or allow itself to be read" (Brand 166). The identity Whitman receives from his contact with others is not the result of an imagined vision of himself through the other's gaze; it remains his own envisioned identity, expanded through viewing and trying to understand another. The other, "whoever you are" – a phrase that encapsulates both indifference towards status or gender and also the other's mysteriousness – is brought "flush" with the speaker; it is a beautiful word, suggesting at once the sudden rise of emotion in response to contact, the vibrancy of this contact, the equality engendered by the movement of bringing the other close, and the contiguous but still separate relation between self and other. Whitman's picturesque offers the unifying vision of this aesthetic as profoundly ethical, because in the representation is signaled its insufficiency; to know others one must look, and in looking finds the limits of knowing.

These limits are of the utmost importance. The unity Whitman seeks is constructed through his vision and representation; what he sees has been devoured, has become part of the poet. In moving between observer and observed, absorbing body and body absorbed by the

nation, Whitman's literary persona makes pictorial sight integral to the creation of both the self and a radically inclusive, egalitarian nation. Crucially, this inclusivity is achieved through a process of seeing and depicting which is both necessary and necessarily unethical; there is no way to depict others without first absorbing them into one's self. This process can be driven by and is expressive of love, but it is still a form of domination. The potential for admiration and loving embrace of others to become cruelty is played out in Whitman's troubling poem "A Woman Waits for Me." Beginning with the declaration that bold brave women are "not one jot less than I am," asserting that such women are "well-possess'd of themselves" (*Leaves* 88), the poem quickly moves to the lines, "I cannot let you go, I would do you good, / I am for you, and you are for me, not only for our own sake, but for / others' sakes" (*Leaves* 89). While the voice in this poem echoes that in the rest of Whitman's work, rejoicing in health, strength, sensuality, and creativity, the dynamics are uncharacteristically not that of absorption and union, but of a union through domination that denies the claims of another's subjectivity. It is a song of imperialism: "I do not hurt you any more than is necessary for you, / I pour the stuff to start sons and daughters fit for these States... On you I graft the graft of the best-beloved of me and America" (*Leaves* 89). The speaker possesses the object of his desire, not primarily for himself, but for his nation and its future. Some critics have reacted strongly to the fact that the sex act depicted in this poem appears to be not mutual but forced, but others have sought to justify it within the context of Whitman's emancipatory vision for American women – one which, while radical in its embrace of sensual, athletic women, nonetheless saw women's highest value to society as their "fecundity" (*Loving* 18).¹²⁶ I read this poem as one in which Whitman's

¹²⁶ Edwin Haviland Miller, for instance, calls it "a masturbatory rape dream" (136). Jerome Loving, by contrast, reads "A Woman Waits for Me" as being "not a description of hegemonic male sexual activity but one of communion between genders" (23). Arthur Wrobel similarly observes how Whitman perceived women's primary duty to their nation as the bearing of children. Folsom and Price observe that although the poem "fantasizes from a

enthusiasm about the American project breaks the bounds of ethicality elsewhere inscribed by his emphasis on sight and on mutuality of experience that always includes the potential plurality of the self.

In “A Woman Waits For Me” the subject position of the “I” is not bounded in any way; he is “stern, acrid, large, undissuadable, but I love you” (*Leaves* 89) – a kind of relentless loving that looks not to the loved object but to the qualities the speaker projects upon her, and more importantly, what those qualities represent for the success of the nation. The imagery of sight, so prominent throughout Whitman’s work, is notably absent, replaced by a will to “inter-penetrate” which, despite the implied mutuality of the word, will “listen to no entreaties” (*Leaves* 89). In no other Whitman poem is unity incommensurate with plurality. On the contrary, as he writes in “On Blue Ontario’s Shore,” “There can be any number of supremes – one does not countervail / another any more than one eyesight countervails another, or / one life countervails another” (*Leaves* 264). Throughout the most moving and enduring of Whitman’s poems, the speaker is he who “contains multitudes,” who is dissolved into air or eddies or grass; his sense of immortality derives not from planting himself in another, as it does in “A Woman Waits,” but, as in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” from “The certainty of others, the life, love, sight, hearing of others” (*Leaves* 129). The moral vision, in *Leaves of Grass*, celebrates “The separate countless free identities, like eyesight” (*Leaves* 13): identity, like sight, is a process of doubling, a phantasmagorical imprint. In “I Sing the Body Electric,” Whitman asks, “Do you suppose you have a right to a good sight, and he or she has / no right to a sight?” (*Leaves* 85). Sight is, throughout Whitman’s

male perspective about taking a woman sexually by force... it was nonetheless a favorite of some nineteenth-century women reformers, both for the way it celebrated female sexuality... and for the way it projected a new kind of independent American woman” (72-3).

work, synecdoche for subjectivity, and the poet, in seeing others, takes them into himself so that this self can expand and change. “Whitman has, and he encourages us to find in ourselves, the irony of the person who is not one thing – who, even to his own understanding, is composed of unseen parts – who can imagine that an event or experience may possibly alter what he is” (Bromwich 101). This is the picturesque Whitman, whose unity is always mutable and in flux, a temporary view from within a landscape adored for its unknowable, unsayable multiplicities. “A Woman Waits for Me,” for all its celebratory and life-affirming imagery, serves as a chilling depiction of the violation that can result from the desire for fusion with another – perhaps especially in acts of creation.

Such desire is rendered in a poem far more characteristic of Whitman’s writing, the twenty-ninth bather section of “Song of Myself,” a section notable for its doubling of pictorial sight. Here, scopic dominion does not differentiate viewer from viewed, but brings them into contact. The viewing figured in this poem makes possible the imaginative expansion of the woman who watches and of the poet who watches her, through the union it allows between the woman and the men and between the poet and the woman. The “lonesome” woman who “hides handsome and richly drest” (*Leaves* 37) evokes the restraining conventions of gentility Whitman so often wrote against, and the section performs her vision of the bathing young men as her release from this sad captivity. Only the poem’s speaker sees her and addresses her as the “twenty-ninth bather” and records the “unseen hand” that “pass’d over their bodies” (*Leaves* 37). In her sight, even the “homeliest” of the men is “beautiful” (*Leaves* 37), a transformation that suggests the need that her contained and materialistic existence has created for contact with life in its commoner forms. From her window, she creates a picturesque scene of the bathers that fosters this contact, and the “I” of the poem sees her in this act of creation and places her within

the scene, naming her seeing as loving. The section emphasizes the importance of sight in creating imaginative connections between people of disparate classes, and captures the ache for release into the natural that genteel writers throughout the century associate with the picturesque.

Despite the moments in which Whitman finds that “The best I had done seem’d to me blank and suspicious” (*Leaves* 132), in which speech taunts the poet with its inability to express what he has envisioned and absorbed (*Leaves* 50),¹²⁷ his work is characterized by his sense of “The impalpable sustenance of me from all things at all hours / of the day, / The simple, compact, well-join’d scheme, myself / disintegrated, every one disintegrated yet part of the / scheme” (*Leaves* 129). Sustained by, composed of, objects outside himself, the poet Whitman depicts is a unification of parts: in “A Child Went Forth, “the first object he look’d upon, that object he became” (*Leaves* 282). The result of Whitman’s absorption of and into the common is that he becomes himself a picturesque character. While he aligns himself with many types of working-class people, perhaps his strongest association is with a figure highly visible both on the New York streets and in nineteenth-century literature and theater depicting the city’s downtown east side, the Bowery b’hoy.¹²⁸ In *Walt Whitman*, Reynolds argues:

His whole persona in *Leaves of Grass*— wicked rather than conventionally virtuous, free, smart, prone to slang and vigorous outbursts— reflects the b’hoy

¹²⁷ In this moment in “Song of Myself,” “Speech is the twin of my vision, it is unequal to measure itself, / It provokes me forever, it says sarcastically, / *Walt you contain enough, why don’t you let it out then?*” (*Leaves* 50). Vision, then, is the primary source through which others are absorbed, a process language is sometimes insufficient to depict.

¹²⁸ In the following chapter I discuss George Foster’s influential depiction of these prototypical American figures in the 1850s, as well as their relation to authenticity and intensity of experience in Hutchins Hapgood’s *Types from City Streets* (1910). For a brief introduction to their style and significance, see Reynolds, *Walt Whitman* pp. 28-30. See also Dowling, pp. 50-61. He chronicles the ways in which “the B’hoy became a recognizable ‘type’ in the popular consciousness of mid-nineteenth-century New York at a time when the establishment of urban ‘types’ was vital to the evolution of the city’s identity” (55).

culture. One early reviewer opined that his poems reflected “the extravagance, coarseness, and general ‘loudness’ of Bowery boys,” with also their candor and acceptance of the body. Another generalized, “He is the ‘Bowery Bhoy’ in literature.” (30)¹²⁹

Like Thoreau, Whitman in “Democratic Vistas” criticizes his era’s “refinement and delicatessen” which “threaten to eat us up, like a cancer” (*Complete Prose* 230). To combat this sickness, “a little healthy rudeness, savage virtue, justification of what one has in one’s self, whatever it is, is demanded” (Whitman, *Complete Prose* 230). Whitman’s aesthetic and moral alliance with Bowery b’hoys – those most romantic of New York toughs, with whom we will spend more time presently – embodies precisely this healthy rudeness. They might be seen as an urban working-class version of the nonconformist found in the works of Emerson and Thoreau, “rude and invincible,” as Emerson writes in “Fate” (780), guided by his own conscience and healthy appetites. In his recollection of “The Old Bowery,” Whitman describes them as “the young ship-builders, cartmen, butchers, firemen (the old-time ‘soap-lock’ or exaggerated ‘Mose’ or ‘Sikesey,’ of Chanfrau’s plays,) they, too, were always to be seen in these audiences, racy of the East river and the Dry Dock. Slang, wit, occasional shirt sleeves, and a picturesque freedom of looks and manners, with a rude good-nature and restless movement, were generally noticeable” (*Complete Prose* 427). As we will see, the picturesque Bowery b’hoys become a stock character, representative always of virtue, authenticity, and intensity of experience, often seen in contrast to enervated or devious members of the gentility. In embracing this persona, Whitman embodies

¹²⁹ Dowling similarly argues that, “Whitman ... discovered in the B’hoys a refreshingly American articulation ... much of the credit for the characteristics of Whitman’s ‘I’ in *Leaves of Grass* can be attributed to the B’hoys” (57).

the picturesque urban character, at the same time making felt its potency to revitalize not just the individual but also the body politic.

Given that, until Whitman, every other iteration of the picturesque performs the cultural function of separating the genteel subject from the picturesque object (with the possible exception of Thoreau's self-representation in *Walden* as autonomous impoverished hermit), this self-creation as picturesque object is a unique quality of Whitman's picturesque aesthetics, and one which has had far-reaching consequences. While the class-defining function of this aesthetic remains significant, perhaps more powerful and pervasive is the idea that personal authenticity can exist only outside conventional bourgeois lifestyles. Chapter Four considers the role of picturesque aesthetics in the development of the American bohemian, an identity which emerges at the turn of the century in direct relation to the aestheticization and appropriation of rough people and neighborhoods: beyond simply observing roughness, the bohemian immerses himself in it, seeking a Whitmanesque identification with otherness. In projecting the persona of a Bowery b'hoj, however, Whitman does not reject the class into which he was born, but rather embraces it and a certain urban manifestation of the working-class culture to which his family belonged. Moreover, as we have seen, Whitman moves fluidly between many subjectivities; his picturesqueness is, in part, the result of identifying with the multiplicity of subjects he absorbs and describes, and thus representing the variability, the flux, of the picturesque American nation. The bohemian, by contrast, wishes to escape his bourgeois culture (although, as we will see, it merely expands to incorporate the aesthetics of its rejection) by adopting some of the morals and lifestyle choices of poorer people. Yet the American bohemian cannot be a fully picturesque character: he does not have the Bowery b'hoj's freedom, merely liberation from certain social mores, one which is often temporary and enabled by a degree of affluence.

The mystical picturesque initiated the concept, taken up by the American bohemian, that the ability to aestheticize and thus to absorb roughness can foster a subjectivity free from the socially and personally damaging constraints of bourgeois convention. This application of pictorial sight to one's own life, and the belief that such aesthetic self-creation has ethical consequences, is arguably one of the most enduring facets of picturesque aesthetics. In a recent and influential article on the website *Mashable*, David Infante defines the ideals of wealthier millennials he terms the Young Creative Class, or yuccies, who eschew mainstream industries for jobs in which they can express their creativity, and who gravitate toward working-class urban neighborhoods in the process of gentrification: the yuccie “doesn't like gentrification in theory; loves artisanal donuts in practice” (Infante). In theory, gentrification is ethically problematic; in practice, it is the result of bourgeois people looking for affordable housing and bringing their bourgeois lifestyles – artisanal donuts – with them. The yuccie “siren song” is, “You deserve to make a living being yourself. Your ideas are valuable. Follow your dreams” (Infante). Like the members of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie Lears examines, yuccies are driven by a need to create an “authentic” self, and by a fear that their bourgeois lives lack reality and meaning. Like the greeting-card version of Thoreau's exhortation to let the man who hears “a different drummer... step to the music that he hears” (*Walden* 305), Whitman's celebration of authenticity and freedom – filtered through the bohemian's fear of unreality – has become the bourgeois entitlement to make a living being oneself. Bourgeois life for millennials demands being pictorially interesting; Instagram followings can garner jobs, and in any case prove that at least one is living intensely (various washes and tints serving to convey the viewer's affective response to the scene). I am not suggesting that the yuccies, or their better-known predecessors the hipsters, are relatives of the Bowery b'hoj, except insofar as a love of slang, wit, and very

specific casual attire are common qualities. I am, however, offering the possibility that, like the resurgence of interest in Do It Yourself¹³⁰ projects that recalls the Arts and Crafts movement, the hipster or yuccie can be seen as a performative expression of dissatisfaction with the homogenizing forces of capitalist production and also as a response to unstable economic conditions that scholars like Alan Trachtenberg have likened to a second Gilded Age (xii).¹³¹ Now, as then, members of an embattled bourgeoisie fearful about both their social position and the meaninglessness, or “weightlessness,” of the materialism that position entails take recourse in an aesthetic of roughness and anti-industrialism (the yuccie loves to drink locally-brewed craft beer on raw wood tables), in the hope that aestheticizing the common aspects of one’s life (boots, breakfast) makes it authentic, and virtuous. Such an identity manifests precisely the paradox of the picturesque: the more perfectly aestheticized one’s life, the more authentic, and thus morally virtuous, it appears.

In the tradition of the Emersonian liberal who has yielded agency to the higher powers of an indestructible global capitalism, yuccies express their own individualism and moral sentiments not through active political dissent but through aesthetic and economic choices. In this way, their attachment to the picturesque – to roughness, irregularity, and uncultivated spaces – make them ideal capitalists, the frontiersmen of the new economy, reaching out towards as-yet un-capitalized commodities to bring back new regions for capitalist expansion. They are like

¹³⁰ A movement deeply associated with the cultural class takeover of Brooklyn, that picturesque wonderland of elevated trains, old brick, and working-class life. An online article, “The DIY Lifestyle: How to Learn to Do Everything in Brooklyn” (Wolff), provides a list of venues in which people can learn “everything you need to know to be a self-sufficient urban dweller” – from welding a coffee table to pickling, canning, sewing, and glass-making.

¹³¹ Aesthetically, the current moment has such noticeable parallels with the Gilded Age that the television show *Portlandia* included in its second season a song called “The Dream of the 1890s is Alive in Portland,” featuring men in large beards, curled mustaches, suspenders, and lyrics about pickling and knitting (“Cops Redesign”). The styles on display in this sequence are themselves a half-ironic, half-earnest nostalgia, rendering an era obsessed with the picturesque as itself picturesque – a weird doubling.

Lady who, fleeing the constraints of her gentility, goes on an adventure and is revitalized by the Tramp, creating new and more interesting possessions for her owner through her communion with picturesque objects and characters. Kateb precisely identifies the socio-politically ambivalent nature of aesthetic engagement with the common when he argues that “democratic aestheticism calls for personal reform, which consists in employing our democratically cultivated aesthetic attitudes and feelings in relation to all phenomena. By doing that, it dulls the urge to change the world” (34). While elsewhere I will offer more optimistic readings of the ethical potential of pictorial sight, one prominent legacy of the mystical picturesque has been precisely this: to make moral sentiments and the democratized aesthetic principles that express them the locus of liberal agency.

The yuccie is but one possible, if perhaps especially cynical, derivation of Whitman’s self-creation as picturesque character – but one that nicely displays the emphasis, not only in Whitman’s work but also in the mystical picturesque as a whole, on aesthetic vision as necessary for self-definition and for communion with a world outside bourgeois convention and economic relations. The Bowery b’hoj is a multifaceted character, but perhaps its defining feature is freedom, a characteristic Whitman repeatedly associates with “the loafer,” to whom he writes a journalistic ode in 1840 – prelude to the famous opening lines of “Song of Myself, “I loafe and invite my soul, / I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass” (*Leaves* 29). Loafing is, for Whitman, the relaxed, curious position from which to observe the world, open to its beauty. In a series of articles in the *Long-Island Democrat* called “Sun-Down Papers – From the Desk of a Schoolmaster,” Whitman in 1840 writes:

How I do love a loafer! Of all human beings, none equals your genuine, inbred, unvarying loafer. [...] Give me your calm, steady, philosophick son of indolence

[...]. To such an one will I doff my beaver. No matter whether he be a street loafer or a dock loafer – whether his hat be rimless, and his boots slouched, and his coat out at the elbows: he belongs to that ancient and honorable fraternity, whom I venerate above all your upstarts, your dandies, and your political oracles.

(*Journalism I*: 28)

Here Whitman's vision of the loafer merges with the picturesque figure, ragged and happy, beholden to no one. The loafing persona he cultivates and defends initiates his doubled position as both subject and object – perceiving mind who observes and aestheticizes, and a figure fit for a picturesque sketch. The loafer is the *flâneur*, taken from his paved arcades to wander the wharfs and fields and for whom – as for some permutations of the Bowery b'hoys Whitman loved and identified with – ease is not merely indolence but philosophy.¹³² As in later depictions of the b'hoys by both Whitman and others, their roughness and freedom is counterpoised to the urbane sophistication to which the genteel are meant to aspire but which, throughout the Gilded Age, urban sophisticates felt to be disconnection from “real” life.

In his elegy to the changed Bowery in which he evokes the picturesquely free b'hoy, Whitman writes that they are “types that never found their Dickens, or Hogarth, or Balzac, and have pass'd away unportraited” (*Complete Prose* 427). Despite, as we will see, being the objects of various writers' interest, Whitman is right that there is no literary example of a Bowery b'hoy to have become part of the American cannon. In concluding this chapter, I would like to

¹³² Brand observes, from Whitman's writings and in particular his reviews, that he was he was “familiar with the horde of minor *flâneurs* who appeared in ... English magazines” (159). The next chapter examines the influence of the *flâneur* on the urban picturesque, in particular the sketches of rough neighborhoods so popular in the Gilded Age. Whitman was one of the most important progenitors of this peripatetic-observer figure in America, but his sense of unity with others marks a fascinating revision, which arguably affects its character in later picturesque narratives.

suggest two reasons for this representational absence yet mythological or ideological presence, which are also reasons that the urban picturesque has been largely ignored as an object of serious study – or, when studied, found to be an example only of the failure of genteel writers to grasp the severity of poverty in America. The first is that, as Brand finds, there was in nineteenth-century America a “lack of self-consciously urban and urbane writers” of sufficient literary talent to find serious critical interest (190). And while it is true that the prose of George Foster, H.C. Bunner, or Hutchins Hapgood may fail to merit multivalent literary analysis, in the following chapters I hope at least to recover the ways in which their city writing, and particularly their use of picturesque tropes, negotiated class boundaries and thus was crucial to how their readers learned to navigate not only a new type of urban environment but more importantly the new ethical quandaries these environments – and their representations – provoked.

Second, and relatedly, Brand also finds that, “[a]ny kind of equanimity or accommodation to the conditions of urban life is immediately suspect as a form of ‘deadened’ sensibility or moral callousness” (192). The charge of moral callousness has accompanied most contemporary attempts to interpret the picturesque. In the few instances where scholars do see the picturesque as having a moral dimension, it is perceived as generating awareness about the conditions in which the poor live, and possibly as generating sympathy for them.¹³³ This is indeed, as Ruskin argues, a potentially ethical effect generated by a predilection for this aesthetic. What such a reading does not account for are the depictions of the picturesque poor as Whitman depicts the Bowery b’hoys: as a type of perfect adaptation to or expression of working-class urban life, more interesting and vital than wealthier people. But to analyze writing which valorizes poverty treads dangerous moral ground. A typical analysis of picturesque writing

¹³³ See for instance Keith Gandal, *The Virtues of the Vicious*, who argues that “Riis’s appreciation of the picturesque, his desire for spectacular entertainment, was ... a source of sympathy for the poor” (81).

appears in Benedict Giomo's *On The Bowery: Confronting Homelessness in American Society*; he finds that "[t]he urban picturesque school... retained a capricious attitude toward its topical interest in poverty among immigrant groups and the homeless" (54), arguing that any aesthetic interest by wealthier writers in rough people and places is necessarily either superficial or salacious. It is true that genteel writers were compelled by "the general feel" (Giomo 54) of ghettos, and often exploited it for their own ends. What is less understood are the ways in which the genteel observers view themselves as part of the scenes they describe, their temptations to absorb and be absorbed, and what the relations fostered by these encounters can tell us about class identity and anxiety both in the Gilded Age and in the present. The mystical picturesque is the prelude to these urban picturesque narratives, unifying seeing and feeling, making virtuous the ability to aestheticize the common, and locating virtue within roughness and decay.

Chapter Three

The Urban Picturesque and the Liberal Cosmopolitan

The previous chapter posited that the fundamental instability within the middle classes arising from rapid economic and cultural transformations created the need to see aesthetically and to understand such vision as providing a basis for moral action in the world. Pictorial sight, or the ability to perceive any object as aesthetically pleasing, became in mid-century America an aspect of middle-class identity which both generated distance from poorer populations and cultivated interest in – and often appreciation for – their ways of life. Throughout the 1890s, the term “picturesque” became commonplace as a descriptor for urban ghettos and their inhabitants.¹³⁴ Scholars have commented on this term and its role in writing about immigrants and the poor, but no work has yet been done that traces the evolution of picturesque aesthetics in America from rural to urban contexts. In this chapter, I move from the Massachusetts Transcendentalists to the New York journalists who documented the city’s growing slums. Walt Whitman’s writing, in particular his early journalism, was integral to this transition: pictorial sight travels with him from Brooklyn fields to the Lower East Side in the figure of the *flâneur*, a happy wanderer whose ability to aestheticize what he sees both immerses him in his environment and keeps him separate from it. Whitman’s work draws on earlier forms of city writing as well as the city novel which became popular in mid-century, an era in which expanding urban populations and increasing class stratification generated a market for novels and plays about this

¹³⁴ For example, an 1892 advertisement for Jacob Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives* reads: “No page is uninformative, but it would be misleading to suppose the book even tinged with didacticism. It is from beginning to end as picturesque in treatment as it is in material.” (Appeared in the back pages of Jacob Riis, *The Children of the Poor* [1892]; quoted in Keith Gandal, *Virtues of the Vicious*, p. 61).

new urban environment. For many members of the emergent middle class, the Transcendentalists' praise for what is common and natural, and their unification of seeing and feeling, would also have shaped responses to these depictions of urban poverty. The connection made by the mystical picturesque of aesthetic perception and moral sentiment contributed to the development, in the Gilded Age, of a liberal bourgeoisie for whom literature about urban poverty provided not only information or entertainment: consuming these products was also an expression of values and beliefs.

This chapter therefore asks: how did the term “picturesque” become ubiquitous in writing about ghettos in the Gilded Age, and how did this aesthetic function in these works? We have seen that picturesque aesthetics, in both eighteenth-century England and nineteenth-century America, accompanies the expansion and urbanization of the middle class. By the end of the nineteenth century, literacy was widespread and literature was a mass medium.¹³⁵ The numerous publications in which the term “picturesque” appears and their touristic engagement with urban ghettos attest to the growing numbers of people in America who, like those in England a century before, were newly leisured consumers. While in newspaper articles the term “picturesque” often indicates the pleasure affluent people find in traversing poor neighbourhoods, the term also appears in literature aimed at combating injustice, such as Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* (1890). By designating the slums “picturesque,” such writers made squalor aesthetically interesting, a process which also helped to replace condemnation with fascination and,

¹³⁵ As James L. Machor observes, “[t]he American 1800s...witnessed an unprecedented upsurge in reading activity owing to improvements in literacy, major advances in printing and book production, and improved methods of transportation, which facilitated the distribution and availability of printed matter. In the face of such developments and the new mass market they created – a combination that marked the advent of modern print culture – reading as a social and cognitive act took on growing significance for producers of printed material and the mass audience that began consuming it” (xi-xii).

potentially, sympathy. The aestheticization of poverty created a taste for representations of picturesque roughness, and this taste extended into considerations of poverty as a social problem. As the writer and social reformer Helen Campbell wrote in *Prisoners of Poverty* (1887): “To talk of poverty, and to take a theoretical interest in the social questions of the day is a fashion at present, and a fashion which has its foundation of good” (qtd. in Dowling, 32). Discussing the problem of poverty became itself a social activity, one perceived as having ethical or social value, and literature that described the picturesque qualities of urban life contributed to that discourse.

The previous chapter showed that the growth of the middle class was accompanied by a pervasive sense of its ineffectuality, predicated on a diminishing sense of personal autonomy. Writing about urban poverty that focuses on an aesthetic appreciation of the poor rather than on reform reflects this sensibility. However, this aesthetic interest also indicates – and helped to inculcate – another social response to poverty: the “theoretical interest” Campbell identifies, which could also be defined as remote sympathy or a sympathetic response that generates no specific, sustained effort to ameliorate the problem.¹³⁶ Faced with an unprecedented influx of people from a variety of cultures and with the increasingly apparent existence of a permanent urban underclass, more established Americans sought a means of understanding not only their new urban environments but also their moral obligations towards these new populations. Thomas L. Haskell, in his two-part essay “Capitalism and the Origins of Humanitarian Sensibility,” describes the socio-economic conditions which, in the eighteenth century, gave rise to new and unprecedented conceptions of moral responsibility. Haskell argues that “the

¹³⁶ Campbell hoped that reading about impoverished people’s suffering would cause wealthier people to go and see these conditions for themselves – and that having done so, they would “carr[y] away a memory that must forever act as spur to lingering action” (from *Prisoners of Poverty*, qtd. in Dowling p. 32).

humanitarian impulse emerged when and where it did because of its kinship with those social and economic changes that we customarily denominate as ‘the rise of capitalism’” (“Part 2” 547); he cites “a growing reliance on mutual promises, or contractual relations” (“Part 2” 553) and attention “to the remote consequences of one’s acts” (“Part 2” 560) as the central components both of capitalism and of the “expanded ... range of causal perception” (“Part 2” 556) necessary to feel implicated in another’s suffering.¹³⁷ Gilded Age America, so named for Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner’s novel satirizing the corruption and greed of “capitalists” and politicians,¹³⁸ was an era marked by “a significant increase in the influence of business in America, corresponding to the emergence of the modern corporate form of ownership” (Trachtenberg 4).¹³⁹ Humanitarian sensibilities, or increased concerns about the extent and shape of an individual’s moral responsibility, are significant aspects of the “influence of corporate life on thought and expression” that characterized the latter nineteenth century (Trachtenberg 5). When genteel writers applied pictorial sight to their urban landscapes, they helped incorporate classed and ethnic others into wealthier Americans’ conceptions of their nation and potentially their sphere of influence and responsibility.

¹³⁷ “It is not merely coincidental that humanitarianism burst into bloom in the late eighteenth century just as the norm of promise keeping was being elevated to a supreme moral and legal imperative. At the most obvious level, the new stress on promise keeping contributed to the emergence of the humanitarian sensibility by encouraging new levels of scrupulosity in the fulfillment of ethical maxims. If one’s customers and trading partners were increasingly conceded the right and actual power to invoke legal penalties for one’s failure to live up to one’s promises, what of the obligations created by one’s covenant with God? The Golden Rule took on a new operational significance for pious men like [abolitionist] John Woolman not simply because of an upwelling of piety but also because the spread of market transactions changed the backdrop against which scrupulosity was measured by imposing on everyday affairs an unprecedentedly high standard of conscientious performance” (Haskell, “Part 2” 555).

¹³⁸ That Americans in the Gilded Age saw their economic conditions as part of the system of capitalism is suggested by the fact that the designation “capitalist” appears several times in *The Gilded Age*: see pp. 89, 115, 123; the word “capital” appears 46 times.

¹³⁹ Trachtenberg reminds us that “[t]he word [corporation] refers to any association of individuals bound together into a *corpus*, a body sharing a common purpose in a common name” (5).

The increasingly diverse urban environments taking shape in nineteenth-century America complicate Adam Smith's contention in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* that "we should be little interested ... in the fortune of those whom we can neither serve nor hurt, and who are in every respect so very remote from us" (197). People remote in background or social class were no longer "placed altogether out of the sphere of [one's] activity" (Smith 197)¹⁴⁰ but were visibly present; the fortunes of one class could not be perceived as unrelated to those above or below. The question was (and remains): if we did not directly cause the hurt, to what extent can or should we attempt to serve another? The answer to this question changes based on many factors, but perhaps the definitive one is whether, in a given circumstance of suffering, action or inaction would be the extraordinary response. Like Adam Smith, Haskell finds that people feel moral responsibility only for what they perceive they have the power to affect. If, as Adam Smith postulated, we could sacrifice our little finger to save others from imminent peril, we would be monstrous to decline (192),¹⁴¹ but we do not consider ourselves monstrous for failing to take

¹⁴⁰ Part III Chap. III "Of the Influence and Authority of Conscience"

¹⁴¹ In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith outlines this theory with a thought experiment: "Let us suppose that the great empire of China, with all its myriads of inhabitants, was suddenly swallowed up by an earthquake... a man of humanity in Europe, who had no sort of connection with that part of the world, would, I imagine, first of all express very strongly his sorrow for the misfortune of that unhappy people, he would make many melancholy reflections upon the precariousness of human life, and the vanity of all the labours of man, which could thus be annihilated in a moment.... And when all this fine philosophy was over, when all these humane sentiments had been once fairly expressed, he would pursue his business or his pleasure... with the same ease and tranquility as if no such accident had happened. The most frivolous disaster which could befall himself would occasion a more real disturbance" (193). But would he prevent this "paltry misfortune" (the loss of his little finger), by sacrificing all of China? "Human nature startles with horror at the thought" (193). Part III, Chapter III: "On the Influence and Authority of Conscience" (pp.191-220). Haskell uses a similar thought experiment, which he structures around a "starving stranger": "As I sit at my desk writing this essay, and as you, the reader, now sit reading it, both of us are aware that some people in Phnom Penh, Bombay, Rangoon, the Sahel, and elsewhere will die next week of starvation. They are strangers; all we know about them is that they will die. We also know that it would be possible for any one of us to sell a car or a house, buy an airline ticket, fly to Bombay or wherever, seek out at least one of those starving strangers, and save his life, or at the very least extend it. We could be there tomorrow, and we really could save him" ("Part 1" 354). Similar to Smith's argument that although we have no obligation to make large sacrifices to save those outside our immediate connections, our moral obligation to make a small sacrifice to save others is unquestionable, Haskell's argument is that our sense of implication only grows strong enough to instigate action – and that ethical conviction only becomes moral obligation – when the actions necessary are below a certain threshold of feasibility. "Imagine that we have at our disposal an as yet uninvented technology...that will enable us

exceptional steps to help those whose circumstances are not directly connected to our own. “No matter how hard people strive to live up to moral codes, they have no occasion for feeling causally implicated in the sufferings of a stranger until they possess techniques capable of affecting his condition” (Haskell, “Part 2” 556). Crucially, these steps must be “of sufficient ordinariness, familiarity, certainty of effect, and ease of operation that our failure to use them would constitute a suspension of routine.... Only then will we begin to feel that our inaction is not merely one among many conditions necessary for the occurrence or continuation of the evil event but instead a significant contributory cause” (Haskell, “Part 1,” 358). Haskell observes that technological changes affect the degree of responsibility people feel towards others: “Curiously, our feeling of responsibility for the stranger's plight, though nowhere near strong enough to move us to action, is probably stronger today than it would have been before the airplane” (“Part 1” 356). Just as the fact that we could board an airplane and save a starving stranger makes us feel more responsible for his suffering – although not enough to make us override “our preference for sitting here, reading and writing about moral responsibility” (Haskell, “Part 1” 354) – the ability to walk through or read about a New York slum increased nineteenth-century Americans’ sense of moral obligation towards poorer people. Expanding publishing and distribution networks were also important technological advances that increased

to save the starving stranger with minimal expenditure of time and energy, no disruption of our ordinary routine. If we could save him by just reaching out to press a button, then a failure to act would become indefensible. What convention previously enabled us to regard as an acceptably incidental concomitant of our inaction would then be transformed into heinous neglect or even – arguably – an intention to do harm. No convention could save us from responsibility then. And notice that this drastic change in our operative sense of responsibility could be brought about without any change at all in our ethical convictions. All of our ideas, every abstract formulation of moral obligation could remain the same; the only change needed to get us over the threshold of action is an expansion of the range of opportunities available to us for shaping the future and intervening in other lives (“Part 1” 356). This argument raises many questions about the liberal’s responsibility to enact institutional change – what exactly constitutes an opportunity for shaping the future? – as well as about the ways that online petitions, the ability instantly to send money to charities (by pressing a button), and other such technologies have influenced our sense of moral responsibility towards suffering strangers.

people's feeling of responsibility towards suffering strangers, if not enough to instigate direct action then at least to create an ethical conviction that one should be concerned about the problem. Modern life and modern industrial capitalism furnish a sense of implication, but for most, the techniques to remediate others' sufferings remain obscure, or entail sacrifices well beyond what most consider common behavior.¹⁴²

Some people do, of course, make exceptional sacrifices to help engender social change, and this work is arguably upheld by the goodwill, the general moral approbation, of many others. In his exploration of the relationship between capitalism and the abolitionist movement, Haskell observes that the success of this project depended on a relatively small group of active reformers working within an increasingly receptive environment of people "prepared ... to listen and comprehend" (563). Literature depicting the urban picturesque attests to a similar environment, in which a growing sense of moral obligation inspired the increasing efforts at reform that eventually ushered in what became known as the Progressive Era. Most genteel people, however, were simply readers who would never be personally involved with reform or charitable movements for poorer or immigrant people, but whose consumption of stories about them helped to displace opprobrium towards the less fortunate with tolerance or even compassionate interest; such concern might then lead them to support institutional changes that benefit those populations. Scholarship on the picturesque has identified the ways in which it contributed to an emergent sense of cosmopolitanism in American cities, particularly New York. The texts I discuss in this chapter show that cosmopolitanism cultivates not only the ability to perceive class

¹⁴² William Dean Howells returns to the concept of sacrifice many times in his work, a theme I touch on in Chapter Five but which merits a longer discussion of its own. His work suggests that he finds it both beautiful and ultimately absurd, because it fails to produce real social change. Personal sacrifice is, therefore, for Howells ultimately an individual aesthetic choice rather than an act by which to effect meaningful social or political improvements.

and ethnic difference aesthetically, but also to express through this aesthetic interest sympathy for strangers. As in earlier works extolling the moral virtue of pictorial sight, literature that depicts the urban poor as picturesque advanced the liberal sensibility that observing and feeling compassion towards – or even kinship with – class and ethnic others constitutes moral virtue. At the same time, such writing lays the groundwork for what will become known as liberal guilt: the sense of “being implicated in systems of domination” (Ellison, “Liberal” 350) and lacking a technique by which to alter this system. By the end of the century, this paradoxical sense of responsibility and lack of agency will contribute to the ironic stance which to this day remains the liberal’s chief tool of both self-preservation and self-laceration.

Where the mystical picturesque helped to constitute the American middle class within a structure of feeling towards others, the urban picturesque roots this feeling in physical space, mapping the city through encounters with specific sites of aesthetically interesting roughness. The media through which this emerging structure is transmitted is also new, as mass circulated newspapers situate depictions of picturesque slums alongside news reports of politics and city crime, offering a cartography of civic engagement that includes impoverished neighbourhoods as both entertainment and social problem. This chapter thus studies first the relation between the European *flâneur* and the American ghetto tourist, and contends that writing about the urban picturesque helps to create both an aesthetic disposition and more tolerant attitudes toward immigrants and poorer people, shaping an emergent liberal cosmopolitanism of middle-class urbanites. I situate urban picturesque narratives within traditions of urban writing, in order to understand the particular moral and social opportunities this genre presents as well as how nineteenth-century journalistic expeditions into rough neighbourhoods both draw upon and alter

earlier conceptions of cross-class viewing. The second part of the chapter explores how, in the later nineteenth century, literature calling for the discipline and reform of the poor becomes intertwined with the act of aestheticizing them. Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* exemplifies this process: it contributes to the flood of journalism that chronicles the sights available in New York's slums, while tacitly instructing genteel readers in appropriate affective and aesthetic responses to new urban phenomena.

The Picturesque Perspective: Rivals and Antecedents

The picturesque occupies a unique place among urban literature because the genteel observer, fascinated with "rough" people and places, figures within these potentially picturesque scenes. It is, notably, a fascination that proliferated in America but not in Britain. The tradition inaugurated by Pierce Egan's *Life in London* was, in England, short-lived, associated as it was with a "libertine picturesqueness" characteristic of "Regency London" (Brand 60) but not acceptable in Victorian England, in which books about urban slums took on a far more lurid if putatively moralizing tone. Rather than the ribald, good-natured pursuit of forbidden pleasures sought by Corinthian Tom and his country cousin in the 1820s, the 1840s produced works like G.W.M. Reynold's *Mysteries of London* (1846), in which the most horrific possibilities of slum life are displayed with astonishing relish – all in the name of reform, of course. Brand calls the novel "a kind of pornography of human misery" (62), which feels precise. He points out that, like unapologetically seamy books, such as Egan's, Reynolds's work is "designed to be consumed as a spectacle by a socially distanced audience," but that "because Reynolds's spectacle derives its appeal from its ability to produce a sense of disgust and horror, it implies an even greater degree of social distance between the reader and the spectacle than can be found in

the *flâneur* or in Egan” (Brand 62). This distance and horror separate the urban mystery novel from the picturesque narrative. The latter is interested in poverty and even in suffering, up to a point, but not in the gruesome detail offered by the urban mystery; picturesque aestheticization can create social and emotional distance through rendering others as spectacle, but it also often expresses yearning both to close this distance and for “the secret of joy” the poor are seen to possess.¹⁴³ It is necessary to the picturesque traveler that the sights he encounters not be too disturbing to engage with, since he must be able to occupy a position within the landscape he depicts.

The “mysteries” genre that originated with Eugene Sue’s *Mysteries of Paris*¹⁴⁴ spawned imitations in America as well, most prominently Ned Buntline’s *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York* (1848), which like *Mysteries of London* chronicles “the various and peculiar characters” (Buntline preface) that populate New York’s ghettos with the intent to “lay open the festering sores” of the city so that clergymen and philanthropists can help to heal them (Buntline 7).¹⁴⁵ Buntline’s narrative appears to set itself up as a reproof against the type of libertine enjoyment of ghettos that the genteel might take; one of his first anecdotes involves several young men accosting a poor sewing girl: “These were fashionable young *gentlemen*, sons of the ‘first families’” (Buntline 11), an observation that might be read both as call to middle-class

¹⁴³ “Black people are natural, they possess the secret of joy,” is the epigraph to Alice Walker’s 1992 novel *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, a searing account of black suffering; the phrase is taken from *African Saga*, by Mirella Ricciardi, born in Kenya to European parents. The photographs she produced during her return to Africa during decolonization are fascinating and troubling for their combination of longing, appropriation, and commercialization.

¹⁴⁴ Sue’s book was arguably “the seminal event within literary culture” contributing to the “rash of urban novels in the United States”; it was also “arguably France’s first bestseller, had an important influence on the novels of Victor Hugo and Emile Zola and may even have contributed to the revolution of 1848” (Beach 200).

¹⁴⁵ Beach argues that “it is fair to assume that the city novel was the most popular fictional genre of the [midcentury] period, far outstripping the frontier novel of westward expansion and exploration” (123). Works including “romances (often tinged with the gothic), cautionary tales of ‘real life’ in the city, and sentimental stories of the poor girl or boy made good” were written both by popular and more literary authors (Beach 123).

people to reject the debauchery of the wealthy and as rebuke to readers whose interest in his narrative wanders into prurience. Similarly, the narrator's consistent assertions that, "This is not romance, reader – it is but *too* true!" (23) seem designed to counteract the narrative's sensationalistic and sentimental representations of poverty. Like Reynolds's *Mysteries*, Buntline's work claims to represent degradation and vice in order to excite moral passion, while offering inducement to pay attention via the baser passions.¹⁴⁶ These works accomplish this Janus-faced stance by appealing constantly to a reader who is absolutely removed from the world the novels depict, a world in which the narrator has immersed himself so that no genteel person ever has to. If the degree of debasement depicted in *Mysteries and Miseries* threatens to transform it into a distanced, dioramic scene, Buntline's insistence on these scenes' veracity, to which he can testify as witness, reinstates the reader within the world of the novel. He appeals to that quality in readers that is compelled by sights from which they would otherwise be repelled – perversion by definition, as extension from the norm and lingering there – but makes these sights grotesque rather than picturesque, thus purporting to foreclose any desire such depictions might engender for encounters with this rough world. If the picturesque makes perversion available to consciousness as curiosity and potentially concern, the urban vice novel represses interest, allowing it to return only as horror.

Works such as these, and the traditions of moral and sensationalistic writing to which they gave rise, share an interest with the picturesque in the aesthetic possibilities of poverty and in the relation of genteel observers to offensive urban sights. They are, however, another branch

¹⁴⁶ David Reynolds, in *Beneath the American Renaissance: the Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville*, chronicles the "succession of vociferous reformers whose loudly announced goal was to stamp out various behavioral sins or social iniquities – intemperance, licentiousness, urban poverty, chattel and wage slavery, poor prison conditions, and so forth – but who described vice in such lurid detail that they themselves were branded as dangerously immoral and sacrilegious" (55). Reynolds terms these writers "immoral or dark reformers" (55).

of the family of urban slum literature, because they repudiate any function as travel narratives and protest (albeit often too much) against any possible aesthetic interest in their subjects for its own sake. The picturesque narrator of New York streets does not conceal his enjoyment of the sights he witnesses, but neither does he look too closely at what might truly offend.¹⁴⁷ His gaze rests on what is interesting to describe, and which is suggestive of human life outside the dominant bourgeois culture. The seeker of the picturesque desires to transcend, or at least probe, the boundaries of this culture and thus often appears walking amongst, and often *interacting* with, the poor. He is responsible for witnessing and constructing his picturesque scene, and unlike Reynolds's or Buntline's narrators, the lover of the urban picturesque does not offer these depictions in order to protect genteel readers from the locations he visits: on the contrary, he often invites them to visit the picturesque locations themselves. Indeed, while reporters and writers of urban sketches might figure themselves as experts in ghetto life, one of the most marked characteristics of the urban picturesque is that, like its rural iterations, it is available to anyone with the means and interest to pursue it. The lack of distance figured in picturesque narratives holds important ethical possibilities, as does the burden of perceiving and representing others whose experiences are profoundly different from those of the picturesque traveler. The cross-class relations figured in the American picturesque, which range from an impossibility of knowing to complete fusion with others, suggest a profound ambivalence among the bourgeoisie about how to contend with poverty and inequality, and about the increasingly defined and rigid strictures of their own class.

¹⁴⁷ Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* is an exception to this rule; the role of this book in straddling reformist and aesthetic impulses is discussed in detail below.

From the Urban Spectacle to the Urban Stroll

Because picturesque aesthetics are essentially concerned with what makes a compelling picture and the correct vantage point from which to compose it, picturesque narratives engage questions about the relation of narrator to subject. The easy, knowing narration evident in Egan's *Tom and Jerry*, or Dickens's *Sketches by Boz*, presents one possible posture of the narrator of picturesque sights, one in which the desire for amusement and a detached curiosity predominate.¹⁴⁸ This position mirrors that of the picturesque traveler seeking a favourable vantage point from which to unify a variety of parts, navigating the appropriate proximity to and distance from rough objects to achieve the desired effect. It is a particularly useful stance to cultivate in complex and multifarious urban environments, in which a limited affective response to the lives on display makes possible aesthetic enjoyment. Viewing rough neighborhoods as picturesque can function much like the physical distance Knight asserts is necessary to make unsavory objects appealing as art. Knight also insists that the picturesque requires a vision sufficiently versed in painting to perceive the aesthetic potential in potentially unpleasant objects; the detached, spectatorial position of the picturesque traveler in the city likewise depends upon – and asserts – a gaze with the aesthetic knowledge to harmonize a potentially confounding multitude of parts.

¹⁴⁸ Dana Brand provides a nuanced reading of *Sketches*, including the brief but suggestive moments of “sympathy” with the suffering suggested by some of the sights the narrator witnesses (56-7). Compassion is fleeting, however, and Boz’s tone insists upon an at-times callous detachment which, Brand suggests, likely contains “some irony and self-parody” (46). I would suggest that Dickens’s rejection, in his novels, of the “position of watcher” (Brand 57) reflects his unwillingness to persist in the pose of urban *flâneur* he inherited from “Addison and Steele... Charles Lamb, and various other urban spectatorial essayists who wrote for metropolitan newspapers and magazines like those in which his own sketches appeared” (46). In his novels, the panoramic gaze functions as unifying vision, rather than assertion of a dominant point of view imposed to generate distance between observer and observed.

The knowing, affectively remote narrative voice that guides many picturesque narratives echoes that of the famous urban wanderer, the *flâneur*. This word was used first by Baudelaire in “The Painter of Modern Life” (1863) in which the poet argues:

For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and infinite. [...] Thus the lover of universal life enters into a crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electrical energy. Or we might liken him to a mirror as vast as the crowd itself; or to a kaleidoscope gifted with consciousness, responding to each one of its movements and reproducing the multiplicity of life and the flickering grace of all the elements of life. (9)

Picturesque aesthetic principles made available to an expanding American bourgeoisie a sense of the city as both exciting and accessible, and of its inhabitants as both vibrantly colourful and also, sometimes, unexpectedly graceful. Like the French *flâneurs* of the 1830s, the American urban wanderer was introduced to the reading public through writers and journalists who “wrote sketches of urban life from the perspective of a strolling ... observer” (Brand 6). Dana Brand, writing about the completed portions of Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, contends that the *flâneur*, with his pose of all-seeing, all-knowing detachment, “existed to assure a literate bourgeois audience that urban crowds were not as illegible as they appeared to be, that social life was not as incoherent as it appeared to be, and that the masses were not as politically threatening as they appeared to be” (6). The knowledge imparted by the *flâneur* in newspapers and later, collections of sketches of urban picturesque sights, mitigates the potential fear induced by the “masses” – read immigrant and working-class citizens – by rendering them as aesthetically pleasing objects. As Benjamin writes in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”: “If it were the

intention of the press to have the reader assimilate the information it supplies as part of his own experience, it would not achieve its purpose. But its intention is just the opposite, and it is achieved: to isolate what happens from the realm in which it could affect the experience of the reader” (*Selected* 315). I suggest that written accounts of picturesque slums do allow readers to assimilate those areas as part of their experience – but it is the experience of the tasteful reader, the bourgeois citizen whose aesthetic appreciation makes encounters with potentially threatening people and places sources of urbane pleasure.

Yet seekers of the picturesque are not the *flâneur* as described by Baudelaire or Benjamin, although they function similarly and possess traits in common. There are two fundamental differences. The first is the distance between viewer and viewed. Whereas “the *flâneur* reduces the city to a panorama or diorama, a scale model, in which everything is, in effect brought indoors” (Brand 7), the picturesque traveler’s vantage point is not sufficiently distanced to produce such a miniaturized and contained image. “Picturesque theory situates the viewing subject within the scene: the viewer is imagined to be not surveying so much as included within the landscape” (Valihora 281).¹⁴⁹ The picturesque scene necessitates distance created within proximity, its existence predicated on a particular vantage point that can be either physical (through a camera obscura or carriage window), or epistemological (by perceiving the subjects as aesthetically pleasing in a particular way, and composing them as art). While the picturesque gaze can, like the pose of the *flâneur*, protect the viewer from being seen (Brand 6) – or rather, function to keep the subjects under view at a safe distance – it does not necessarily do so: many picturesque narratives contain interactions between viewer and viewed, or between bourgeois

¹⁴⁹ “What ultimately distinguishes the picturesque from its parent categories [the beautiful and the sublime] is its asymmetrical composition defined within distinct boundaries. It does not claim to include everything within an all-encompassing panorama, but rather it provides modest glimpses and sketches of particular scenes” (Bramen, “Spectacle” 452).

and “rough” characters, and these range from profoundly uncomfortable to chummy. What renders the objects under view picturesque is the narrator’s insistence that they are so. The urban picturesque does not always evince an interest in the moral dimensions of cross-class viewing, however it emerges from the mystical picturesque in its representations of poverty as both a source of suffering to be compassionated and of vibrancy or authenticity lacking among the middle class. And while the urban picturesque might not make possible spiritual union, it does offer the possibility of a self which expands to absorb new types of people and experiences.

As it emerges in urban journalism the picturesque brings viewer and viewed into a new type of relation, one that is paradoxically more consumeristic and more intimate than previous iterations of this aesthetic. As journalistic copy, slums and their residents were increasingly popular ways to sell newspapers, and ghettos became tourist attractions; at the same time, New Yorkers were reading about their fellow citizens, people whose lives were worlds apart socially, but physically might be on the next street. By consuming representations of structurally distanced but physically proximate others, members of the urban bourgeoisie developed a taste for knowledge about these unfamiliar ways of life, as well as for discussions of their responsibilities towards strangers. Such readers were becoming cosmopolitan. In *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, Kwame Anthony Appiah defines this concept as being comprised of two main ideas: first, “that we have obligations to others, obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind, or even the more formal ties of a shared citizenship”; and second, “that we take seriously not just the value of human life, but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance” (xv). These ideas, that individual lives are valuable in their differences and that we are related to those who are different, are also sentiments, experienced as affective

responses to others. Representations of ghettos and immigrants as interesting and charming, as well as often dirty and rough, meant that as middle-class Americans engaged in real or imaginative *flânerie*, their cosmopolitan sensibilities were coalescing into the liberal values of tolerance and compassion.

The second difference between *flâneur* and picturesque spectator is that where the *flâneur* is fully committed to a view of modernity in all its capitalist excess, the lover of the picturesque is interested in the relics of the past that may be found in the present. The *flâneur* developed exclusively in urban spaces, “analogous to the arcades, department stores, grand boulevards, and world expositions that were his natural and contemporary habitat” (Brand 7), which became “a model for the creative and consuming consciousness implicit in much of the art of the bourgeois nineteenth century” (Brand 8). By contrast, the picturesque initially required landscape, and helped to make sense of changing rural areas marked with vestiges of a passing way of life. This elegiac quality is retained in urban picturesque narratives. In “Picturesque New York” (1892), M.G. Van Rensselaer makes the palimpsestic quality of this aesthetic explicit when she writes that the person who has lived several decades in New York sees both the present city “and an earlier, vanished one as well; and his constant perception of the vanished one vastly increases the picturesqueness of the actual one” (322). The picturesque qualities of this city are evident also in the numerous sketches which portray the quaint practices of immigrants, often expressing the perception that working-class communities are more tightly-knit and less socially constrained than are wealthier ones, and thus resistant to the homogenizing forces of industrial-capitalist society.¹⁵⁰ Thus while both the *flâneur* and the picturesque traveler are responses to urbanization

¹⁵⁰ A good example of the urban picturesque as nostalgia for the pastoral is provided by Van Rensselaer, who in 1892 wrote about enjoying New York’s “Shantytown” and its inhabitants for the “perpetual picturesqueness in their tottering, pitiful, vanishing” ways, reminiscent of those “often greenly envired relics of bucolic days” (“Picturesque New York” 320).

and the changes wrought by capitalist economies, and both require and foster a “creative and consuming consciousness,” the picturesque traveler retains within his vision conditions which modernity is in the process of making obsolete. As the previous chapter shows, the American middle class developed concurrently with a sense of its own unreality and contingency. The rapid industrialization and urbanization of the last half of the nineteenth century expanded and solidified the bourgeoisie, a process accompanied by narratives in which pictorial sight fosters contact with rough people and places perceived as more authentic and vital than wealthier ones.

These representations are coloured by the nostalgia inherent in the picturesque, and thus narratives about the picturesque poor represent them as possessing traits attributed to pre-modern life. The pleasure that bourgeois writers and journalists take in the sights and interactions offered by the ghetto is at times an expression of Ruskin’s low picturesque, making bright and cheerful the raggedness it portrays, but the dynamic is more complex and interesting than that, encompassing a longing for the real and a sense of its presence in urban slums. For Whitman, the rough Bowery b’hoys is, by the end of the century, a nostalgic figure, but in his early work this picturesque character more crucially functions as an antonym of and antidote for the enervated wealthy he perceived as hollowing out the heart and democratic potential of the nation. In all American literature that deploys the picturesque, it points explicitly or implicitly to a discomfort with or anxiety about modern urban life and about genteel life as created by this new environment; this unease is expressed as concern about the conditions in which poor people live, as fascination with these same conditions, and as critique of the materialism or emotional constraint of the well-to-do. The urban picturesque is the aesthetic of the wharf and the tenement, rather than the glittering department store or the boulevard, of the ragged merchant rather than the elegant consumer. In its interest in the rough underside of modern life, the

picturesque functions as (at times unwitting) critique of the economic uncertainties and social parameters contingent on industrial capitalism.

Despite the differences between the two modes of observation, the evolution of the *flâneur* as urban guide provides a basis for understanding the role of the picturesque in Gilded Age New York. Brand traces the figure of the *flâneur* back to “the culture of spectacle that developed in London during its first period of extraordinary growth, in the sixteenth century” (14). This spectacle emerged from economic changes, including “the growth of international trade ... and the relative social fluidity” (Brand 15) that created a commercial culture in which the display of goods and possessions became increasingly varied and opulent. “An inevitable product of all of this watching, looking, showing, and signifying was a self-consciousness, a sense that London existed as something to be looked at and represented in and of itself, as something whose image would have meaning” (Brand 16). Responding to and producing this new sense of the city as spectacle were “a series of urban genres, whose express purpose was to provide images of London” (Brand 16). A similar culture of spectacle develops in mid-nineteenth-century New York, the result of the city’s – and nation’s – astonishing expansion and its “ascendancy as the preeminent American culture capital” (Conron 15). In this era, depictions of urban roughness become an important part of the discourse through which New Yorkers and other Americans come to understand and create the spectacle of a city in a tremendous moment of growth and flux.

Because class difference was such a fundamental geo-social and political organizer of urban life in nineteenth-century America, urban rambles of the kind inaugurated by the *flâneur* quickly became entangled with the aesthetics of the picturesque.¹⁵¹ Two of the progenitors of

¹⁵¹ Bramen has also noted the relation of nineteenth-century American writing about the city to earlier European versions: “As the modern descendent of the eighteenth-century genre of urban spectatorial literature, which provided

flânerie, the coney-catching book and the Theophrastian character book, indicate the long association of urban exploration and cross-class encounters. In the seventeenth century, the “coney-catching” book introduced urban crime and vice into literature as aesthetically interesting. Such books “catalogued the various forms of deception and fraud that could be encountered in London” (Brand 18), which might be read as the narrative analog to the picturesque representation of unsavoury characters which Price notes are so much more interesting than respectable ones. While coney-catching books were supposedly meant to educate people about the dangers of the city, they quickly became sources of entertainment, particularly for:

the class of idle, wealthy, and ostentatious young men who were particularly important in sustaining the theaters, amusements, and luxury trades of the metropolis. This model of consumption anticipates much in the urban culture that would develop later. In every century in England, the market for images of the city seems to have consisted to a large degree of wealthy young men residing in the metropolis before the assumption of adult responsibilities. For this protobohemian subculture, as it is represented within a tradition extending from the coney-catching books to Pierce Egan’s *Life in London*, a metropolis is not a community or a place to do business so much as it is a spectacle to be consumed, a carnival of glamorous freedom where gentlemen can test the limits of experience before accepting those limits as the contours of their identity as gentlemen. (Brand 19)

panoramic tours of London in installments, the intra-urban walking tour provided glimpses or brief sketches of New York rather than elaborate panoramic descriptions” (“Failure” 447).

The picturesque as it exists in urban narratives derives from such early images of the city in three important ways. Akin to the coney-catching books' disclosure of secrets of the city to the uninitiated, the writers of picturesque narratives provide a way to view environments that would otherwise be perceived as incomprehensible and potentially dangerous. They frame a relation between a spectator and structurally distanced others. Second, just as the coney-catching books were intended primarily for a genteel audience, and thus helped to commodify urban spaces as articles of consumption for this audience, the picturesque as it appeared in American urban narratives appealed to a growing bourgeoisie, whose position as spectators of picturesque poverty helped to define their class position. Finally, depictions of urban vice intended to make "gentlemen merrie" (Brand 18) fostered the sense that working-class neighbourhoods were more alive, more vibrant and interesting, than wealthier ones. The slumming expeditions chronicled on both sides of the Atlantic testify to the liberatory possibilities the wealthy saw in ghettos.¹⁵² The intersection of literatures of urban exploration with picturesque aesthetics helps to explain how poverty came to be associated with vibrancy and an authenticity of experience impossible in bourgeois life: in its interest in variation, roughness, and naturalness as simply visually appealing, the picturesque allows the enjoyment of urban slums as aesthetic pleasure without attempting to conceal this pleasure within putatively moralizing tracts.

If the coney-catching book inaugurated urban expeditions as libertine pleasure, then another seventeenth-century genre, the Theophrastian character book, introduced the detached observational style that developed in *flânerie* and much of the urban picturesque.¹⁵³ Based upon

¹⁵² For accounts of slumming parties in New York, see "The Inspector's Museum," *The Evening Sun*, May 16, 1890, p.6; "Young Ladies in the Tombs," *The Evening Sun* April 3, 1890, p.3. For a detailed study of slumming in Victorian England, see Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton UP, 2004).

¹⁵³ Hamilton traces the influence of the Theophrastian character book on the nineteenth-century American sketch, by way of eighteenth-century British writers: "From such essayists as Swift, Addison, Johnson, and Goldsmith, the

the *Characters* of Theophrastus, which applied a systematic method of classification to human character, the character book identifies urban types “by manner of dress, characteristic facial expressions, and locale” (Brand 21). The desire to make external signs evidence of inherent traits appears as the taste for the “moral picturesque” that Hawthorne lambastes in “The Old Apple-Dealer,” in which the narrator desires but cannot achieve this kind of analysis of character through observation; it returns uncritically in many picturesque narratives that identify ethnic traits with particular modes of dress, speech, and environment. In a large city, the desire to identify human traits through observable features becomes a means of control over a potentially confounding environment; the emergence of the character book within a newly vast and heterogeneous London suggests that urban expansion is often accompanied by such literary endeavors to make the city a comprehensible experience. By breaking down the vast metropolis into specific neighborhoods populated by recognizable human types, the character book works “to provide a coherent model of the city” (Brand 23), and this model is, crucially, constructed by the observer.

The character book makes the city legible by offering a catalog of human types; the picturesque offers an aesthetic framework for viewing new types of strangers and unknown areas, which early urban genres associate with liberatory experiences. Unlike the coney-catching book, however, in which the guide is a character, the observer in character books remains unknown and unseen, much like the *flâneur*. The picturesque traveler is fascinated by people and places beyond the perimeters of the genteel world, but he is not omniscient like the *flâneur* or his progenitors in character books. His knowledge is, rather, contingent on what and how he observes, and while picturesque narratives do frequently equate character with physical

figure of the bemused, or bitter, urbane observer standing at a disinterested distance gained currency as a convention that would be modified and reproduced in many nineteenth-century sketches” (38).

presentation, the limits of picturesque vision – or the attempts of the picturesque viewer to find an appropriate position in relation to the objects of his scrutiny – are often figured as well.

From Loafing to Loving: Walt Whitman's Winding Path

The previous chapter concluded with the moral vision of Walt Whitman, poet of the picturesque, perceiving himself as absorbing and absorbed by the rough, raw American populace, cohering a nation through his bounded but permeable position within it. Before the poems in which Whitman would create himself as the “Bowery B’hooy in literature” (Reynolds, *Whitman* 30), however, Whitman’s literary persona was a far more conventional: he is the detached, pleased observer of city sights, the *flâneur*:

As a New York journalist, he was undoubtedly familiar with the work of the New York *flâneurs*, in the *Knickerbocker*, *Tribune*, *Mirror*, and other New York publications. Whitman was also familiar with the work of English urban spectators. To judge from his reviews, he was a great admirer of Lamb... and the early Dickens (see “Boz and Democracy”). It is clear from Whitman’s clippings... that he was a regular reader of the *Westminster Review*, *North British Review*, *Edinburgh Review*, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, and the *Quarterly Review*, and it can therefore be assumed that he was familiar with the horde of minor *flâneurs* who appeared in these and other English magazines. (Brand 159)

There is a certain irony that Whitman, who proclaimed the need for an entirely new American literature, began his literary career following in the footsteps of English writers, but it is also logical that a young person experiencing New York in the mid-nineteenth century would be

compelled by the urban explorations offered by English *flâneurs*. Like many other journalists in mid-century America, Whitman drew on this literary tradition, offering blithe commentary on the sights of the city. Yet where European *flâneurs* remained predominantly within wealthier parts of the city, Whitman sought out the poor and working classes. These articles are significant for the attention they bring to poorer areas and people in New York, which later in the century become the source of such consistent aesthetic interest, and because of the precedent they set for enjoyable viewing of rougher urban areas. Whitman's journalism combines the emergent interest in seamy urban narratives and the posture of the *flâneur*: "What Whitman may have learned from Dickens, along with a general sensitivity to the various dimensions of city life, was an ability to leave behind the avenues and major thoroughfares and to cast a more interested eye on the habitats and inhabitants of the nether world" (Beach 125).¹⁵⁴ Whitman's transformation from journalist to poet is also his transformation from *flâneur* to picturesque character, a change which is most evident in the position he assumes within the scenes he depicts. Where Whitman's poetry is characterized by proximity to, or even imagined union with, those he represents, his journalistic voice is that of a detached, if concerned, observer and commentator. Whitman's writing, then, offers a bridge between the *flâneur* and the picturesque observer. The differences between his journalism and his later writing make clear the unique perspective provided by the picturesque: the viewer becomes part of the scene, and aesthetic interest in urban poverty becomes entangled with affective and moral responses to it.

Whitman's career as a journalist has been a belated area of study, overshadowed by his later work and undermined by a quality that some scholars have seen as being merely

¹⁵⁴ Beach points out that Whitman was "ahead of the largest crowd of [midcentury] American urban novelists" (125), and credits Whitman's love of Dickens, in particular, as an influence on Whitman's early fascination with rough urban neighborhoods.

“expressions of the age itself at its lowest and most ordinary” (Zweig 4).¹⁵⁵ While it is true that Whitman’s journalistic voice is, in many if not most articles, indistinguishable from those of other reporters of the day, the subjects and details included in some of his early pieces do suggest the themes and emotional tenor of his later writing. As Shelley Fisher Fishkin observes in *From Fact to Fiction: Journalism and Imaginative Writing in America*, it was in his earliest pieces “that Whitman first stumbled upon subjects, styles, stances, and strategies to which he would later return in *Leaves of Grass*” (15). She points out that the city “walks” Whitman published in the *New York Aurora*, for which Whitman served briefly as chief editor, were unique among the local papers at the time. “During the month that Whitman was at its helm, [the *Aurora*] paid more attention than any other paper to the sights and sounds of everyday life in New York – to what Whitman called in an editorial about his paper, ‘pictures of life as it is’” (Fishkin 15). One excellent example of Whitman’s city walks is “Life in a New York Market,” published in the *Aurora*, on March 16, 1842:

One Saturday night, not long since, a fantasy popped into our brain that we would like to take a stroll of observation through a *market*....

How the crowd rolls along! There comes a journeyman mason (we know him by his *limy* dress) and his wife – she bearing a little white basket on her arm. With what an independent air the mason looks around upon the fleshy wares; the secret of the matter is, that he has his past week’s wages in his pocket, and therefore puts he on that devil-may-care countenance. So marvellous an

¹⁵⁵ Dana Brand calls Whitman’s journalism “pure hackwork” (160). Shelley Fisher Fishkin, in her study of nineteenth-century journalism, observes that Whitman’s earliest journalism has “received virtually no critical attention” (15). Beach claims that “Whitman’s transformation from journalistic writer and editor to major poet remains one of the most surprising phenomena in American literature” (1).

influence hath money in making a man feel valiant and as good as his neighbor.

(*Journalism I: 55*)

Whitman goes on to chronicle other characters in the market: a “prim, red cheeked damsel...maid of all work of an elderly couple”; “a white faced thin bodied, sickly looking middle aged man...dressed in a shabby suit”; a “fat, jolly featured woman... the keeper of a boarding house for mechanics” – the “heterogeneous mass... who compose the bustling crowd” (*Journalism I: 56*). Whitman, with his enthusiastic punctuation and evident joy in his surroundings is precisely Baudelaire’s “passionate spectator,” but he brings this delight not only to the well-dressed crowd of the boulevard or the arcade but to a working-class market as well. Doing so marks the beginning, in American writing, of genteel writing about poor and working-class areas in which they are represented not as potential threats or sites of sensationalistic violence and vice, but as vibrant and varied spaces worthy of aesthetic representation and perhaps even personal observation.

As in the Theophrastian character books, Whitman serves as a guide to the city, and presents his subjects as knowable through their attire and expressions. There is considerable scholarship on how, in the later nineteenth century, writing about working-class areas of the city helped to generate a sense of urban sophistication for residents of increasingly large and diverse cities. Sabine Haenni, for instance, writes of the ways that pictures of urban spaces, and tours through them, helped to contribute to a sense of cosmopolitanism (502); Carrie Tirado Bramen finds that the “intra-urban walking tour” popular at the end of the century functioned as “cultural incorporation by casting cultural difference in terms of unity-in-discreteness” (“Failure” 447).¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁶ See also Dowling, especially pages 5-20.

Whitman's early journalism, which applies the tradition of European *flânerie* to document a uniquely American and working-class crowd, is the antecedent to the picturesque representations and slumming expeditions that would become so popular and influential in the coming decades. In another 1842 piece, "A Ramble Up Third Avenue," Whitman once again serves as guide to a part of the city that would be foreign to middle-class New Yorkers:

The right side of Chatham street from Frankfort to Pearl, well deserves the name of "Old Jewry," every other shop, at least, is occupied by a Pawn broker, or old clothes dealer, and you observe standing at each door one of the descendants of the twelve tribes, whether of Judah, Benjamin, or Isacher, it is impossible to tell, greeting you with "walk in shentlemen – what you want to buy?" and woe to the green one that happens to get in their toils. Above Pearl street, one or two Peter Funk shops hoist the red flag, where you can buy a watch for three cents and a thousand brass rings for the same price, each, in one lot. These fellows are worse than the Jews. Next comes half a dozen auction shops for the sale of old bedsteads, bureaus, broken china, tin ware and old carpets, where you can spend your money *dirt cheap*. Enough of Chatham street – here we are at the Bowery. This is a wide pleasant street.... (*Journalism* I:140-141)

This description offers an early taste of reporting that would become widespread in the New York papers I will discuss at the end of this chapter, which became so prominent at the end of the century. Taken together, "Market" and "Ramble" chart the route from *flânerie* towards picturesque tourism. In the Market piece, Whitman's use of the impersonal "we" removes the observer from the scene: "our brain" being an impossibility, the authorial voice is a construction from the outset – the gentleman explorer, guiding us through the urban landscape. He is the

impersonal, omniscient *flâneur*, whose imaginative leaps into the lives and minds of those he observes are fanciful, if charming and at times sympathetic, constructions. In his “Ramble,” Whitman’s use of the second person brings the reader into the scene in a manner that will become common in later touristic writing about ghettos, as does the cataloguing of the bargains and snares for which visitors to the area should look out. In his latter piece, “we” might as well be walking with the writer, as he helpfully (if with common anti-Semitism) guides us through the neighborhood, until we turn with him into his beloved Bowery. The discreteness of observer and observed is, in this piece, more marked than their unity, a quality that will hold fast through much of the journalism that depicts these areas as being picturesque. Like Whitman, the journalists who travel to the Lower East Side later in the century represent themselves within the scene, making the view picturesque – and redefining the function of the *flâneur* as not merely spectator but participant; yet the potential for the reporter to be transformed by contact with these perceived Others remains merely that. As guide, or as *flâneur*, Whitman has not yet established his relation towards the crowds as one of love; he remains the “mirror” which Baudelaire describes as reflecting the unknown others, who are available as surfaces only. In Whitman’s poetry, and in later sketches of ghettos by Bunner and Hapgood, the writer’s position becomes less discrete, and the picturesque details become not merely kaleidoscopic color and light but an absorbing experience; the writer’s fascination, affection, and longing become part of the scene.

The Genteel-Sensational: City Adventures for the Middle Class

The significance of *flânerie* to Whitman’s journalism is, in part, to introduce American readers to working-class life as spectacle, but not as spectacular. His newspaper writing is the forbear not of sensationalistic accounts of ghetto crime and vice, but of the many depictions of

working-class people's daily lives and habits, their joys and sorrows as perceived by middle-class writers.¹⁵⁷ By mid-century, major papers like *The New York Sun* were committed to “depicting ‘the warm truth of real life,’ as [journalist and writer] Charles Godfrey Leland put it” (Connery 23). Whitman's evocative prose brings representations of working-class urban areas to major American newspapers, and this, in turn, contributes to the development, in the later nineteenth century, of realist literature set in American ghettos. In *Journalism and Realism: Rendering American Life*, Thomas B. Connery argues for the centrality of journalism to “a realistic movement” in the nineteenth century which sought “to record life observed” (xx). This realist mode, as Connery and others have recently argued,¹⁵⁸ drew on the prolific and profitable newspaper writing about the daily lives of urban Americans. As Connery observes, “newspapers and especially the penny papers that had blossomed in various cities, but most strongly in New York, had been covering the range of city life, telling tales about real people and events to the working-class and middle-class urban population before fiction started to do so” (Connery 23). Whitman's interest in depicting “life as it is” manifests, in his articles, as curiosity about, and enthusiasm for, the sights of the city readily available to anyone; in his writing about them, they become objects worthy of aesthetic attention, of pictorial sight. Picturesque aesthetics must be seen, then, as integral to the rise of the newspaper industry so central to nineteenth-century society, and to the realist project the journalistic interest in representations of real life helped to

¹⁵⁷ Even in his reporting on more sensational events, such as a deadly fire in the Lower East Side, Whitman attempts to give a sense of life as it is for both those involved and for the observer. Fishkin writes at length about Whitman's piece on a fire in 1842: while other newspapers' coverage consisted almost entirely of “names, addresses, and an account of how the fire spread,” Whitman's writing “makes the reader feel as if he were watching the fire himself” (20), and “concludes his account...with a description of the way the victims look and with extended empathetic musings on the way they must feel” (21).

¹⁵⁸ See also Karen Roggenkamp, *Narrating the News: New Journalism and Literary Genre in Late Nineteenth-Century American Newspapers and Fiction*; J. Chris Westgate, *Staging the Slums, Slumming the Stage: Class, Poverty, Ethnicity, and Sexuality in American Theatre, 1890-1916*.

foment. Within the American tradition of ascribing moral value to pictorial sight, the dissemination of urban dramas – of suffering, crime, and daily life – as news as well as entertainment made knowing about and feeling for others an aspect of informed citizenship for the emergent bourgeoisie.

As we have seen, the picturesque – particularly in America – is fundamentally a means of perceiving common objects as aesthetically interesting. By adopting the *flâneur's* gaze, Whitman helped to popularize an aesthetics of the common *among the middle class*. Fishkin observes that “[t]he revolution of the penny press led all of the mass newspapers to focus more on the lives of common people, but Whitman’s colleagues often emphasized the less common aspects of those lives; while they focused on the sensational (murderers and madmen), Whitman focused on the ordinary (milkmen and maids)” (23). It is certainly the case that these sensational aspects came to be incorporated into reporting for the middle classes as well. Karen Roggenkamp chronicles the influence of the penny press on what she calls “new journalism,” which rose to prominence in the last two decades of the nineteenth century and which she characterizes as “an innovative, commercialized, sensationalistic, and above all dramatic style of reportage” (xii) that was more closely related to popular fiction than to conventional journalism. Richard Harding Davis is the outstanding example of such sensationalistic journalism, and his work provides a helpful counterpoint to the picturesque position in which I am interested.

Because some of his works depict encounters between affluent people and the urban poor and make use of dialect attributed to the latter, Davis’s writing might be read as participating in the tradition of the urban picturesque. In *On the Bowery: Confronting Homelessness in American Society*, Benedict Giomo places Richard Harding Davis, H.C. Bunner, and Brander Matthews together in what he terms “the picturesque school,” which he sees as being “defined by

its glaring omissions concerning the submerged details of poverty” (62); all these men were “members of New York society and representatives of the genteel tradition” (54), whose works provided views of the slums with the “quaint outlines and soft focus of the picturesque” (54). Davis arguably belongs to another category, however, which I am calling the genteel-sensational; his works draw upon New York’s slums, but do not make them picturesque: rather, they are sensationalized for a genteel, rather than a working-class audience. His gentility was one of Davis’s defining features, in both his life and work. Roggenkamp describes how, “at the *Philadelphia Record* and the *Philadelphia Press*, Davis both amazed and irritated his coworkers by uncovering the gritty underbelly of urban life while wielding a natty walking stick and dressed as though he were headed to afternoon tea” (51). While this description suggests that Davis occupied a *flâneur*’s position in relation to this “gritty underbelly,” and the genial, knowing tone of his writing owes something to this urbane figure, his work departs from this tradition and from that of the picturesque tourist through rough neighborhoods in several important respects. First, Davis “sought out melodrama and natural excitement” (Roggenkamp 51); while drawing on similar characters and locations as picturesque narratives, and like them depicting cross-class encounters, Davis’s romantic, sensational, and often comedic plots remove his tales from the domain of the common.¹⁵⁹ They are not tales of exploration, but of minor adventure set in the city, and as such are not interested in the aesthetics of rough areas except as backdrops. Moreover, inter-class encounters in Davis’s work invariably involve the heroic intervention of an upper-class man defending himself or some wronged person from the vice or viciousness of working-class people. Finally, the third-person narration and heavy reliance on

¹⁵⁹ It is worth noting that some contemporary critics saw Davis’s stories as functioning “to promote the classes’ mutual under-standing, to effect through the medium of the modernized fairy tale a rapprochement of the aristocracy and the proletariat” (Florence V. Keys, “Critical Study,” *The Inquirer*, 10 Sept, 1898, qtd. in Osborn, p. 88).

dialogue blithely sweep the stories along, without providing the perspective from a specific point of view upon which picturesque narratives rely. There is little interiority, except to depict Van Bibber's calculations or responses. In short, the picturesque fundamentally requires a viewer to compose the scene, and in these stories Van Bibber is not an observer, but an actor; he does not compose scenes for view, but encounters situations and dominates them.

The first story in his wildly popular collection *Van Bibber and Other Stories* (1892)¹⁶⁰ contains several features characteristic of Davis's fiction and city reporting, and serves as an effective foil for the picturesque narratives I discuss below. It tells of the titular character, a wealthy New Yorker, on the night he rescues a child from a life in the theatre. As with Egan's Corinthian Tom, Van Bibber's urban suavity derives in part from his pleasure in the downtown theatre scene and its actors; they are "simple, unconventional, light-hearted folk, and Van Bibber found them vastly more entertaining and preferable to the silence of the deserted club" (Davis 3). There is a kinship in this description, and that of the "unconsciously graceful groups in the sharply divided light and shadow of the wings" (Davis 3), with those of picturesque urban areas, and Van Bibber's preference for this vibrant, non-genteel scene suggests a similar etiology. Yet the narrative itself moves in an entirely different direction: he sees a child about to go onstage whose "quaintly sweet face, and its strange mark of gentleness and refinement" cause him to realize that she does not belong there; pulls from the wardrobe manager the story of the child's parentage; whisks the girl from the theatre back to the gentleman father who has abandoned her after his actress wife abandoned him, and convinces the man to reclaim his child. As in many

¹⁶⁰ "The first edition of *Gallegher*, the collected stories brought together as a book in 1890, sold out within its first month of release. It had sold over fifteen thousand copies by the end of the first year. The first edition (four thousand copies) of *Van Bibber and Others* ran out by noon of its second day on the market. Davis followed up with two of the best sellers of the 1890s, the romantic novels *Soldiers of Fortune* (1897) and *The Princess Aline* (1899), both serialized in 1895" (Roggenkamp 150).

other middle-class depictions of the theatre,¹⁶¹ the environment is depicted as a contaminant: “‘This red spot on her cheek,’ he said gravely, ‘is where Mary Vane kissed her to-night, and this is where Alma Stantley kissed her, and that Lee girl. You have heard of them, perhaps. They will never kiss her again’” (Davis 15). In contrast to the Gilded Age writing about downtown theatre which delights in the vibrancy of the crowd and its class and/or ethnic difference as objects of depiction, here the theatre is merely the seedy backdrop for a romantic tale.¹⁶² While enjoying the “picturesque disorder” (Davis 3) of his actor friend’s wardrobe (himself a disinherited gentleman), Van Bibber nonetheless maintains a distanced and moralistic view of this downtown scene. In stories such as these, and in his journalistic pieces, many of which in form and content are almost indistinguishable from fiction,¹⁶³ Davis uses gritty urban areas as backdrops for genteel heroism, offering to middle-class readers the excitement of dime novel stories, but with a gentleman hero.

One other story will suffice to depict the difference between the genteel-sensational tradition and that of the picturesque. In “The Hungry Man Was Fed,” Van Bibber plays an elaborate joke on a man he encounters when he “broke one of his rules of life one day and came down-town” (Davis 20). At first the story once again suggests the *flâneur* – Van Bibber observes “the bustle and confusion of the streets, with as much interest as a lately arrived immigrant” –

¹⁶¹ See for instance, Edward Townsend’s *Daughter of the Tenements* (1895), in which the titular character is preserved by a fanatically cautious mother from the pollutants of the theatre life in which she is raised, and can thus righteously claim the noble inheritance that becomes hers at the novel’s conclusion.

¹⁶² The most famous and critically acclaimed of these occurs in Hutchins Hapgood’s *The Spirit of the Ghetto* (1902). Dowling claims that, “Hapgood historicizes New York Yiddish theater in order to prove that there is a well-established and historically significant cultural event going on in the Lower East Side, and outsiders hitherto oblivious to this extraordinary neighborhood should make their way downtown” (119). For Hutchins, the ghetto is entirely picturesque, as I discuss in the next chapter.

¹⁶³ Davis first came to fame when, on his first day as a reporter for the *Evening Sun*, he recognized and helped to capture a famous con artist by posing as a naive visitor to the city. He wrote the escapade in third person, and “was an instant sensation” (Roggenkamp 51).

but Van Bibber quickly tires of the scene and wishes to “get back to civilization again” (Davis 20). Whereas picturesque narratives feature middle-class characters compelled by the sights of the slums, Davis writes of a decidedly upper-class gentleman disgusted and bewildered by them. As Van Bibber attempts to return uptown, he is accosted by “a miserable-looking, dirty, and red-eyed object” who begs for money for food. “Van Bibber drew away as though the Object had a contagious disease in his rags” (Davis 20), hands the man a quarter and hurries away. Experiencing a moment of compassion, he tries and fails to imagine the man’s situation, and decides to “go back and hunt up the Object and give him more money” (Davis 21). On so doing, he sees the man (referred to throughout as the Object) obtaining money from two other men, after which the begging man, who does not recognize Van Bibber, repeats his previously-told tale of woe, and receives from him more money. Lost and encountering the man a third time, and hearing again that the man is “faint for food, sir” (Davis 21), Van Bibber realizes that the man is attempting to obtain more than the price of breakfast, and ushers him into a restaurant. Here it becomes evident that the man has already eaten, but “the clubman” (as Van Bibber is occasionally called) orders the beggar an enormous breakfast, which he forces him to eat in its entirety and then to pay for, with tip. Van Bibber leaves, “smiling and easy, ma[king] his way through the admiring crowd and out into the street,” and returns to his club, where he tells of his “adventure to a fellow-clubman” (Davis 23). The gentleman is once again the hero, the poorer character a threat, and the rough neighborhood in which he is encountered holds no pleasure except as retrospectively recounted for comedic and self-congratulatory effect.

This story will find its keenest contrast in a sketch from William Dean Howells’s *Impressions and Experiences* (1896), in which the narrator struggles with the question of

whether or not to give to a beggar, and decides that he must and should.¹⁶⁴ I discuss this and other pieces from that collection in Chapter Five, but for now, Davis's piece illustrates precisely the conflict faced by wealthy urban dwellers encountering extreme poverty: the man is starving, or the man is a fraud; I have a duty to help him, or I have a duty to expose him, or at least to preserve myself from being defrauded.¹⁶⁵ In cities that throughout the Gilded Age faced crisis levels of poverty and homelessness, there was a near-certainty of encountering people who were actually in terrible need, but Davis's tale makes comedy of hunger, and encourages the view that those who are begging are often "impostor[s]" (Davis 22). Where the picturesque sees raggedness and decay as signs of poverty – if often downplaying the degree of suffering this condition entails by foregrounding their aesthetic pleasures – the *Van Bibber* stories do not see poverty as beautiful, and empty it of social significance except as being the potential bearer of physical and moral contagion. Neither do these stories represent poverty as being a problem to which it is the duty of the wealthy to attend. The presence of the one (putatively) hungry man does not suggest the fact of there being multitudes of hungry people, and Van Bibber's momentary compassion does not read as exemplary, but, in the context of the story, as naïveté. While the representations of poverty as picturesque that were popular at the same time as Davis's

¹⁶⁴ The scenario of fraudulent beggars also appears in Brander Matthews's story "In the Midst of Life" as a lesson to a genteel woman momentarily overcome with compassion for the poor. Thoreau tidily articulates the American wariness of charity when he writes in *Walden*: "Be sure that you give the poor the aid they most need, though it be your example that leaves them far behind" (71). By attributing much poverty to "taste" (71), Thoreau mitigates against reformist impulses that seek to change environments perceived as fostering poverty and its social ills.

¹⁶⁵ Bramen contends that, "Howells's dilemma centers on a question of human agency. Should the well-to-do encourage dependency through charity, or should they foster independence by just saying no?" ("Failure" 91). While this Emersonian ethical dilemma is one aspect of the encounter, another is whether or not it matters if the man deserves help. Howells, like Charles Lamb in *Essays of Elia*, decides it does not. This position affirms that which Howells upholds throughout his later work, that people in poverty are not comprehensible to those with money, a fact the latter has an ethical duty to accept.

are, inarguably, ethically fraught, their depiction of poor and racialized communities as *interesting* and not simply as places associated with vice, moral degradation, and sordid titillation distinguishes these representations and makes them socially more interesting and potentially more useful than other kinds of city writing.

During a decade shaped by violent class conflict and economic instability, in which popular literature demonized the wealthy and cultural criticism reviled their enervation and insipidity, Davis created narratives that celebrated the gentleman's worldliness and derring-do, qualities that stemmed largely from their heroes' ability to get the better of poorer people.¹⁶⁶ While such tales held obvious appeal – one related to the fear that wealth is morally and physically debilitating – the anxieties of the middle class around inequality and social responsibility were neither articulated nor assuaged by the exploits of gentleman adventurers. These social and ethical dilemmas thus found expression in the daily newspapers and the literary sketch, both of which were influenced by the aesthetics of the common and by new visual representations of ghettos in photographic journalism that explicitly depicted such places and their inhabitants as being picturesque. In these works, the term designates rough people and places as being aesthetically interesting, but more importantly, picturesque viewing comes to frame the moral and social relations between observer and observed, making aesthetic taste – and in particular the ability to aestheticize any object – once again a facet of one's values and sense of community.

¹⁶⁶ John Higham has paid particular attention to the ways in which “the dynamism that characterized the whole political and social scene from the turn of the century through World War I emerged during the 1890s in large areas of popular culture” (177). The “reassertion of the masculine principle of virility and instinctive action in a literature too much dominated by the feminine principle of refinement and delicacy” (179) which Higham sees in writing by Jack London, Owen Wister and others can be seen at work, in an urban context, in Davis's stories.

Travels Among the Other Half

Middle-class interest in urban exploration took many forms in the last half of the nineteenth century. This section first looks at how plays and city sketches contributed to the growing interest, among the mid-century bourgeoisie, in ghettos and their inhabitants as aesthetically pleasurable objects. The association of picturesque aesthetics with art about the urban poor gains cultural potency with the immensely influential photojournalism of Jacob Riis, which connects this taste with moral sentiment and the class position such sentiments served to express and uphold. The use of the word “picturesque” in New York newspapers to describe poor areas of the city and their inhabitants, which I examine at the end of this chapter, becomes more interesting and significant in the context of these earlier works.

The function of the picturesque in Gilded Age journalism has not yet been the subject of critical inquiry, but it provides a compelling historical archive of the intersection of aesthetic taste and class identity in mass circulated media. One predominantly Italian section of lower Manhattan, Mulberry Bend, is described as picturesque at least fourteen times in only the *New York Times* between 1892 and 1900; the Jewish Quarter in the Lower East Side is presented as picturesque with similar frequency. The abundance of Gilded Age articles about the picturesque qualities of ghettos and their inhabitants attests to the assumption by newspaper editors that middle-class readers will find such depictions interesting, and it also functionally makes them so: as picturesque locales, these areas become part of the urban landscape available for consumption by middle-class readers, at the same time becoming the locus of social problems these readers are expected to be aware of and concerned about. Bramen has shown how “[t]he aesthetic of the picturesque provided a much-needed vocabulary for middle-class inhabitants of the city. It offered a discourse of color and variety with which urban dwellers could visually transform the

rubbish, congestion, and misery of the city into a source of rough and rugged pleasure” (“Failure” 87). In “The Urban Picturesque and the Spectacle of Americanization,” Bramen argues that “the urban picturesque operated as a form of local color, which captured the Old World customs and peculiarities that existed in the heart of modernity” (446), and that “[t]he main task of the urban picturesque was...to demonstrate to the middle-class reader that ‘richness and variety’ were part of the metropolitan experience” (447). I hope to expand these observations – currently the most detailed and nuanced readings of the urban picturesque – by delving further into why picturesque aesthetics provided such a useful discursive framework for the middle class, and what this discourse reveals about bourgeois class anxiety regarding not only poverty but also the constraints and expectations felt by the bourgeoisie.

The widespread use of the term “picturesque” in writing about New York’s impoverished neighborhoods began concurrently with the publication of Jacob Riis’s *How the Other Half Lives* (1890).¹⁶⁷ There exists a tremendous amount of scholarship on this work, on both its sociological and aesthetic implications.¹⁶⁸ What I would like to add to this discussion is an understanding of Riis’s work in the context of an emergent liberal tradition constituted in part by the apprehension of a suffering, potentially dangerous, but also vibrant and aesthetically appealing underclass. This view of the poor, and of the appropriate moral and aesthetic responses to it by the genteel classes, is evident in *How the Other Half Lives*, as well as in the many newspaper articles written throughout the 1890s about poor and immigrant

¹⁶⁷ Notably, this is the same year as Howells published *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, the first work to interrogate this term as applied to poor and immigrant populations.

¹⁶⁸ See especially Maren Stange, *Symbols of Ideal Life: Social Documentary Photography in America, 1890-1950*; and, most recently, Bonnie Yochelson and Daniel Czitrom’s *Rediscovering Jacob Riis: Exposure Journalism and Photography in Turn-of-the-Century New York*.

neighbourhoods. Riis was by no means the first American to use the term picturesque to describe urban scenes, although it did vastly increase after the publication of *How the Other Half Lives* – owing, no doubt, in part to the novelty of its photographs, which helped to re-inscribe picturesque aesthetic principles within a visual medium.¹⁶⁹ But as early as 1857, an article in *The New-York Daily Times* recorded that, “[t]he appearance of this portion of our City at present is exceedingly picturesque. The old rookeries left standing way above the street, the piles of building-stone, and curb-stones, and excavated earth everywhere visible; the new warehouses now erecting...and now and then a Second-avenue car, with its load of human freight” (“The Bowery Extension”). As in Whitman’s evocation of America’s picturesque “formation-stir” (*Complete Prose* 377), the picturesqueness of this scene is in its roughness and contrast of old and new. In 1883, the *New York Times* ran an article called “A Revel in the Bowery: The carnival of the unwashed and disreputable,” which described the neighborhood thus: “The broad thoroughfare...was spread before them with its glittering shops, its dives and saloons...all lighted as brilliantly as midday by the great electric lamps that stretched from one end of the street to the other, and the whole effect, without the human element, was bright and picturesque, and almost bewildering” (13). This is one of the earliest depictions of a rough neighborhood as rewarding pictorial sight, and the headline’s association of the poor with the spectacle and liberation of a carnival suggests the emergent trope of the slum as an exciting tourist destination.

¹⁶⁹ It is interesting that “the first half-tone photographic plate” to appear in a newspaper – in the March 4, 1880 edition of the *New York Daily Graphic* – was “a slum scene” (Szasz et al. 425). The technical difficulties of reproduction, however, did not allow for “widespread newspaper use until sometime after 1897” (Szasz et al. 425). Riis’s photographs originally appeared as lantern slides, another popular form of entertainment in the Gilded Age, and one which also drew upon the picturesque. “The Lights and Shadows of a Great City,” subtitled “The Life of the Lowly” (1903) used some of Riis’s photographs, “but ‘comics’ were interspersed for relief” (Musser, *Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company* p. 523, n. 25). The use of Riis’s work in a context clearly meant primarily as entertainment suggests the degree to which aestheticized poverty had been incorporated into popular culture by the turn of the century.

Depictions of ghettos as picturesque tourist locales became increasingly prevalent throughout the rest of the century. By 1888, in her piece “The Italians of New York,” Viola Roseboro could praise the “artistic effects that semi-barbarians, and they only, seem able to master,” before apologizing that her use of the terms “picturesque,” “charming” and “artistic... are words apt to be badly overworked in writing about the Italians” (Roseboro 396). Roseboro’s urban travelogue – part entertainment, part sociological study – draws on the familiar concept of the picturesque as a way of perceiving uncultivated spaces, and applies it to the wilds of Mulberry Bend. In the decade preceding her sketch, the term “picturesque” was used incessantly to depict the American wilderness: for example, an illustrated section of *Appleton’s Journal*, edited by the prominent poet William Cullen Bryant and entitled *Picturesque America*, sold millions of copies between 1872 and 1874 (Bertellini 100). Poor people in other parts of the world, especially Italy, were also described as picturesque. Howells’s 1866 *Venetian Life*, for instance, which Richard Brodhead credits with “presenting Italy to an American readership” (97), abounds in “picturesque wretchedness” (Howells, *Venetian* 24), “picturesque ruin” (Howells, *Venetian* 28), and “beggar[s] in picturesque and desultory costume” (Howells, *Venetian* 18) – a descriptive mode that, as I discuss in the final chapter, comes to haunt him. In Roseboro’s urban domestic travel narrative, “the overuse of the term [picturesque] has the advantage of naturalizing the Italians’ presence: their association with the city becomes as expected as the word ‘picturesque’ is to describe them” (Bramen, *Uses* 177). As David Leviatin notes in his Introduction to *How the Other Half Lives*, Riis’s work coincided with “the closing of the western frontier”: “With the western wilderness and the Indian conquered, American culture needed new symbols of ‘otherness’ against which to define itself” (27-28). Roseboro’s article popularized the trope of the hot-headed, light-hearted, and above all colorful Italian of Mulberry

Bend. Many of the qualities that become familiar in depictions of New York's Italian population are evident in Roseboro's piece, including an ethnographic and sociological perspective that also appeals to aesthetic taste; like Riis's longer work, "Italians in New York" provides a new discursive framework through which the genteel classes can become conversant with the realities of their multicultural city, and can relate to them both as informed citizens and as those with the means to cultivate aesthetic judgement. Just as viewing the uncultivated Western regions as picturesque helped to incorporate that landscape into the collective national imaginary, depictions of immigrant populations as picturesque made urban slums sites of exploration, colonization, and aesthetic pleasure.

Neither was Riis's work original in its careful observation of the habits and lives of New York's poor, although its discussion of specific injustices is more detailed, and his focus on immigrants reflects the city's changing population. In 1849, however, George Foster published the popular collection *New York in Slices*, introduced with a depiction of the wretchedness beneath the gay surface of New York; anticipating Riis, Foster asks "Society to accuse itself" (5) for the suffering of its poor. The next year, Foster published his exponentially more popular *New York by Gaslight*, which introduced America to such enduring characters as the newspaper boy and the Bowery b'hoy and g'hal.¹⁷⁰ It is notable that the term picturesque appears only three times in *Slices*, and none of these refers to poverty or dereliction, but rather to the artistic groupings of individuals. The word does not appear at all in *Gaslight*, suggesting that the application of pictorial sight to urban roughness had not yet begun. Rather, Foster's work initiates this practice by making New York's poor aesthetically interesting – without attaching

¹⁷⁰ *Slices* the book did very well, with a press run of 20,000, and Foster followed that with another book of sketches, *New York By Gas-Light...*, in 1850. *Gas-Light*, consisting of slices of the gritty and seamy night-side of the city, was even more popular than *Slices* (with about 200,000 in circulation)" (Connery 53).

entirely negative moral judgements to their ways of life. His language also sets up many tropes that will become staples of picturesque literature later in the century. Most important of these is the Bowery b'hooy and g'hal depicted in the sketch "Mose and Lize":

In the boisterous roughness, the rude manners and the profanity of the b'hooy there is little, truly, to elicit our admiration. But his cheerful and patient performance of the labor to which he is allotted and by which he lives ... his open abhorrence of all "nonsense" – the hearty manner in which he stands up on all occasions for his friend, and especially his indomitable devotion to fair play – bespeak for him and his future destiny our warmest sympathies and our highest hopes. (Foster 170)

This paragon of rough freedom is contrasted with "the shallow-pated, milk-hearted sucklings of foppery and fashion" to which the b'hooy knows himself "far superior" (Foster 171). Foster here depicts precisely Whitman's forgotten Mose, "racy of the East river and the Dry Dock," with his "Slang, wit, occasional shirt sleeves, and a picturesque freedom of looks and manners" (*Complete Prose* 427); as Whitman will do, Foster contrasts this defiantly independent character with the pusillanimous sons of the "codfish aristocracy" (Foster 172), and claims the rude vitality of the working class as that which is worthy of sympathy and definitive of the national character. I would suggest that the view of such figures as being picturesque develops in two ways: first, as the century progressed, Mose and Lize become antiquated characters; Whitman, writing in 1892, laments their disappearance. Their qualities of freedom, strength, and loyalty, are thus associated with a quaint urban type, and when displayed by working-class characters in fiction evoke the

nostalgia for simplicity, authenticity, and community contained within the picturesque.¹⁷¹

Second, these traits are absorbed by later depictions of Bowery types, especially the Bowery tough, who becomes the quintessence of picturesque roughness both in popular plays about the neighborhood and in works such as Hapgood's *Types from City Streets*. Foster's work is the first American text to depict roughness as both virtuous and aesthetically appealing.¹⁷²

Foster's depictions of the daily lives of common men and women initiate a new way of perceiving the poor which becomes increasingly prevalent over the course of the century. Moving away from the purely sensational, Foster's sketches grow out of the mysteries-and-miseries novels popular since earlier in the century, as well as from "the day-to-day reportage that he and others were supplying to the big-city daily press," while enriching these forms by chronicling "the tangible city, in much of its particular and realistic detail" (Blumin, Introduction 27). They also appear at almost the same moment as the first theatrical production about the urban poor. "*New York As It Is*, performed as *A Glance at New York in 1848*, which starred popular actor Frank Chanfrau as Mose the Fire Boy...introduced the famous Bowery B'hoy style of speech to popular culture" (Dowling 53). In trying to render the spirit of the Bowery b'hoy, Foster writes of their "strong and piquant characteristics, a single glance at which would go farther than pages of description" (174). The public clearly wished to see these characters for themselves: debuting in 1849, "the play was performed for forty-eight consecutive nights, selling over forty thousand tickets, making it, up to that point, the most popular play in American

¹⁷¹ Tom in Townsend's *Daughter of the Tenements* possesses many of these characteristics, although his ability as an artist makes him upwardly mobile.

¹⁷² Adrienne Siegel, in her study of mid-century representations of the city, discusses the immense popularity of the "picturesque" figure of "Mose the Fireboy" as "the embodiment of the impudent and exuberant child of the city, the Bowery boy" (33).

History” (Dowling 53). *A Glance* was only the first of the slum play genre that went on to dominate the theatre industry at the end of the nineteenth century.

Plays about urban slum life reflect both the increasing aesthetic interest in slums and the change in the moral and social understandings of poverty over the course of the century. In Dion Boucicault’s play *The Poor of New York* (1857), poverty “becomes a form of spiritual richness that contains the seeds of its own negation, a blessed state that purifies honesty and opens the heart to generosity and nobility” (Jones 31). While this view of material deprivation as spiritual enrichment holds fast throughout the century, it is telling that the protagonists of this play are a middle-class family temporarily reduced to penury. Over the next forty years, however, changing concepts about the causes of poverty and its social significance, as well as a growing population of middle-class urbanites, contributed to new aesthetic approaches towards the slums. In 1884, the production *Slumming in this Town* helped to popularize the slum tour, which, as theatre historian Chris Westgate observes, simultaneously distanced middle-class viewers from poverty and brought them in contact with the illicit entertainments with which ghettos were associated:

Before 1884, slumming expeditions were usually around half a dozen or so wealthy adventurers employing a police escort to take them on tours. After 1884, slumming grew in popularity and opportunity as an infrastructure of slum tourism developed out of the determination of shrewd tour guides and perceptive businessmen. Originally, slumming was the “fashionable dissipation” among the upper classes of New York, who were intent in emulating their betters in London, where slumming had long been a favorite pastime. Additionally, slumming appealed to the emergent middle class by affording members of this class the

opportunity to contrast themselves with the lower classes – so that they could differentiate themselves from immigrants and the working class *and* participate in the amusements from immigrant and working-class life. (24)

Slums were becoming spectacles, the enjoyment of which was a facet of genteel acculturation. The demonstration of this cultural knowledge could, however, be acquired without traveling to the slums themselves. Westgate observes that *A Trip to Chinatown*, which in 1891 became America's longest-running play, "clearly drew on the emergent leisure economy both in terms of what it represented about slumming and the way that it affiliated itself with this increasingly fashionable amusement. More than that, the play implicitly advanced an argument about the superiority of slumming the stage rather than the streets" (24).¹⁷³ Westgate presents slum plays as integral to the change, over the course of the nineteenth century, in perceptions of class, arguing that such plays "elucidate[d] the ethical ambiguities involved in the cross-class encounters of slumming" (7). After the publication of *How the Other Half Lives*, slum plays grew tremendously in popularity, and this fact attests to the desire, among the emergent bourgeoisie, to consume representations of poverty both as entertainment and as moral education.

How the Other Half Lives thus built on existing aesthetic interest in poverty and drew on the same anxious curiosity about it to which earlier representations appealed. Despite its contribution to making the slum a spectacle, however, it also offered new insights into the

¹⁷³ Riis saw his own work in a similar way: "The beauty of looking into these places without actually being present there is that the excursionist is spared the vulgar sounds and odious scents and repulsive exhibition attendant upon such a personal examination" (qtd. in Leviatin, p. 29). Riis's statement recalls Knight's argument that the picturesque can exist only in the absence of other repugnant sensory information, thus suggesting that Riis's work makes palatable for viewing that which would otherwise offend, and that the sympathy he hopes to rouse in his readers for the poor would be unavailable to genteel people upon actually visiting the slums. His use of the term "excursionist" highlights the touristic quality of his work, but suggests that travel literature, as it were, is preferable to actual excursions to the slums, which would lack the requisite aesthetic distance to make them picturesque.

conditions of the poor in New York. Most importantly, it constructed poverty as simultaneously a source of unique and interesting habits and modes of living, and a serious social problem of which the middle class must be aware.¹⁷⁴ The combination of aesthetic appeal and social intervention presented by Riis's work was, as Westgate and others identify, crucial to the development of class identity among the bourgeoisie. I propose that picturesque aesthetics helped to create not only a sense of a distinct bourgeois identity, but also class consciousness among the middle class, and that this consciousness was, in essence, an anxious one. In using the term "class consciousness," I am operating within the definition provided by Anthony Giddens in his preeminent work *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies*. Giddens makes an important distinction between "class awareness" and "class consciousness":

in so far as class is a structured phenomenon, there will tend to exist a common awareness and acceptance of similar attitudes and beliefs, linked to a common style of life, among the members of the class. "Class awareness," as I use the term here, does not involve a recognition that these attitudes and beliefs signify a particular class affiliation, or the recognition that there exist other classes, characterized by different attitudes, beliefs, and styles of life; "class consciousness," by contrast ... does imply both of these. The difference between class awareness and class consciousness is a fundamental one, because class awareness may take the form of a denial of the existence or reality of classes.

Thus the class awareness of the middle class, in so far as it involves beliefs which

¹⁷⁴ Gandal argues that, Riis's limitations as slum reformer "seem to be endemic not simply to Riis's visitor status but to a general practice of slum representation whose most conspicuous stylistic feature is sensationalism. Riis may indeed have concentrated on the visual aspects of slum life because he was a visitor to poverty, but the fact is that the visual aspects were also the most appealing and accessible for a reading or viewing audience. If Riis's call for reform got tangible results where others' had failed, it was because his book included dramatic photographs and depicted slum life in a sensational manner" (87).

place a premium upon individual responsibility and achievement, is of this order.

(111)

The process by which middle-class Americans came to see their social station in relation to those above and below was inextricable from aesthetic representations of other classes, particularly the poor and working class. The tremendous popularity and cultural influence of *How the Other Half Lives* “clarified the purpose and the identity of the middle class” (Leviatin 30); the clarification it offered was that poverty was not only aesthetically interesting, but also a social problem to which it was the duty of wealthier citizens to attend.¹⁷⁵ In the context of the economic precarity and sense of inefficacy pervading the middle class, attending to cultural products about the poor became a means of fulfilling this duty.

The obligation to contemplate urban ghettos added a new dimension to the culture of gentility, making what we now call social consciousness part of the cultural knowledge necessary to claim position among the bourgeoisie. Riis’s work was crucial to the recognition of a lower class in America which possessed a variety of values and lifestyles different from those of wealthier people; his representations of poor and working-class lives depict these differences as being worthy of pictorial sight. At the same time, the recognition of these differences as being caused by not only individual but also social factors, and the concurrent recognition, described by Newfield, Lears, and Higham, that economic and social conditions limited the agency of any individual, created a sense of one’s status as contingent and unstable.¹⁷⁶ The anxiety that social

¹⁷⁵ For an exploration of critical and public reception of *How the Other Half Lives*, see Szasz et al, “The Camera and the Social Conscience: The Documentary Photography of Jacob A. Riis.” They argue that “Riis’s book was the first to arouse genuine public outcry” (422), and that he was “the first reformer to catch the ear of the country with his message of the wretched living conditions in the major cities” (411).

¹⁷⁶ Higham finds that, in the 1890s, “[m]any felt an erosion of their own independent station in society” (188).

position does not entirely, or even predominantly, result from individual actions, helps to explain the fascination with poverty as an aesthetic commodity, which distances poorer people from wealthier ones in possession of good aesthetic judgement. As Boucicault's play suggests, fortunes may rise and fall, but taste can remain stable: the ability to appreciate a good book (and to scorn a dime novel) might bolster a family's sense of class status should they fall on hard times. Concerns about limited personal agency also suggest that the popularity of Riis's first book derived in part from a sense among genteel readers that by knowing about socially constructed suffering, and feeling compassion for the poor, they were acknowledging their responsibility for a problem they otherwise could not affect. Despite decades of reform efforts by such organizations as The Children's Aid Society, the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, and the Five Points Mission – all of which, along with many others both local and national, appeared around mid-century – “the Protestant crusade to reform the wicked elements of New York life was inevitably a losing battle, for reasons that were demographic as much as moral or spiritual” (Beach 12). The city was simply growing too fast, swelled both by Americans leaving rural areas and by immigration.

Anxiety about bourgeois identity would also have stemmed, in part, from the difficulty Americans felt in acknowledging the existence of defined social classes, and the related indeterminacy of the concept of a middle class. “The history of the middle class in America was long hobbled by a discourse of classless republican equality” (Young 43). Linda Young, in *Middle Class Culture in the Nineteenth Century*, and Stuart Blumin, in *The Emergence of the Middle Class*, both note that the presence of this egalitarian ideal shaped discourses of class in

America well into the 1970s.¹⁷⁷ “The political ideal of equality became interpreted in historic practice as a society of the middling sort, a view that elided into the mid-twentieth-century ‘consensus’ of privatist, individualist values unifying all levels of American society” (Young 43). Part of the difficulty of discussing the American class structure is the expansive and protean character of what was conceived of as the middling classes in the first century of the nation’s existence.¹⁷⁸ Stuart Blumin observes that “[t]hroughout the nineteenth-century, ‘middle class’ had multiple and conflicting meanings” (248), but that during the 1850s, “Americans did shift decisively...from a social taxonomy that referred primarily to each individual’s position within a hierarchical relation (a taxonomy of ‘rank’), to one that referred primarily to the existence of broadly homogeneous social categories (a taxonomy of ‘class’)” (249). Both Blumin and Young see taste and social values as central to the definition of an American middle class. “Gentility was the culture of the middle class, and can even be said to define it. This idea has some utility, since middle-class definition has been famously difficult to reach via the conventional criteria of work, income or political stance” (Young 5). The production and expression of these tastes and values was inextricable from literary representations of the urban centres in which class disparity was most pronounced.

Thus, part of the “gradual refinement of the term ‘middle class’” occurred in relation to “more or less sensationalized accounts of the polarization of the city into ever more inclusive

¹⁷⁷ Arguing for the necessity of studies on literary representations of poverty, Gavin Jones notes: “In their unusually statistical analysis of the breadth of articles that have appeared in *American Quarterly* since its inception in 1949, Larry Griffin and Maria Tempenis conclude that there is a long-standing bias in American studies toward the multicultural questions of gender, race, and ethnicity at the expense of analyses of social class – an emphasis on questions of identity and representation rather than on those of social structural position” (6).

¹⁷⁸ “There was...a fundamental, unresolved contradiction in the social standing of the majority of middling folk. The social degradation of manual work circumscribed the status of all artisans, but the independence of many, and the prosperity of a few, strained the very idea of a clearly differentiated set of social levels” (Blumin 35).

upper and lower classes” (Blumin 249). Representations of the slums as picturesque were among these less sensationalized accounts, and appealed to the growing “salaried middle class anxious about its own status,” offering “the healing properties identified with high culture” (Trachtenberg 145). In aestheticizing the lower classes (and at times mocking the upper classes), the urban picturesque contributed to the emergent understanding of a distinct American middle class. Moreover, the application of picturesque aesthetics to urban slums helped to assuage the anxiety embedded within middle-class identity, both by making the poor aesthetic objects and by entwining new forms of aesthetic and moral judgement. In much the same way as abolitionist novels appealed to middle-class values of domesticity and Christian virtue, depictions of poverty that were not merely sensational but sought to humanize the poor provided opportunities to express compassion and awareness of social issues, traits which were becoming central to an emergent bourgeois liberalism.¹⁷⁹

I have given this very brief overview of the complexities of class discourse in America to give a sense of the importance that aesthetic engagement with class disparity had with regards both to defining the middle class and to creating this class as one dependent for its existence on particular tastes and sentiments. In placing Riis at the forefront of this movement towards aesthetic and thus class recognition of the poor by the bourgeoisie, I follow Keith Gandal, whose *Virtues of the Vicious* traces a fundamental moral shift in America generated by the perception by the middle class of poverty as spectacle. Gandal identifies a change over the course of the 1890s

¹⁷⁹ David Leviatin, in his comprehensive Introduction to *How the Other Half Lives*, observes that “the desire for entertainment that combined serious subject matter with the appealing narrative flow characteristic of sentimental melodrama attracted people; interest in tales of the Other Half came from much the same source as did interest in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*” (29).

from the perception that poverty was caused by individual failings to one which considered “the importance of environmental or social factors in individual behavior” (Gandal 8),¹⁸⁰ and he sees *How the Other Half Lives* as being crucial to this shift:¹⁸¹

How the Other Half Lives... was the first book in in America on the subject [of slums] to contain pictures. Although [it] mostly focused on environmental causes of poverty and crime, it was also one of the first books to present ethnographic and psychological details that challenged traditional moralistic accounts, to talk about the separate “ways” of slum dwellers – which were not necessarily immoral in their difference – and to speak of the importance of “individuality” or self-esteem in addition to “moral character” (in the reformation of the poor). (Gandal 8)

The moral shift from an individual to a social theory of poverty is part of a broader cultural change, which encompassed “the decline of Protestant morality and the rise of an alternative ethics,” through which “[t]he valuable part of oneself has been redefined as something like

¹⁸⁰ The work of social reformer Jane Addams was also central to this changing perception. David Levine, in *Jane Addams and the Liberal Tradition* (1971), summarizes her views thus: “The poor were poor because at every turn they were prevented from being anything else. They were not only as good as the well-to-do; in some respects they were morally superior. Many were working to the point of exhaustion. Yet even if all adults in the family worked hard, spent money only for the necessities, including a little necessary recreation, income only barely met expenses” (128). Addams, a tireless lecturer and the founder of the Settlement House movement, was among the vanguard of social reformers promulgating this view of poverty as being socially constructed.

¹⁸¹ In *Staging the Slum, Slumming the Stage*, Westgate draws on Gandal in reading *How the Other Half Lives* as a work which helped to inaugurate a less moralistic view of the poor; Westgate helpfully summarizes this shift: “Under the Victorian [discursive] regime, poverty was defined by moral or individualistic theories that endorsed conservative suppositions.... Near the close of the century, though, this regime was undermined by historical, geographical, and philosophical developments, including the aggregation of the poor into separate districts, waves of new immigration, the depression of the 1890s, the rise of the science of sociology, and the publication of *How the Other Half Lives*” (6). Gavin Jones identifies a similar dynamic, arguing that poverty discourse contained an “unresolved conflict between reformist and antireformist positions, between environmental and individualistic explanations of chronic need – a tension that stemmed from the dilemma of confronting the catastrophic breakdown of equality within whiteness itself, as American-born men of working age visibly swelled the ranks of the unemployed after the crisis winter of 1893-94” (75-6). See also Robert Bremner, *From the Depths: The Discovery of Poverty in the United States* (1956).

individuality, feelings, or self-esteem, which need to be discovered and developed” (Gandal 7). The discovery and development of this individuality, in Gandal’s analysis, is related to the aesthetic discovery of the slums, which presented “alternative customs and exotic sights that provided excitement” (13), as well as “a heterodox model of self-esteem – the violent, swaggering tough” (13). Gandal reads this aesthetic fascination with poverty, as I do, as a response to prevalent fears about modern bourgeois life. Building on Lears’s discussion in *No Place of Grace* of “overcivilization,” Gandal argues that the desire among the bourgeoisie for greater spiritual and physical intensity generated an interest in the slums as part of an “effort to pursue excitement and vitality in and of themselves” (149). In contributing to the burgeoning class consciousness of the bourgeoisie, which was predicated on the ability to see inequality as not only or primarily the result of individual actions, the picturesque provided members of the middle class with a new mode of engagement with poverty: compassion for the poor – accessed primarily through aesthetic encounters – could function as affirmation of membership in the middle class.

Riis’s first use of the term “picturesque” exposes a fundamental tension in his work between the aesthetic and ethnographic interest of the slums, and an approach which depicts slums as sources of physical and moral hazard. The section “The Italian in New York” opens as follows:

Certainly a picturesque, if not very tidy, element has been added to the population in the “assisted” Italian immigrant who claims so large a share of public attention, partly because he keeps coming at such a tremendous rate, but chiefly because he elects to stay in New York, or near enough for it to serve as his base of operations, and here reproduces conditions of destitution and disorder which, set in the

framework of Mediterranean exuberance, are the delight of the artist, but in a matter-of-fact American community become its danger and reproach. (Riis 91)

The terms of picturesque aesthetics are set: disorder and destitution which, while Riis disavows it here, are sought throughout his work as sights to delight not only the artist in foreign lands but also in matter-of-fact New York.¹⁸² By terming the Italian immigrants picturesque, Riis provides tacit encouragement to his readers to view them as art, but he goes on to insist that such pleasures are dangerous social forces in an American context. He is an adamant proponent of housing reform, yet repeatedly describes dereliction as aesthetically pleasing. These paradoxical positions persist throughout the work. Riis begins the section on Italians with a warning about the dangers of dereliction, yet goes on to commend the Italians as being perceived as good tenants by slum landlords precisely because they do not complain about the miserable conditions of their housing. After a brief discourse providing an ethnographic study of the Italians' relish for living cheaply, albeit in squalor, and their fondness for gambling and its attendant violence within the Italian community, Riis goes on to proclaim that, "[w]ith all his conspicuous faults, the swarthy Italian immigrant has his redeeming traits" (95). Chief among these is his aesthetic appeal: "Their vivid and picturesque costumes lend a tinge of color to the otherwise dull monotony of the slums they inhabit. The Italian is gay, light-hearted, and if his fur is not stroked the wrong way, inoffensive as a child" (Riis 95). Such depictions clearly do set up urban ghettos as areas available for consumption as "local color" (Bramen, "Spectacle" 446). Moreover, the ability to consume this commodity is, through Riis's work, connected to an interest in

¹⁸² Gandal, Bertellini and others observe Riis's disappointment with Chinatown as picturesque locale, due to its cleanliness and the residents' proclivity for staying indoors rather than conducting their commercial and private lives in the open street.

sociological insights, a combination which makes aesthetic taste integral to becoming an informed citizen.

The dual function of pictorial sight in Riis's work, as both aesthetic and ethnographic instrument, foregrounds the role of the viewer in constructing her understanding of poverty. If dereliction is both aesthetically pleasing and socially dangerous, and if affluent citizens are encouraged both to consume and to reform the slums, what then are the moral or ethical claims poverty makes on genteel readers? Or, put another way, what is the relation constructed by *How the Other Half Lives* between observers of poverty and those they observe?¹⁸³ These questions cannot be fully understood without considering the role that picturesque aesthetics play in Riis's work. Gandal reads Riis's use of the picturesque as a means by which slums can be seen "as spectacle for its own sake" (62). By equating the picturesque with the spectacular, however, Gandal elides three of its main components: first, its inception as an aesthetic for the genteel classes; second, the affective quality of the picturesque, which is not predominantly excitement,

¹⁸³ This question is also significant in the context of Riis himself. In his autobiography, *The Making of an American* (1901), he writes of the process of taking some of his interior shots: "It is not too much to say that our party carried terror wherever it went. The flashlight of those days was contained in cartridges fired from a revolver. The spectacle of half a dozen strange men invading a house in the midnight hour armed with big pistols which they shot off recklessly was hardly reassuring, however sugary our speech, and it was not to be wondered at if the tenants bolted through windows and down fire-escapes wherever we went" (268). If part of Riis's process relied on the uninvited entrance to people's homes, another part appeared to require establishing some form of rapport with his subjects. Gandal contends that "if Riis is able to photograph toughs and to get them to confess their tricks, it is not because he threatens them with police force but because he offers them the possibility of a notoriety – and a confirmation – they seek" (Gandal 18); this suggests that Riis to some extent understood and could play upon the desires of those he sought to photograph. Szasz et al. contend that it was Riis's compassion for those in poverty that elevated his work from mere spectacularization to instruments of social reform; they observe that "Riis carefully posed some of his strongest images" (418), and argue that "the power of his photographs hinged to a great extent on the nature of his social vision" (419) – an argument which also suggests that he staged his pictures to maximise compassionate responses and minimize signs of cleanliness or order which he may have found in tenement districts. These various positions indicate the problematic position Riis occupied in relation to his objects of depiction: is his work expressive of sympathy he felt because he was himself an immigrant and because of his dedication to Christian ideals, or does it reveal the invasive and frightening tactics he employed and his alignment with a police force generally distrusted among tenement-dwellers? Arguably, as both invasive outsider and compassionate insider, Riis embodies the paradoxical stance generated by the picturesque: a desire to know about the conditions of poorer people by those whose presence in rough neighbourhoods both makes these areas spectacles and marks them as places in need of reform – a position which might itself be both welcome and offensive to those who inhabit them.

but curiosity and potentially sympathy; and third, the moral dimension to pictorial sight expounded in other nineteenth-century American literature. Given these facets of picturesque aesthetics, and Riis's depiction of slums as not merely dangerous or pitiable but also as picturesque in their vibrancy and communitarianism, the valences his work presents go beyond the merely spectacular. *How the Other Half Lives* offers the possibility for middle-class viewers to be transformed by the sight of suffering, and for this spectacle and the affective responses it generates to engender a liberal ethics predicated on the willingness to enter imaginatively into the hardships of strangers.

Let us look, then, at the aspects of the picturesque that indicate a more complex relation between viewer and viewed than one which simply provides entertainment. First, and most straightforwardly, the Gilded Age contexts in which picturesque representations of poverty appear suggest that the picturesque in late-nineteenth-century America functioned much as it did in England earlier in the century: as a type of code word by which those with moderate wealth could display aesthetic tastes that require a degree of cultural knowledge unavailable to those in lower social strata, yet accessible to those without great wealth. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, “[r]ecurrent cycles of boom and collapse” created a “public sense of crisis” (Trachtenberg 40).¹⁸⁴ For middle-class Americans constantly contending with the possibility of losing their social station, making the poor available for aesthetic consumption was a means of demonstrating cultural distinction. Leviatin puts it succinctly: “To define itself as a class, the new urban middle class needed to look at the new urban poor” (29). If, as Gandal, Bramen, and

¹⁸⁴ “An international ‘great depression’ from 1873 to 1896 afflicted all industrial nations with chronic overproduction and dramatically falling prices, averaging one-third on all commodities.... A severe Wall Street crash in 1873 triggered a round of bankruptcies and failures in the United States, six thousand businesses closing in 1874 alone, and as many as nine hundred a month folding in 1878. A perilously uneven business cycle continued for more than twenty years, affecting all sections of the economy” (Trachtenberg 39).

others claim, depictions of New York's slums as aesthetically interesting are "touristic" (Gandal 27), then the spectacles on offer are not only those presented by writers and photographers, but rather those inherent in the rough neighborhoods themselves, waiting to be perceived as picturesque by those with the aesthetic knowledge to do so. One of the central principles of picturesque aesthetics, and integral to their popularity, is that they "could be learned by anyone and applied to just about anything" (Bermingham, "Ready-to-Wear" 87). This is its appeal as travel literature, which prescribes a mode for viewing unfamiliar landscapes; it is important to remember that by the end of the nineteenth century, the term picturesque had "completely saturated the marketplace of guidebooks and travel narratives" (Bramen, "Spectacle" 444). By applying this term, this way of seeing, to poor neighborhoods, Riis's accounts and others like them function as "urban travel literature" (Gandal 34) – accounts which are read not only for the pleasure of the depictions they offer, but also as guide books for interested travelers. In helping to popularize the slum tour, which "became a full-scale industry during the closing decades of the nineteenth century" (Westgate 6), Riis's depictions of the urban picturesque came to function precisely this way. Riis and others who depicted the urban picturesque are thus not simply making spectacle of the slums, but educating the middle class on a new type of aesthetic experience in which they can participate by unifying a variety of rough objects into a pleasing whole.

To align picturesque representations of poverty with the type of spectacle enjoyed by the poor themselves (even if of themselves, a common feature of working-class theatre), is to disregard the class-defining work picturesque aesthetics have always played and to assume that those concerned about their unstable class position would identify their tastes with those from

whom they wish to distance themselves.¹⁸⁵ Aligning Riis's "touristic" presentation of the slums with the type of spectacular entertainment favored by the working class, Gandal argues that "Riis's appreciation of the picturesque, his desire for spectacular entertainment, was...a source of sympathy for the poor. It was something – perhaps even the main thing – that he and the poor had in common" (81). Gandal sees the bourgeois interest in spectacle as the point of sympathy between Riis's viewers and viewed, and in the context of a middle-class culture widely felt to be flaccid and constraining, the desire for intense experience yielded by the slums certainly bespeaks "an anxious desire for excitement" (Gandal 21). It is this desire which Gandal understands Riis and his readers to share with poorer people. Gandal argues that the "moment of greatest sympathy in the whole of the book" is Riis's portrait of two women who have chosen their slum life over decent work in the countryside because they "have to be where something is going on" (81). It is certainly the case that, as Gandal observes, in North America the "ethics of pleasure and excitement" (138) have by now overtaken "the traditional Protestant values of sobriety, discipline, chastity" (56) and that the roots of this "alternative morality" in America can be found in Gilded Age literature extolling the virtues of ghetto toughs and the vivid life of the streets – a phenomenon I discuss in the next chapter. Yet, while *How the Other Half Lives* does make available to the middle class the spectacle of the street which, according to Riis (and other middle-class writers including Howells and Stephen Crane) is one of the consolations of poverty, the ethic of pleasure is not the only, or the central, one this work fosters.

¹⁸⁵ Brodhead indicates the unlikelihood of middle-class people perceiving their interest in the slums as being a point of commonality between themselves and those who live in them: "a middle-class ethos anxious to differentiate itself from a lower order projects the value terms it uses to organize that difference into the literary realm, [and] fastens the opposition domestic fiction/ sensation fiction to the larger oppositions good society/bad society, respectable/nonrespectable, womanly/unwomanly, morally self-controlled/licentious. Through this process an aesthetic difference between once equally acceptable modes is made to express the moral difference between 'us' and 'them,' and the choices people make between now-separated writing worlds come to tell what 'kind' of people they are" (103).

While picturesque accounts of the slums can serve as travel guides, inducements to illicit pleasures, or representations of the excitements of the streets, they differ from accounts that “make gentlemen merrie” in their inclusion of suffering. The participation they invite is not only visual or physical engagement with derelict spaces, but also – and more importantly – affective engagement. The emotional tenor of picturesque art is, as Ruskin identified, “a certain under current of tragical passion – a vein of real human sympathy” (11). If it is excitement that seekers of the picturesque desire, it is “a sad excitement” (Ruskin 12). What does it mean to desire “sad excitement”? Such an emotion can certainly be considered sentimental, if we follow Michael Tanner’s influential definition of sentimental emotions as those “in which there was a pleasurable element, of however overlaid or involuted a sort” (132). This pleasure is part of what makes the social or political utility of sentimental art suspect. Consuming representations of trauma and experiencing the sorrowful emotions they induce can and often does produce a cathartic response which alleviates the suffering of the viewer, but does nothing for those suffering the injustices represented. As Berlant memorably phrases it: “The problem that organizes so much feeling then regains livable proportions, and the uncomfortable pressure of feeling dissipates, like so much gas” (“Subject” 52). Works like Riis’s, which provide aesthetically compelling depictions of suffering in order to incite an emotional response in those who consume it, who then might be able to produce social change, are problematic for the same reason: the pleasure of the picturesque is in many cases bound up with the pleasurable feeling of sympathy it can produce. Yet the pleasure of sad excitement seems different from that produced by the purely sensational – a type of thrill or horror that does not include a sense of kinship with the object of the spectacle, or any sense of responsibility for the suffering under view. As discussed above, works like Buntline’s *Mysteries and Miseries*, while purporting to incite moral

outrage by representing the ravages of poverty, are more likely to engender appalled fascination – excitement, certainly, but not one primarily characterized by sadness.

The spectacles of suffering in *How the Other Half Lives* bear closer relation to those depicted in sentimental literature, such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or *The Lamplighter*, works which explicitly aim “to educate their readers in Christian perfection and to move the nation as a whole closer to the city of God” (Tompkins 149). Like Stowe and Warner, Riis was a devout Christian, whose “dream of constructing a temporal Christian commonwealth . . . informed his progressive view of reform and inspired his crusade” (Leviatin 20). The crusade was not only against corrupt landlords or unscrupulous employers, but, perhaps most fiercely, for the hearts of middle-class Americans. To construct a virtuous nation required the prevention of vice and sin bred by the slums, as well as the creation of sympathy for those suffering in a brutal environment, which is the specific work that narratives and photographs of poverty can accomplish. Destitution, in Riis's work, is picturesque precisely because it is not sensational, but rather common, and tragic, and thus deserving of sympathy. In his portrayal of the poor driven to their rooftops in extremely hot weather, Riis writes:

With the first hot night in June police dispatches, that record the killing of men and women by rolling off roofs and window-sills while asleep, announce that the time of greatest suffering among the poor is at hand. It is in hot weather, when the life indoors is well-nigh unbearable with cooking, sleeping, and working, all crowded into the small rooms together, that the tenement expands, reckless of all restraint. Then a strange and picturesque life moves upon the flat roofs. (165)

Framing these deaths as recorded by police makes them read as commonplace, and this unremarkable nature makes them all the more productive of sadness and outrage. The chapter

goes on to describe mothers and boys trying to escape the stifling tenements and to chronicle the death of children endemic to hot summer weather in the slums. The lives depicted here are picturesque in their raggedness and suffering as well as in the communitarian practices that slum housing necessitates. Exposed to the viewer's perception, this poverty is aesthetically compelling in its strangeness, vibrancy, and intense struggle for life, but it would also be a profoundly calloused reader who could find people's deaths – particularly those of children – pure spectacle, devoid of any claim for compassion. Like the sentimental fictions of the previous generation, Riis's urban picturesque "imagines a democratic world based in the communitarian values of common feeling, collective action, and public responsibility" (Silverman 5). While *How the Other Half Lives* certainly aimed at instigating action and a sense of public responsibility for the horror of urban slums, arguably its most profound and enduring effect was to inculcate within the bourgeoisie a sense of common feeling with structurally distanced others. With the abolition of slavery, the suffering of the urban poor became a new – and continuing – cause to be championed by liberal middle-class citizens.¹⁸⁶

Genteel Americans of the Gilded Age would have been familiar not only with the sentimental literature intended to produce right feeling in its readers, but also with the moral dynamics of aesthetic vision as promulgated by Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. For many members of the educated American bourgeoisie, pictorial sight could not be simply an aesthetic proclivity. The work of Emerson in particular – luminary of the liberal middle classes – would

¹⁸⁶ Leviatin notes that, while Riis spent the rest of his life (he died in 1914) "lecturing extensively throughout the country, writing numerous articles and several books ... [n]one of this work, with the possible exception of his autobiography, received the attention of *How the Other Half Lives*" (9). The book's immense popularity was, no doubt, in part due to its novelty at the time of its publication and the proliferation of other sources of information and entertainment about the poor. But it also suggests that the power of this work was less its ability to produce an active and engaged contingent of middle-class social reformers than its ability to engender a structure of feeling within its readership that was satisfied by the consumption of aesthetic products about poverty.

have made it appear both immoral and personally degrading to apprehend the world as “mere tinsel” (16). As we have seen, to make the world spectacle is, for Emerson, both to bring into view one’s own subjective position and potentially to unify that subjectivity with the objects under view. For many cultivated Americans, observing poverty was an opportunity to experience an imaginative connection with suffering, and thus to puncture the suffocating membrane of middle-class comfort. Writing about William James’s essay “What Makes a Life Significant” (1899), Trachtenberg discusses James’s response to a week at an educational retreat in upstate New York which had been created to disseminate the Arnoldian ideals of Sweetness and Light: “The same nagging and nervous discontent which drove ... the offspring of Northern elite families into cults of arts and crafts, militarism, and Orientalism, ... drove [William] James away from Chautauqua, ‘wishing for heroism and the spectacle of human nature on the rack’” (141). James’s desire for spectacles of suffering should recall Adam Smith’s famous lines:

Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations [...] By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. (3)

It is not spectacle as entertainment James seeks, but contact with profound, intense human experience, and specifically that of physical suffering. Spectacle in James’s essay serves as the

medium for imagination, for a conception of another's suffering through which to revitalize his own sense of life as significant.¹⁸⁷

Nothing in the “middle-class paradise” (James, qtd. in Trachtenberg 140) of culturally edifying activities provides this sense of vitality, and this deficiency makes the spectacle of hardship necessary. It provides the basis for an imaginative leap into a more fully alive body, and thus for sympathy with those whose experiences fall outside the physically and spiritually pallid ones allotted to the middle class. Significantly, this edifying experience presents itself to James in a moment of pictorial sight:

He finds that spectacle, as he leaves the vicinity of the assembly, in an unexpected place: through the window of the speeding train, in a flashing glimpse of “a workman doing something on the dizzy edge of a sky-scaling iron construction.” What is unexpected is the discovery of “great fields of heroism lying round about me [...] in the daily lives of the laboring classes,” in physical work, in cattle yards and mines, on vessels and lumber rafts [...] James realizes at once that heroism need not be confined to the romance of battle. His soul fills with “a wave of sympathy with the common life of common men [...]”.] Recounting this

¹⁸⁷ Ross Posnock identifies a similar impulse in the writing of Henry James. William warned his brother that, upon returning from Europe “he would likely find America too loud and vulgar, and that it ‘might yield ... little besides painful shocks.’ Yet Henry insisted that it was ‘absolutely *for* ... the Shocks in general ... that I nurse my infatuation” (84). *The American Scene* (1904), the work Henry James wrote after experiencing these shocks, exhibits little pleasure in them, despite what Posnock terms James’s “traumatophilia” (255). The picturesque does not function for James as an aesthetic framework for perceiving America; when he uses the term, it is to observe that such an aesthetics makes neither more interesting nor more knowable the sights he observes: “It is indubitably a ‘great’ bay, a great harbour, but no one item of the romantic, or even of the picturesque as commonly understood, contributes to its effect” (73). James rejects the term outright as an appropriate description for the New York port: “the candour of its avidity and the freshness of its audacity” (76), are akin to the qualities Whitman perceives as picturesque; for James, however, the port is neither grimy nor colourful enough to merit this term. Nonetheless, James’s interest in the aesthetic possibilities of trauma or painful shocks is suggestive of the same impulse to witness hardship expressed in William James’s speech.

extraordinary moment, James urges the students in his audience to resist that endemic blindness to the “lives of the other half,” that American condition by which “everybody remains outside everybody else’s sight.” (Trachtenberg 141)

The frame of the train’s window provides “the change in [his] point of view” that Emerson in “Nature” offers as the basis of pictorial sight (33), a moment of visual apprehension that begets a sense both of one’s stable subjectivity and the possibility of its transcendence. Aestheticizing the common man allows James to sympathize with him. He does not himself, it seems, wish to labor in the fields or mines, but feels compelled to witness it in order to feel that life is more than a series of civilizing lectures and stifling afternoon teas. In *Fruits of Sorrow: Framing our Attention to Suffering*, Elizabeth V. Spelman gives those who experience suffering with which others wish to be associated the name “spiritual bellhops”; they are “carriers of experience from which others can benefit” (1). This seems an important part of the function Riis’s slum-dwellers served. James’s essay is written against “the frustrations, the routine, and the sheer dullness of an urban-industrial culture” (Higham 177) that predominated throughout the 1890s. Witnessing the spectacle of the “lives of the other half” is a cure for the ill of the age – asphyxiation by parlour-room air. This cure results not simply from awareness that the other half exists, or from making them aesthetic objects, but from the sympathy with them that the spectacle of their lives, their daily common struggle, evokes.

This moral dimension of Riis’s representations of the poor is foregrounded by the specific information he provides about the nature of their suffering, its social and economic causes and effects. Riis’s picturesque Italians are colorful, but they are also exploited by landlords, middle-men and padrones (Riis 92-93); they bring their predilection for filth with them from Italy, according to Riis, but the conditions in New York’s slums are still squalid and

unwholesome: the famous picture “In the Home of an Italian Rag-Picker, Jersey Street” depicts a mother cradling a swaddled infant in a cellar, surrounded by barrels and bundles of rags.¹⁸⁸ Such an image does not convey excitement, and the only pleasure it could be said to proffer is that of knowing about and potentially feeling compassion for the suffering of other human beings. The information to which it gives visual support places judgment on these conditions as resulting not only from the failings of certain individuals or even ethnic groups but also from structural problems, most prominently city planners and unscrupulous landlords.¹⁸⁹

In his capacity as social reformer, and in the portions of *How the Other Half Lives* where Riis actively advocates for social change, he expands the function of picturesque aesthetics. By applying this term to images propagated with the desire to instigate social reform, Riis builds on the moral dimension of pictorial sight articulated by the Transcendentalists by suggesting that such feeling should, in fact, produce some form of engagement with the specific problems his images reveal. In their examination of Riis as America’s “first documentary photographer,” Ferenc M. Szasz, Ralph F. Bogardus, and Ralph H. Bogardus contend that his photographs “demonstrate[d] tenement conditions to the nation in a way which made them irrefutable” (411). The irrefutability of poverty was, however, arguably less important – and less novel, at least for

¹⁸⁸ By representing the debasement of the home and of motherhood, Riis’s photograph would have been particularly abhorrent to genteel readers. Many scholars have observed the significance of the home as a place of sanctity in nineteenth-century writing, and the ways in which the suffering associated with poverty is almost always represented as the lack of such a home. See in particular Amy Schrager Lang, *The Syntax of Class: Writing Inequality in Nineteenth-Century America*; Amy Kaplan, *The Social Construction of American Realism*, especially pages 47-51. Gandal treats this subject at length: see especially pages 71-81, 201.

¹⁸⁹ See in particular Riis’s explanation of the origins of the tenement: the wealthy saw opportunity in the old downtown houses, partitioning them “without regard for light or ventilation,” and “thus the dark bedroom, prolific of untold depravities, came into the world” (8). While elsewhere Riis himself opines that the immigrants bring their disorderliness with them, here he observes that “so illogical is human greed” that the landlords themselves often blame the dereliction of their tenements on the “filthy habits” of their tenants (9). Riis’s work draws on many of the tropes of Gilded Age reformers by focusing on the immorality and vice presumed to emanate from slum environments; what is different is his insistence that for these conditions, the wealthy bear some, if not most, of the responsibility.

urbanites – than the affective frame Riis provides for the apprehension of the poor. His photographs, many of which portray people in their homes, appear alongside text drawing on statistics and expressing moral outrage;¹⁹⁰ the text works against the images merely providing pleasure or instigating fear, making them portals into lives adversely affected by circumstances that wealthier people can help to change. Szasz et al. examine earlier photographic excursions among the poor, such as those by Sigmund Krausz and Frances B. Johnston, and find that these images and the text accompanying them lack “social vision” (413) and “reveal virtually no sympathy” (414) for their subjects: Krausz, for instance, “said he hoped the reading public would find ‘the same pleasure in looking them over as I had’” (qt. in Szasz et al. 415).¹⁹¹ Krausz’s images, like Riis’s, aestheticize raggedness and dereliction, but they derive from the Gilpinian vision of the picturesque which exists separately from moral or affective responses. The work of photographers like Krausz and Johnston indicate the competing and overlapping responses to American poverty as both a new form of aesthetic pleasure and as a profound social problem in need of redress. By combining sociological and ethnographic detail with photographs of people and places he describes as picturesque, Riis operates on both levels, aligning aesthetic pleasure, moral sentiment, and work for social reform.¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ “Riis intermingled Protestant gospel with sociology, stark melodrama with appalling statistics, romantic characterization with interviews, and caricatured settings with specific sites of inquiry – urban neighborhoods that outsider audiences were encouraged to explore for themselves” (Dowling 21).

¹⁹¹ The quotation is from Krausz’s *Street Types of Chicago* (1892).

¹⁹² Szasz et al. note that after 1900, Riis’s lectures, which he gave across the country, underwent a subtle change: “instead of closing his lantern slide shows with a picture of Jesus and a call to action, he concluded by showing Mulberry Bend’s transformation into a park, and other examples of social progress” (435).

Yet, then as now, caring would not always, or even most often, produce active engagement.¹⁹³ As we will see, the term picturesque becomes a type of shorthand not only for a way of seeing poverty but also for discussions of how the bourgeoisie *feel toward* the poor. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these feelings are often ambivalent and conflicted. Gandal sees Riis's work as conveying "conflicting messages": the poverty represented there is productive *either* of sympathy, revulsion, or fascination. For Gandal, these responses to poverty are incompatible: "intimate sympathy or condemnation versus remote fascination. This is an absolute choice between ethics" (72). Such a pronouncement, however, feels too absolute, particularly in a discussion of the picturesque, which arguably collapses these two ethics. In reading about slums the middle-class person does not become a spectator like the reader of dime novels, drawn purely by cheap thrills, and such prurient interest would have been anathema to the many members of the middle class who read Riis's work for its information about pressing social issues. Nor does Riis convey a pure exoticism meant to keep the Other separate and aesthetically distanced; as Gandal observes, "[v]isions of brotherhood and spectacles of curiosities both serve to reassure the reader that the Chinese man is perhaps not ultimately a threat to home and country. Aesthetic assimilation has its practical benefits" (72). If the poor are objects of entertainment, they are also, paradoxically, humanized by their aestheticization, and become objects of pity and compassion. What purpose is served, however, by such compassion, if the genteel reader is not moved to "some form of political activism: moral and social justice (better housing) or social

¹⁹³ What in fact constitutes active engagement is a topic too large to consider here. Giving to charity might qualify, but it changes none of the underlying conditions that necessitate such help. Voting is a form of engagement – one a surprising number of people decline – but it, too, might be seen to have limited efficacy in restructuring basic inequalities. Learning or writing about an issue is itself a form of active engagement, the one arguably most likely to be produced by picturesque aesthetics. But the limitations of this approach are, I think, self-evident. Recently, the term "virtue signaling" has come into popular use as a way of indicating the gap between a person's (or corporation's) performance of virtue and their actual behaviors. It is, interestingly, a term initially defined in this way by a right-leaning thinker, but has been avidly embraced by left-leaning writers. See James Bartholomew, "I invented 'virtue signalling'. Now it's taking over the world."

defense (better policing or further immigrant restriction)” (Gandal 71)? In the absence of such acts, does the viewer merely apprehend this suffering as spectacle? Or is it more likely that the compassion, or humanitarian sensibilities, incited in the viewer often moves her to feeling rather than action? Images of suffering produce an appetite for justice, but not the recipe.¹⁹⁴ What viewers of aestheticized suffering are left with, then, is remote sympathy: the understanding that awful things are occurring, a sense that they are unjust, and a sorrow for those suffering this injustice that nonetheless does not incite the reader to undertake direct or sustained actions to ameliorate it.

This remote sympathy becomes a bulwark of the liberal character. If “liberalism works less as a conscious, systematic ideology than as a structure of affect regarding social being” (Newfield 12), then depictions of social injustice must be part of what conditions these affective responses. As Richard Rorty has influentially argued, liberalism is predicated upon “the imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers,” a process which “is a matter of detailed description of what unfamiliar people are like and of redescription of what we ourselves are like. This is a task not for theory but for genres such as ethnography, the journalist’s report, the comic book, the docudrama, and, especially, the novel” (xvi). Riis’s ethnographic reportage opened a new path by which middle-class Americans could imaginatively connect themselves to “strange people.” Designating life in the slums as picturesque functions as an invitation for

¹⁹⁴ Riis’s work may provide a partial exception to this separation or partial provision. In identifying so clearly what he perceived as the causes for the ills he represents, he does offer those interested in reform a fairly clear roadmap for where to begin redressing these issues. In a sense, charity pamphlets seek to the same – namely, to present an image of suffering and a location to send the check. Where Riis’s work was aimed at structural reform, however, most nonprofits are trying to ameliorate immediate suffering rather than to intervene in the larger causes that produce it. By no means am I arguing that this is an unworthy aim, nor that the salve to consciousness which such giving might provide does more harm than good; and indeed, I am skeptical of nonprofits, such as Plan International, which does make structural change part of its mandate. In the Conclusion I discuss further what might be considered sustained engagement with social issues, and whether it is possible or desirable that such actions operate beyond aesthetics.

middle-class readers not to look away in revulsion, or to leave the suffering found there to social workers or police. By including the details of indignities and injustices suffered by those in poverty, Riis constructs this looking not as mere dispassionate, spectacular consumption of quaint or exotic others, but rather as a condition of actively constructing a sense of one's society. John Higham, in his influential essay "The Reorientation of American Culture in the 1890s," argues that "[t]he equipment of liberalism with a collective social ethic constituted the principal achievement of social thought both in England and in America in the 1890s" (185).

Undoubtedly, many more people read *How the Other Half Lives* than were moved by it to take up active work among the poor; but the continuing interest of the bourgeoisie, through the Progressive Era, in representations of poverty attests to an abiding social ethic that valued knowledge about and compassion for socially constructed suffering. By uniting aesthetic and moral responses to urban poverty, and insisting that bearing witness to the suffering experienced by the poor was the duty of the better-off, Riis's work helped to bring this liberal ethic into being.

Cosmopolitanism at Low Prices

Riis contributed to the popular interest in ghettos not only through the wildly successful publication of *How the Other Half Lives* and his visibility on the lecture circuit, but also by sparking a journalistic interest in the urban picturesque. To take one prominent example, the Jewish market (first explored by Whitman) becomes a common excursion for journalists, whose proclivity for the sights on view there would doubtless have been influenced by passages in *How the Other Half Live* such as this one, taken from the section "Jewtown":

Thursday night and Friday morning are bargain days in the “Pig-market.” Then is the time to study the ways of this peculiar people to the best advantage. A common pulse beats in the quarters of the Polish Jews and in the Mulberry Bend, though they have little else in common.... Friday brings out all the latent color and picturesqueness of the Italians, as of these Semites. The crowds and the common poverty are the bonds of sympathy between them. The Pig-market is in Hester Street, extending either way from Ludlow Street, and up and down the side streets two or three blocks, as the state of trade demands. The name was given to it probably in derision, for pork is the one ware that is not on sale in the Pig-market. There is scarcely anything else that can be hawked from a wagon that is not to be found, and at ridiculously low prices. (Riis 135-136)

The invitation to “study the ways” of a “peculiar people” frames the depiction as ethnography, but the immediate move into their “picturesqueness,” the precise directions for finding them, and the mention of “low prices” make it a tourist’s guide.¹⁹⁵ Moving through the crowd, Riis is less a student of ethnically unique practices than a *flâneur* enjoying the vibrancy of a street scene. His pictorial sight is not, as it will be in work by later slum writers, an invitation either to transcend class boundaries and feel a sense of unity with the residents there, or to attend to the act of viewing them aesthetically. It is, rather, productive of a Bourdieuvian aesthetic distance, in which the genteel observer can learn to see any object as potentially productive of an artistic effect, and in so doing, demarcate his higher class status. Moreover, the combination of aesthetic

¹⁹⁵ The peculiar wares and the bargains to be had in “Jewtown” markets are a recurrent trope in journalism about the area. See for instance, “Keeping in Style” *New York Tribune* August 26, 1900; “The Delights of Haggling” *New York Tribune* July 28, 1901. Collected in *Portal to America: The Lower East Side 1870-1925*, ed. Allon Schoener. Henry Holt, 1967.

pleasure with ethnographic detail functions to make knowledge about class or ethnic others part of the cultural capital possessed by, and indicative of, the genteel viewer.

Eight years later, journalists were still describing “the picturesque markets of Hester, Ludlow, and Essex Street” (Lyell 14). In “Foreign Types of New York Life,” a *New York Times* writer informs readers that “[t]o witness a sight that rivals any of the street market scenes of Europe in primitive picturesqueness one must visit the Hestor [sic] Street market on Thursday evenings or any time on Friday [...] These are the places where one might study intelligently types of life scarcely found elsewhere in America” (Lyell 14). The tone is congenial, treating the reader as a friendly acquaintance to whom one would enthuse about a pleasurable trip, and the picturesqueness of the destination is its main attraction. The phrase “study intelligently” tidily creates a community of informed insiders whose interest in the ways of primitive peoples is taken for granted. This is a touristic and positive example of writing about the Jews, in which the picturesque connotes vibrancy and quaintness, and the opportunity for an enlightening view of “types” foreign to genteel Americans. The fact that a near-identical article was published in the same paper the preceding year – “The Ghetto Market, Hester Street” points out the area’s “charm and attractiveness to the student of mankind” (56) – indicates the sustained interest throughout the decade in the “life, manners, and customs” of the Jews (“The Ghetto Market” 55). Moreover, the author sells this tourist destination in part on its cheapness: “No extensive steamship fares need be paid in order to visit this American ghetto”; the “interested observer” (“The Ghetto Market” 55) whom the piece is meant to interest can express his cultivated tastes simply by walking through the Lower East Side.

In this version of the picturesque, the aesthetic functions much as it did for the Briton travelling in Wales or Scotland, encountering quaint local types, except that, as Bramen observes,

the Others being observed are also, through aesthetically mediated encounters, becoming part of an emergent cosmopolitanism. “By making the alienation of the rag picker less alienating for the viewer, these tours [of urban ghettos] transformed the shock of modernity into a mild surprise” (“Spectacle” 456). To this observation I would only add that for members of the bourgeoisie, the modern, cosmopolitan character they were cultivating would have meant not only seeing “class disparity and ethnic heterogeneity [as] potentially pleasant aspects of the modern experience” (Bramen, “Spectacle” 444), but also being the type of person who reads about these issues in *The New York Times*. As Brodhead has found, literary taste was “a prime sign of class difference” (103). Consuming articles about the urban picturesque demarcated one’s class affiliation, and because such articles depicted the specific modes of life among poorer people, also helped to produce class consciousness among the bourgeoisie.¹⁹⁶ That these *Times* articles invite readers to study Jewish immigrant types indicates a community of readers being educated in class-appropriate sentiments toward the other half. The picturesque ghetto as it appears in such articles requires little affective investment – depictions of suffering are minimal or absent – but it does require a degree of liberal tolerance for peculiar sights, smells, and modes of living. Thus, to be a cultivated member of the Gilded Age bourgeoisie was, such writing suggests, to acquire a tasteful interest in and broad-mindedness about these interesting specimens of foreign cultures.

Such benign curiosity did not, however, characterize all the writing about the picturesque Jewish markets. As Riis’s work does, newspaper articles by turns evoke interest in immigrants’ charming ways and disgust for the squalor in which they live. A *Times* article from 1892

¹⁹⁶ The literary sketch, which proliferated in large part due to the “explosion of magazine and newspaper publication,” “became a staple in the newly forming literary marketplace, gaining commercial and critical currency, while proving to be a product and agent of competing definitions of ‘the literary’ as well as a vehicle for working out the various cultural and socioeconomic issues” shaping nineteenth-century America (Hamilton 14).

promising to present “Picturesque Incidents of the Descent into Essex Street”¹⁹⁷ provides an account of the raiding of rotten food from the vendors: “Yesterday was market day, the day before the Jewish Sabbath, and the tenements had vomited what they held into the narrow old street.” In this decidedly unsympathetic report, children are found “swarming like emmets,” “with faces besmeared and dirty” (“Raiding Street Stands” 8). Through persistent use of animal imagery, the author presents his subjects as irreclaimably other: they “squalled like cats”; one woman “scuttles like a rat.” He forecloses the possibility of compassion by making bleak comedy of what was clearly tragedy for the vendors and their customers: one man, whose entire stock is taken, “howled with anguish and picked up mud from the street and cast it upon his forehead. He swore, entreated, fought, and wept salt tears.” The consternation caused by the raids is not due to the impoverishment that makes better fare impossible, but because “This people has a fondness for eggs that are spoiled” (“Raiding Street Stands” 8). The term picturesque here is curious: it seems to designate that such incidents are worth observing – they present a “confusion wonderful to see” – and the lighthearted tone with which the author describes the scene aligns him with the detached *flâneur* who delights in witnessing the sights of the city, as opposed to the serious-minded charity writer of a generation past. The moral condemnation he metes out, however, also indicates that the slums are a serious health problem, and that, while amusing to read about, they must be appropriately invigilated and punished when not in accordance with the city’s laws. The term also suggests that the concept of representing slum life as amusing spectacle – even if disgusting when seen up close – has become a consistent feature of urban life for the bourgeoisie and that the *Times* readership might have been

¹⁹⁷ Amusingly, this article appears next to an advertisement for Royal Baking Powder, “unequaled for purity, strength, and wholesomeness.”

encouraged to preserve a sense of revulsion alongside their remote sympathy and condescending pleasure in immigrants' quaintness.

The expansion of picturesque aesthetics effected by Riis's work was short-lived. While the term remained in popular use as a descriptor for slums into the early twentieth century, its association with a kind of caring that could also be socially useful quickly gave way to a more ambivalent meaning. In the writing of H.C. Bunner, Brander Matthews, Hutchins Hapgood, and William Dean Howells, the picturesque functions as an index both of desire by the genteel for the rough and of the limited understanding which aesthetic responses to poverty generate in wealthier people. Riis himself disavowed the term as an appropriate way to describe American ghettos. In an article published in *Century* in 1896, "Light in Dark Places: A Story of the Better New York," Riis writes, "New World poverty is not often picturesque. It lacks the leisurely setting, the historical background. Starvation by steam is not popular. Tenement-house squalor never had any other interest than the human one, demanding instant remedy in action" (252). Such a statement suggests that in advocating for social reform Riis found that the aestheticization of slums and the implementation of remedies for their problems were at odds – that knowing about and feeling for suffering did not necessarily induce people to intervene in its causes. This gap between knowledge and action is the point of conception for liberal guilt and for the irony that makes it bearable.

Chapter Four

Awkward Discussions of Awkward Positions: Sympathy, Irony, and Mild Debauchery in Genteel Writing about the Poor

The prominence of picturesque aesthetics in writing about New York's ghettos entrenched its role in structuring both American class distinctions and the moral and affective responses of wealthier people towards poorer ones. The emergent cosmopolitanism engendered by art that depicted poor and immigrant populations as interesting specimens of city life rather than as merely morally deficient creatures solidified in popular writing of the 1890s, which took for granted the aesthetic interest of rough urban areas and their inhabitants. Narratives of the urban picturesque have been generally derided as romanticized and unscrupulously exploitative depictions of ghetto life, and it is true that this aesthetic framework keeps in shadow the gruesome realities of the slums. This chapter argues, however, that in the context of picturesque aesthetics as they evolved in America, narratives which use the picturesque to describe the slums are not simply designating them as aesthetically interesting or even as potential tourist sites. In works by H.C. Bunner, Brander Matthews, and Hutchins Hapgood, the spectatorial pleasure of the *flâneur* evolves into a complex interaction with rough people and places: class consciousness both makes aesthetic taste explicitly a demarcation of social position and exposes the ethical problems inherent in aestheticizing poverty. These works grapple with the ineffectuality of remote sympathy, and with the question of whether sympathetic observation of others' hardship can foster a more ethical relation to structurally distanced others. As in the works of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, in many of the sketches I will examine below aestheticizing the rough and the common functions not only as critique of a refined and falsified bourgeoisie but also as

offering a way to transcend the limitations imposed by this social position on the scope of one's understanding and experience.

The Organ Grinder and the Dull Dinner: Studies in Aestheticizing Poverty

The combination of moral opprobrium and aesthetic pleasure evident in *How the Other Half Lives* and in newspaper reports from the ghetto provides a sense of the readership to whom H.C. Bunner and Brander Matthews would have addressed their collections of sketches. Bunner, widely popular in the Gilded Age, has not been of much interest to scholars of that era, and when he is discussed, it is invariably in the context of his "ethnic tourism" (Westgate 122) and the necessarily superficial representations of poverty that such tourism could provide. Matthews, a more prolific and prominent figure (he was an eminent professor of dramatic literature at Columbia University, prominent literary critic, and close friend of Theodore Roosevelt), has fallen into almost equal obscurity, and for similar reasons: both Bunner and Matthews express views of subaltern people which, while progressive for their time, became embarrassing in the Progressive Era (McElrath 92).¹⁹⁸ Both writers provided fascinated accounts of New York's ghettos, which take their aesthetic pleasures and the propensity of genteel people to enjoy them as matters of fact. The stories provide little useful information about the lives of poor people,

¹⁹⁸ Lawrence J. Oliver, in *Brander Matthews*, calls him "one of the most prominent and influential American men of letters during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (xi). Oliver traces the decline of Matthews's reputation to the advent of the Young Intellectuals, who "revolt[ed] against the Genteel Tradition in the years surrounding World War I.... It was, of course, George Santayana who in 1911 coined the phrase 'Genteel Tradition,' in his famous essay, 'The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy.' According to Santayana, the Genteel Tradition was the heir of Calvinism and Transcendentalism, but it had lost the passionate intensity of the former and the 'calmly revolutionary' spirit of the latter; the result was a vapid idealism, which Santayana personified as a senile grandmother smiling serenely at a terrible world" (xiii). Oliver argues that, despite the elements of this negatively conceived gentility evident in Matthews's work, characterizing him in this way ignores many aspects of his thinking that were at odds with the literary establishment and which militated against the conservatism and elitism which his work was seen to espouse. The two stories under discussion here indicate these two facets of Matthews's writing – both the sentimentalism and its naïve (or callous) view of class inequality, and an effort to critique and challenge the genteel perspective.

and they make no admonishments to the wealthy to help them. What makes these collections interesting is not the way that the authors represent the poor, but rather how they represent bourgeois aesthetic interest in poverty, which they do with a forthrightness seen neither before nor since. Moreover, both authors figure pictorial sight as producing a materially ineffectual sympathy: Bunner's work suggests that being able to aestheticize the poor is necessary for morally virtuous sentiments, but offers no indication that such sentiments can produce social change, while Matthews's presents the picturesque as merely an effete and ethically compromised predilection. These collections both suggest that seeking out views of poverty does not and cannot generate real understanding of structurally distanced others, and use the picturesque to frame discussions of genteel attitudes and responsibilities towards poorer people.

The first story in Bunner's *Urban and Suburban Sketches* (1893) serves as an object lesson in how genteel people should feel towards the poor.¹⁹⁹ He begins "Jersey and Mulberry" with a letter to the editor of a newspaper written by a lady made cranky by the sounds of an organ-grinder below her window. She calls organ-grinders "pestilential beggars" and derides city authorities for granting them licenses and for their "fellow-feeling of vulgarity with the mob" (3). Bunner then observes: "Now certainly that was not a good letter to write, and is not a

¹⁹⁹ That Bunner uses the form of the sketch suggests not only the personal and subjective nature of his narratives, or the narrator's "dual authority of authentic participation and urbane detachment" (Hamilton 20), but also places him in a tradition of authorship aligned with the edification of the middle classes. Hamilton considers the role of the literary sketch in reifying middle-class moral authority and class position (36-41). She cites, in particular, the influence of David Hume's argument, in "Of Refinement in the Arts," for a fusion of "leisure and work, the arts and the economy, learning and social interaction": "The result of such arguments as Hume's is that leisure, consumption, and, as a particular example, literary forms that entertainingly educate could be understood, over the course of the eighteenth century, as contributors to a strong economy and republican forms of government. Thus, by the end of the century, pleasure and leisure had become reified as ends in themselves, both the rights and the tokens of one's middle-class status. To write or read for pleasure then, signaled one's membership in the 'moral aristocracy' of the bourgeoisie" (39). Bunner's sketches testify that his leisure is also part of the work of being a sophisticated member of bourgeois society, and they depict social interactions which for the author demonstrate more and less appropriate moral attitudes towards classed others.

pleasant letter to read; but the worst of it is, I am afraid that you can never make the writer of it understand why it is unfair and unwise and downright cruel. For I think we can figure out the personality of that writer pretty easily” (4-5). The woman Bunner characterizes as a “nice old or middle-aged lady, unmarried of course,”²⁰⁰ with a good fortune, and subject to nervous headaches. It was in her state of nervous prostration that the organ-grinder appeared beneath her window, and, rather than sending the maid down with a dime and a request that the man play elsewhere, she sent her down to threaten him with imprisonment. The woman is already unsympathetic, somewhat ridiculous, and not likely to inspire in readers the desire to identify with her. Bunner’s next move, however, elevates the sketch from crude satire into the morality tale it becomes:

Later in the afternoon the old lady drove out, and the fresh air did her a world of good, and she stopped at a toy store and bought some trifles for sister Mary's little girl, who had the measles. Then she came home, and after dinner she read Mr. Jacob Riis's book, “How the Other Half Lives”; and she shuddered at the picture of the Jersey Street slums on the title page, and shuddered more as she read of the fourteen people packed in one room, and of the suffering and squalor and misery of it all. And then she made a memorandum to give a larger check to the charitable society next time. Then she went to bed, not forgetting first to read her nightly chapter in the gospel of the carpenter's son of Nazareth. And she had quite forgotten all about the coarse and unchristian words she had written in the letter.... (6-7)

Her heartlessness toward the organ-grinder is placed in relation to two increasingly distant,

²⁰⁰ His comment about her spinsterhood, while tiresome in its misogyny, is interesting only in its suggestion that her lack of a family makes her less susceptible to sympathetic responses to others.

suffering others: her sick niece, and the slum-dwellers as presented by Riis's book. Readers can therefore no longer accuse her of mere selfishness, but might begin to see her actions as part of a larger social context, one in which caring for others is a duty which even crotchety old ladies recognize. Her lack of feeling is also held up against her Christian virtue, figured here as the teachings of a carpenter's son, himself poor and preaching the gospel of helping the poor. The passage makes a pointed comment about the way *How the Other Half Lives* was received – it is after-dinner reading for comfortable people, and reminds them of their duty toward the poor. Her perusal of Riis also suggests that the work his book accomplished among the gentility was not necessarily to engender actual sympathy for suffering others but perhaps to garner greater donations to charity. Bunner's lightly mocking tone corrals readers to his narrator's side of the debate about organ-grinders, inviting sympathy with his perspective and making distasteful one less compassionate. Finally, the woman's shuddering at the represented misery suggests that she takes no pleasure from the photographs, and cannot bring pictorial sight to such rough objects.

The woman's response to Riis's depictions – revulsion rather than interest – is connected to her lack of sympathy. To be able to bring pictorial sight to the slums is in Bunner's work an aspect of caring about the people who live there. When Bunner's narrator appears shortly thereafter, he makes clear his position in relation to the poor as both spatial and affective:

Now, I have no doubt that when that organ-grinder went home at night, he and his large family laid themselves down to rest in a back room of the Jersey Street slum, and if it be so, I may sometimes see him when I look out of a certain window of the great red-brick building where my office is, for it lies on Mulberry Street, between Jersey and Houston. My own personal and private window looks out on Mulberry Street. It is in a little den at the end of a long

string of low-partitioned offices stretching along the Mulberry Street side; and we who tenant them have looked out of the windows for so many years that we have got to know, at least by sight, a great many of the dwellers thereabouts. We are almost in the very heart of that “mob” on whose “fellow-feeling of vulgarity” the fellows who grind the organ rely to sustain them in their outrageous behavior. And, do you know, as we look out of those windows, year after year, we find ourselves growing to have a fellow-feeling of vulgarity with that same mob. (Bunner 8)

Bunner’s perspective here is unique among writing about the poor. It claims them as material for picturesque observation and depiction, framing one of the most famous of slum streets in his office window and asserting this position as the threshold of “fellow-feeling” with the poor. The “we” of this passage is not the speaker and the poor, but the speaker and other tenants of offices which look out upon them, and it also functions as an invitation to the reader to look from the same perspective. In his “do you know” it is possible to hear the good-natured conversation of a genteel acquaintance, who presents with mild surprise the fact of his “vulgarity” in finding the “mob” sympathetic. Pictorial sight, in this passage, does not promote a transcendental unity with those living in poverty but the ability to see the common as beautiful is emphatically an aspect of what Bunner portrays as moral virtue.

The fact that Bunner does not follow the organ-grinder into his home is significant, because it demarcates the boundary of what the genteel observer can know about poorer people. The few critical responses to Bunner which exist tend to focus on his failure to depict the suffering found in the slums he loves to observe. Benedict Giomo, whose study *On the Bowery* provides the most sustained treatment of Bunner’s work, sees him as a member of “[t]he urban

picturesque school... [which] retained a capricious attitude toward its topical interest in poverty among immigrant groups and the homeless. Its writers not only dallied but wallowed in the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and the general feel of ‘the other half’” (54). Bunner does indeed perceive the ghetto as picturesque, and, as I will discuss below, this designation connotes a sense of the poor as inherently more interesting than the wealthy because more authentic and vibrant, a view that is obviously problematic. In the context of the passages above, however, Giamo’s assessment of Bunner as wallowing in the aesthetic pleasures of the other half is not entirely fair, particularly given the way in which he references Riis’s book, which suggests that seeing them as “other” is itself morally compromising. I am proposing, therefore, that the sketches omit depictions of hardship not because Bunner is unaware of this suffering or uninterested in it, but because the view he presents is one of sympathetic observer of the external life of the slums, and not that of a reformer, such as Riis, who quite literally invaded the tenements to capture images of the lives they contained. We might productively contrast Bunner’s perspective with that of the “lover of the moral picturesque” presented by Hawthorne’s sketch, in which the apple-dealer’s exterior lends the pretext for the viewer’s imaginative journey into the poor man’s life. As we saw, that journey forecloses upon the possibility of actual knowledge about or sympathy for the apple-dealer, who instead becomes a symbol for impersonal social forces as conceived of by the viewer. Bunner’s sketch presents only what it can see, as if a textual photograph – but one he has neither posed nor intruded upon others’ homes to capture. While we know, from the allusion to Riis, what crowding and squalor awaits the organ-grinder, we are neither invited to imagine it nor presented with an imagined depiction of it. The allusion also suggests that such knowledge does not necessarily lead to greater sympathy. Instead, we are invited to look from the speaker’s

window into the street, and to experience in that moment of pictorial sight a feeling of common humanity with those below.

The sketch proceeds to chronicle the daily lives of various characters the speaker can observe from his office, and whom he describes with the light and occasionally ironic tone of the *flâneur*. Each portrait, however, contains more specific details than the mere strolling observer could perceive; the moving picture created by the window frame presents surfaces only, but seen over a course of months or years, the surfaces gain depth, as in the depiction of “that favorite purchase of the poor—three potatoes, one turnip, one carrot, four onions, and the handful of kale” (Bunner 9-10). Bunner’s tone is the opposite of the journalist who avers that immigrant Jews have a fondness for spoiled eggs. The “favorite” here is simultaneously ironic and true: such items are not delicacies, and are thus unlikely to be especially desirable, but they are what he observes to be most frequently chosen. The depictions are also more prone to the sentimental than those of the journalistic *flâneur*, but they always retain the distanced perspective of the viewer, as in the depiction of two faces seen at a window: one is that of “the mulatto-woman’s youngster”; her mother goes out to work, and thus she is “so much alone, that the sage-green old bachelor in the second den from mine could not stand it, last Christmas time, so he sent her a doll on the sly. That is the other face” (Bunner 15). The image of a lonely child and her doll, gifted by an unknown gentleman, presents her plight without offering any sordid details about her poverty. It also aligns the girl in her window – one of several Bunner depicts – with the speaker himself, all of whom pass their hours viewing the street. He makes a distinction, however, between the poor residents of that street and the genteel observer at his office window: “But though the life of Jersey and Mulberry Streets may be mildly interesting to outside spectators who happen to have a fellow-feeling of vulgarity with the mob, the mob must find it rather

monotonous. Jersey Street is not only a blind alley, but a dead one, so far as outside life is concerned” (Bunner 18). To the wealthier observer, the slum street is a novelty. The observation serves to remind readers of the class difference between observer and observed, and of the fact that, while the wealthy speaker and reader might take pleasure in these novel sights, for those whose lives they comprise, the spectacle might not be so fascinating, merely all they have access to. In Bunner’s representation of pictorial sight, viewing the slum as spectacle creates a point of commonality between the genteel observer/reader and the poorer people under view, while preserving a sense of their difference and, ultimately, reminding the genteel viewer of her privilege.

Bunner’s stance throughout the sketch is that of ally to the poor, whose ways he chronicles both for the pleasure they offer and to instruct the wealthy on their harmlessness. He invites “our good old maiden lady” to come to “sit at my window,” so that she can see “that it is not a mob that rejoices in ‘outrageous behavior,’ as some other mobs that we read of have rejoiced—notably one that gave a great deal of trouble to some very ‘decent people’ in Paris toward the end of the last century” (29). As Bramen observes, presenting the poor as picturesque dissociates their poverty from the threat of political revolution (“Spectacle” 463). Bunner is indeed the opposite of a radical: eschewing didacticism or advocacy of any kind, his tone and diction are invariably conversational and pleasant; he offers no homilies about the poor, and no plans for their improvement. The first-person perspective contributes to the feeling that poorer people are not a danger to the wealthy, a position foregrounded by the point at which the organ-grinder and his monkey come visit the narrator’s home: “my own babies, who seem to be born with the fellow-feeling of vulgarity with the mob, invite him in and show him how to warm his cold little black hands in front of the kitchen range” (Bunner 28). The passage suggests that

people must be educated to forget their innate sympathy with others, and leads into a section that explicitly associates taste with both class and morals:

Our organ-grinder is no more a beggar than is my good friend Mr. Henry Abbey, the honestest and best of operatic impresarios. Mr. Abbey can take the American opera house and hire Mr. Seidl and Mr. —— to conduct grand opera for your delight and mine, and when we can afford it we go and listen to his perfect music, and, as our poor contributions cannot pay for it all, the rich of the land meet the deficit. But this poor, foot-sore child of fortune has only his heavy box of tunes and a human being's easement in the public highway. Let us not shut him out of that poor right because once in a while he wanders in front of our doors and offers wares that offend our finer taste. It is easy enough to get him to betake himself elsewhere, and, if it costs us a few cents, let us not ransack our law-books and our moral philosophies to find out if we cannot indict him for constructive blackmail, but consider the nickel or the dime a little tribute to the uncounted weary souls who love his strains and welcome his coming. (29-30)

Bunner reinforces the gentility of the narrator at the same moment that he presents his most straightforward moral appeal. The narrator is a man of culture, and aligns his cultural tastes with those of his presumed reader. He then points out two potentially surprising things: that such tastes require a certain income, and that many who enjoy high culture are in fact being charitably supported by those with incomes larger than theirs. In this context, the less refined tastes of poorer people are presented as equally valid, and, moreover, to refuse the minute sum required to keep those tastes from offending cultivated ears appears itself to be in poor taste, a deficiency which is also a failing of moral sentiment. Bunner concludes the sketch by reminding his readers

that they are in fact in the minority, and that the popular demand was to allow street musicians to play; thus “the Mayor and the Board of Aldermen did rightly, and did as should be done in this American land of ours, when they granted the demand of the majority of the people, and refused to heed the protest of a minority” (30-31). Bunner, like Whitman, represents the lower classes as the driving force of the American nation, and his writing communicates the necessity of observing with interest, and perhaps even love, the society of New York’s poorer streets.

Bunner’s work is understood as the epitome of the genteel tradition of slum writing, a more fulsome version of the journalistic pieces that make appealing copy of the poor. Westgate, for instance, finds that “H.C. Bunner ... viewed immigrants as an opportunity for indulgence in exoticism. In this Bunner was not alone since, as Chad Heap has demonstrated, immigrant communities were crucial to slumming in that they afforded the wealthy the opportunity to indulge in drinking, gambling, and sexual freedoms found there” (117). Arguably, however, these are two separate but related phenomena: Bunner’s work does not discuss the salacious activities available in slums, although the interest in the slums for aesthetic pleasure undoubtedly made them more available to those who did seek such activities. Sabine Haenni argues that “even as Bunner expresses his lack of interest in high culture, its evocation legitimizes and reifies slumming while marking the ghetto's difference from an industrial-commercial ‘culture of abundance.’ ... As a liminal site of commercial entertainment, the ghetto is both potentially dangerous and safely classifiable within middle-class tourism” (493). By placing the slum alongside the “monuments of Western civilization” (Bunner 90) as a site of commercial entertainment, Bunner inscribes slumming within the parameters of middle-class tourism. Ambivalently, however, his work then actively disparages such interest. In “The Bowery and Bohemia,” for instance (a popular sketch reproduced in *Jersey Street and Jersey Lane*), he

writes, “I am not going to give you the addresses of the cheap restaurants where these poor, cheerful children of adversity are now eating *goulasch* and *Kartoffelsalad* instead of the spaghetti and *tripe à la mode de Caen* of their old haunts. I do not know them, and if I did, I should not hand them over to the mercies of the intrusive young men from the studios and the bachelors’ chambers” (98). The sketch pits “real” Bohemians against poseur members of the bourgeoisie who imitate them; the narrator’s paradoxical knowing/not knowing also signals the narrator’s insider status in both ghetto and genteel communities and the refusal to claim a position either as faux Bohemian or “intrusive” ghetto tourist. Such evasive language points to one part of the dynamic of guilt that ghetto voyeurism creates: Bunner evokes an interesting sight to which he then denies his readers the possibility of full access, because their presence in the scene would destroy it; the genteel observer of slums both wishes access to picturesque areas and knows that his presence will degrade their authenticity. The desire for “authentic” ghettos thus also means ambivalence about their reform, which would deprive the cosmopolitan bourgeoisie of both pleasure and an aspect of their identity.

That wealthier people have not ceased to emulate the lifestyles of poorer people seems to bear out Bunner’s worries rather than his desires. It is nonetheless hard to argue that writing which depicts Bohemians as being so compelling bears no responsibility for attracting to the slums the genteel readership for which Bunner wrote. His work certainly does present the genteel perspective of the slums as “picturesque and interesting” (Bunner 89), and, rather than expressing sorrow for the suffering found there or outrage at the conditions, discusses with the genial detachment of the *flâneur* the ghetto’s aesthetic delights – including “the generous and faithful spirit of friendly poverty” (Bunner 99). Bunner is taken as exemplary of the genteel tradition because his satisfaction in the life he perceives in the slums is so very blunt. Is it

possible to defend from the charge of superficiality and genteel callousness towards the poor the writer who can claim that the impoverished Bowery is “the alivest mile on the face of the earth” (Bunner 89), and who calls himself “an ardent collector of slums” (Bunner 90)? At the risk of being charged similarly myself, I will say that it is, and for two reasons. The first is that the scant scholarship on Bunner invariably focuses on passages such as these and neglects more nuanced moments in his work, such as those described above. His appreciation of the vibrancy and authenticity of people who live in slums has become representative of genteel writing about the urban poor, which scholars have read as essentially analogous to what Ruskin means by the low picturesque: an interest solely in outward forms, divorced from any social context. For Ruskin, Stanfield Clarke’s ruined mill is an example of the low picturesque because it presents this ruination with evident pleasure, and “exult[s] over its every rent as a special treasure and possession” (Ruskin 8). Turner’s more foreboding and gloomy work is noble because its tones more appropriately capture the emotional quality of decay. In this taxonomy, Bunner is indeed a literary example of the low picturesque. Read as encounters with poverty and representations of its cruelties, Bunner’s work is entirely superficial, and offers few insights into the harsh conditions of New York’s slums. This is not, however, the work which is accomplished by these sketches, which is, rather, to depict what had already been established as the genteel perspective of the slums, and to offer an ethical approach to such cross-class viewing.

This approach does not rely upon close observation, either direct or through representations, of the suffering caused by poverty. On the contrary, Bunner’s work suggests that such detailed observations might serve to repulse rather than to engender sympathy in wealthier people. Moral virtue, in Bunner’s work, does nonetheless derive from the ability to look at and feel compassion for people enduring material deprivation, albeit a compassion that leads to no

apparent social change. It is Riis's remote sympathy, but one which acknowledges this remoteness and characterizes it as a consequence of class difference. Bunner's work takes as its starting point the interest in slumming common among the bourgeoisie and relies on a narrator who speaks as a friendly acquaintance to members of that class. The sunny views he offers of impoverished areas are, however, interspersed with moments that acknowledge the suffering of their residents, but these moments provide few details, and thus deny the reader the pleasure of a sentimental compassion for them. Rather than demand sympathy for people who neither the narrator nor the reader can know, Bunner's narrator instead urges middle-class people to approach those living in poverty with kindness, or at least forbearance and decency. Ruskin contends that "the love for the lower picturesque ought to be cultivated with care, wherever it exists; not with any special view to artistic, but to merely humane, education," because "it will constantly lead, if associated with other benevolent principles, to a truer sympathy with the poor, and better understanding of the right ways of helping them" (12). Bunner speaks to fellow lovers of the lower picturesque, and tries to offer a humane way of approaching slumming. Such an approach does not require outpourings of emotion – indeed, his blithe prose and the paucity of details about suffering militate against them.

I argue, therefore, that Bunner's picturesque does something new, and that is to use the terminology of the picturesque in order explicitly to address the act of aestheticizing poverty. His work does this by repeatedly drawing attention to his gentility – Bunner as genteel author who speaks through an anonymous but similarly-classed narrator – and to his aesthetic interest in slums, as well as to a spectatorial position which can never provide more than a partial view of what he observes. Thus, the second reason to recalibrate critical approaches to Bunner's work is that the class dynamics it represents are more complex than they initially appear: impoverished

people are no less real than middle-class ones, despite the former being known to the latter only as aesthetic objects. His narrator does not simply claim slums as entertainment more exciting than “art galleries and palaces and theatres and cathedrals” (90), but persistently acknowledges that the genteel observer views these slums from a circumscribed perspective. Unlike sights intended for the cultural edification of its visitors, urban ghettos resist knowability, particularly by outsiders. Of the Bowery, Bunner writes: “I am arriving at the point where I have some faint glimmerings of the littleness of my knowledge of it as compared with what there is to be known. I do not mean to say that I can begin to size the disproportion up with any accuracy, but I think I have accomplished a good deal in getting as far as I have” (88). The lightly ironic tone covers a serious lesson: “no one mortal life can take in the complex intensity of a metropolis. Try to count a million, and then try to form a conception of the impossibility of learning all the ins and outs of the domicile of a million men, women, and children” (85). Such passages remind readers that ghettos are not merely sites of aesthetic pleasure, but also infinitely complex social organisms comprised of radically unknowable others. This perspective pushes back against writing about the city that works to render the urban poor legible, and thus merely a potentially entertaining aspect of cosmopolitan life. In Bunner’s work, the slums’ residents remain fully human, because unknowable despite their availability for aesthetic consumption. In these sketches, the poor are not Ruskin’s old man filling the corner of a sketch, and they are not the subject of a sketch which makes the man a mere symbol; they are, rather, fully alive beyond the limits of the frame which the viewer imposes.

The frame itself is there because, for the genteel viewer, those living in poverty represent a life of greater variety, authenticity, and social freedom than that which is offered by the class into which the viewer was born; this perspective, while tinted in obvious ways by the desires and

anxieties of the viewer, remains a critique of the genteel class. It is, moreover, a perspective shared even by those who did perform active work among the poor. Writing of the Christian socialist Vida Dutton Scudder, who “immersed herself in settlement-house work” in the 1890s, Lears relates that “like Jane Addams and other educated late-Victorian women, Scudder embraced settlement work as ‘a subjective necessity.’ The... ‘comfort, security, good taste’ of bourgeois life created a pleasant atmosphere. ‘Yet sometimes it suffocated me,’ Scudder recalled. ‘Were not the workers, the poor, nearer perhaps that we to the reality I was always seeking?’” (211). Bunner’s urban picturesque depicts slum life as one which, if in many ways hard and monotonous, is also characterized by a sense of community and inter-dependence that wealthier characters are depicted as lacking. As in the work of Thoreau and Whitman, Bunner’s work depicts poverty as possessing spiritual benefit, both for those who live in it and for those who can view it as beautiful.

For an emerging bourgeoisie, writing like Bunner’s was an education in liberal attitudes towards economically disadvantaged others. To be a liberal, cosmopolitan member of the middle classes was not only to encompass within one’s view of the city the existence of ethnic and class difference, but also to perceive value in these differences, which generally meant perceiving them as emblematic of an authenticity and communitarianism lacking among the bourgeoisie. Local color is desirable precisely for this vibrancy, which is counterpoised to the drabness and constraint of genteel life. When Bunner asserts of Mulberry Bend that “color is its strong point” (Bunner 91), he does indeed write as a purveyor of local color literature, in all its lightness and desire for pleasure. Yet, as Stephanie Palmer observes in *Together by Accident: In Search of Local Color*, such literature is fundamentally interested in “facilitating inter-class

communication.”²⁰¹ Bunner’s narrator often functions as a type of tour guide, conversant with the locals but belonging to the bourgeoisie. Addressing his genteel reader, Bunner writes of Mulberry Bend: “No, nobody will hurt you if you go down there and are polite, and mind your own business, and do not step on the babies. But if you stare about and make comments, I think those people will be justified in suspecting that the people uptown don’t always know how to behave themselves like ladies and gentlemen, so do not bring disgrace on your neighborhood, and do not go in a cab” (92-93). Bunner was inarguably a prominent member of the school of writers who made slumming seem an appealing entertainment, but he is also the only one to include an etiquette guide for it.

The idea that genteel people should remember their manners when among those poorer than they sets Bunner’s narrator apart from other guides through slums and, more importantly, indicates that the slum’s residents also have a point of view. Giamo notes that “[t]he typical representational form of the urban picturesque was the brief sketch or vignette” in which “[t]he point of view, primarily personal and subjective, with priority given to narration, suggested an epistemology which stressed momentary perception and impressionistic observation” (54). This personal and subjective point of view is what makes Bunner’s work ethically astute. Unlike more critically lauded works such as Stephen Crane’s *Maggie*, in which an omniscient narrator represents the slum dwellers’ perspectives, Bunner remains in the position of genteel observer, recording only his own impressions, but he is aware that those he views are not objects but subjects.²⁰² If the only way the subject can know itself is through “systematic knowledge of the

²⁰¹ Examining nineteenth-century local colour literature, Palmer analyzes a trope in which the bourgeois traveler is, through an accident, thrown into contact with persons whose locality and class distances them from, and makes them indispensable to, the traveler.

²⁰² Crane’s sketches about the slums do, however, take a first-person perspective, and his writing is often seen as presaging the modernist concern with subjectivity. Entin finds Crane’s work a site of resistance against a realist literature of surveillance of the poor, in part due to “his relative self-consciousness about the act of attempting to

world” which “must include knowledge of other subjects” (Eagleton 73), then Bunner’s refusal to coopt the perspectives of others helps to deliver this knowledge: other subjects are those whose views the bourgeoisie do not have access to.²⁰³ They thus possess a potentially destabilizing gaze, one which manifests the difference between the genteel person’s self-perception and the perceptions others might have of him. Lacan teaches us that the point at which one is made conscious of an Other’s gaze produces a moment of anxious recognition that others are seeing what one cannot. Bunner’s Others, distanced by class and often ethnicity, function like Lacan’s famous sardine can: the concentrated gaze of everything outside of the subject’s field of perception.²⁰⁴ Bunner’s expostulation to uptown tourists of the Bowery

transmute phenomena into text.... In two of his most celebrated sketches, ‘The Men in the Storm’ and ‘An Experiment in Misery,’ the figures that serve as the most acute images of both literary impossibility and literary self-consciousness are the bodies of urban tramps. In these sketches, the neglected, diminished, disfigured bodies of the urban poor initiate the failure of realism’s will-to-scrutiny, prompting forms of narrative disorientation and literary experimentation that undermine the link between writing and social discipline” (328). I do not discuss Crane’s work in this project, despite its central importance to aesthetic interest in the slums in the Gilded Age, because it possesses none of the characteristics of the picturesque. *Maggie* might be seen as a parallax of picturesque views of the slums, presenting them entirely from the perspective of its residents. His sketch “An Experiment in Misery” is predicated on the narrator’s attempt to shed the perspective of a genteel viewer and align himself with homeless men. The picturesque is fundamentally formulated by a structurally distanced viewer, and Crane’s sketch works to close this distance; moreover, at such close range, the slums he depicts are too horrific to be picturesque. Where distance is interjected, it comes in the form of caustic irony, which, as Gandal observes, is aimed both at the middle class and at the poor. While Howells is frequently ironic about the privilege of the middle class (although this irony is often missed by critics), his work never mocks the poor. In short, where the picturesque can, at its most critically and ethically valuable, make available to view the viewing position of the wealthy, Crane abandons this position entirely.

²⁰³ Eagleton goes on to explain that “[w]hat brings us together as subjects is not knowledge but an ineffable reciprocity of feeling. And this is certainly one major reason why the aesthetic has figured so centrally in bourgeois thought. For the alarming truth is that in a social order marked by class division and market competition, it may finally be here, and only here, that human beings belong together in some intimate *Gemeinschaft*” (75). In refusing bourgeois readers this reciprocal feeling, Bunner accepts the fact of class division, and the varying aesthetics these divisions produce. For realists like Crane and Theodore Dreiser, claiming the perspective of the bourgeois observer foreclosed the possibility of representing fully the conditions of those in poverty. Yet there is arguably an ethical purpose in denying the bourgeoisie a belief in an intimate community between classes, and having instead to recognize the bounded subject position from which the bourgeoisie are viewing others. Dickens’s social interconnectedness is a beautiful fantasy of cross-class sympathy, brought into being by all the accidents of fate upon which the nineteenth-century realist novel relies. But while such depictions may show to us the society we would wish to have, perhaps that which we should work towards, there is also an ethical utility in showing the world as it is, from one singular perspective, in all its limitations – particularly when that perspective is one of love for unknown others.

²⁰⁴ Lacan relates a vignette in which he, desiring an experience of “something practical, something physical,” went out to sea with a group of fishermen. One of them pointed to a can floating in the water, and said, “*You see that*

sketches for the bourgeoisie an outline of what it might never occur to them that others might mock: their own privilege. The possibility that a gawking member of the gentility might seem uncouth to a poorer person not only legitimizes the poorer person's subjectivity, but might – and should – make the wealthy person experience some unease when contemplating a slumming trip; she will not, like the *flâneur*, walk unseen amidst the crowd, but will be within a group of equally-perceiving subjects, who will judge her on qualities she is unable to anticipate. What makes Bunner's work uncomfortable for present-day critics is what makes it ethically useful. His sketches deny that there is "a community of feeling subjects" (Eagleton 75) reified by aesthetic taste. What he represents is not intersubjectivity, but the fact of multiple subjectivities which are barred from intimacy by class divisions.

The ethical potential contained in the literary picturesque is not primarily in its depiction of roughness, but in its depiction of observing it. Bunner's work is interesting because he is aware of his lack of intimacy with his subjects, a distance that is signaled by his use of the picturesque. To use Michasiw's terms, Bunner's sketches record immediate impressions of the phenomena of the slums, explicitly partial and subjective, and the light narrative tone is the wash of the viewer's perception. The viewer remains a tourist seeking picturesque sights, but the

can? Do you see it? Well, it doesn't see you!" (Four 95). The anecdote illustrates, first, that Lacan, as essentially a bourgeois tourist among the working class, "was rather out of place in the picture" (Four 96). His sense of displacement there produces an anxiety, which derives from the fact that the perceiving subject cannot perceive himself as others do. "The picture, certainly, is in my eye. But I am not in the picture" (Lacan, Four 96). The picturesque becomes ethically useful in the moments that it makes explicit the fact that the picture is composed by a perceiving subject defined by his class. This subjectivity is, in Bunner (and Howells) always inscribed in the picture they compose, as that which produces an unbridgeable distance between perceiving self and viewed other; in moments such as the one described above, an object under view gazes back: the gaze "surprises him in the function of voyeur, disturbs him, overwhelms him and reduces him to a feeling of shame" (Lacan, Four 84). In Bunner's sketch, this shame is, to be sure, hardly overwhelming, but it does mark the point at which a perceiving subject has been caught in an act of voyeurism, and in which his gentility is perceived as a mask by the others who perceive him. Finally, it is significant that the gaze is the *objet a*, which "symboliz[es] the central lack of desire" as its cause (Lacan, Four 105). The wealthy observer, as we have repeatedly seen, desires what she feels she lacks in her genteel life, and it is this desire, "that underside of consciousness" (Lacan, Four 105), that is manifested by the Other's gaze.

Bowery in all its complexity is unknowable, and remains so in his sketches. The imposition of the subjective is “a binding that serves to free the object” (Michasiw 91); the pleasing sketch is composed by, and exists for, the tourist, who has unified the rough objects into an aesthetic product, but the very fact of its picturesqueness signals “the scene’s resistance to encapsulization” (Michasiw 90). Critics have seen this subjective perspective as neglect of the realities of slum life, when arguably it is a way of recognizing them. Giomo asserts that “the urban picturesque school could not get beyond the introductory formalities of its newly acquired relationship. Thus it remained in a perpetual state of strained acquaintanceship with the conditions of urban poverty” (53). This is true in the sense that, despite Bunner’s sustained observations of the slum, he does not claim deep knowledge of its inhabitants. What seems troubling about this superficiality is that, in eliding details of their hardships, Bunner’s work appears to offer slums as merely sites of aesthetic pleasure, and not as areas in need of a sympathetic response from those with greater wealth.

Yet, if one potential problem of representations of suffering is the superficial compassion they inspire in those who consume them, then Bunner’s work offers a different approach to viewing suffering others. The reader is retained as an ally of the genteel narrator, whose remote sympathy models an appropriate affective response to suffering that wealthier citizens cannot understand. As non-fiction prose, rather than reportage, Bunner’s work relies on a narrative voice whose conversational tone and confessional diction create an association, and perhaps identification, between reader and narrator. The limits of the narrator’s knowledge deepens this identification: he is not an expert on slums, but an “ardent collector,” an amateur explorer drawn to rough neighborhoods out of curiosity and a desire for the pleasure they provide. Riis’s photojournalism, by contrast, provides images of poverty that are unavailable to genteel readers’

view, while the formality of his writing and the inclusion of statistical and political information create an authoritative textual persona rather than a narrator who speaks as a peer to his readers.²⁰⁵ In Bunner's writing, gentility emerges as both class position – those situated between high and low – and affective disposition: an interest in slums which is not prurient, dispassionate or disgusted, but which does not claim shared feeling with strangers. Critical realism, as Giomo argues, will offer in the early twentieth century “the penetration of urban space and confrontation with the actualities of Bowery life” (xv) missing from the urban picturesque. What the urban picturesque supplies is the profoundly limited and desiring perspective of the genteel viewer – the picturesque as an aesthetic taste. That wealthier people took (and take) pleasure in the sights of slums may be an awkward fact, but it is a fact nonetheless, and it is one which Bunner's work opens to scrutiny. In representing as a specific aesthetic taste the genteel predilection for viewing the poor, Bunner makes available for analysis the spectatorial position of the viewer, and the moral and ethical claims such a position entails.

Genteel interest in aesthetic representations of poverty also drives several of the stories in Brander Matthews's *Vignettes of Manhattan*. Described in a contemporary review as “ha[ving] to do with much that is picturesque and fine” (“To Celebrate New York” 23), Matthews's work, like Bunner's, depicts life in the slums as aesthetically interesting. As in Bunner's sketches, the subject of Matthews's stories about poverty is less the details of its hardships than how those details are perceived by the bourgeoisie. References to the picturesque in these stories serve, as

²⁰⁵ Riis does not often use the personal pronoun in *How the Other Half Lives*, and when it appears it is generally to convey a brief encounter with another, or to introduce a specific anecdote: “Well do I recollect the visit of a health inspector to one of these tenements on a July day...” (65); “I came upon a particularly ragged and disreputable tramp...” (78). He does not write of enjoyment, or of his own position in relation to those he encounters as anything more than a concerned citizen.

in Bunner's work, to represent the aesthetic frame required for viewing the poor; but Matthews's work, which leans more heavily on sensationalistic and sentimental tropes, never suggests that the ability to aestheticize the poor might also lead to greater compassion for them. Indeed, the story with the most moral perspective of the poor depicts as socially useless the remote sympathy produced by a taste for the picturesque. His work also presents a strange paradox: *Vignettes of Manhattan*, published in 1894, was followed by *Outlines in Local Color* in 1897, and the latter contains a story which mocks and undermines the perspective of poverty offered by the protagonists of some of the earlier stories. His earlier works portray the distrust of the poor evident in Davis's stories, and a similar investment in separating the worthy from unworthy poor, which Matthews states is simply done, since "those who deserve [charity] won't ask for it" (154); these stories represent the most conventional and ethically problematic manifestation of the urban picturesque, in which the aestheticization of poverty is simply the entitlement of the bourgeoisie. The later collection pivots sharply in its perspective, and brings a knowing, ironic eye to the fascination that slums and their residents hold for members of the gentility.

Matthews's collection opens with a quotation taken from Sir Richard Steele, writing in *The Spectator*: "When I came to my chamber I writ down these minutes; but was at a loss what instruction I should propose to my readers from the enumeration of so many insignificant matters and occurrences; and I thought it of great use, if they could learn with me to keep their minds open to gratification, and ready to receive it from anything it meets with" (11 Aug 1712). Such an epigraph both places Matthews in the tradition of the *flâneur* and identifies the readership to whom his stories are addressed – those seeking to cultivate their tastes by learning to aestheticize common sights. In eighteenth-century England, the ability to perceive any object as potentially beautiful was associated with social status, and publications like *The Spectator* made a privileged

viewing position available to new members of the middle class. In the earlier nineteenth century, Transcendentalism made this ability a spiritual necessity for America's emerging middle class. Matthews's work marks the limits of the Emersonian tradition that presents pictorial sight as a moral faculty. In these vignettes, to view the poor aesthetically is merely to possess cultural knowledge that can provide amusement and class distinction.

The story "In Search of Local Color" is the tale of trying to find gratification from the "insignificant matters" occurring in Mulberry Bend. A writer of note, Rupert De Ruyter, asks an acquaintance who works in a Settlement House to show him the slums: "local color—that's what I want—fresh impressions" (Matthews 59). Suydam, the acquaintance, demurs: "they are not half so picturesque and so pathetic as the sensational newspapers make them out" (Matthews 59-60). The story, however, makes them out as being precisely picturesque and pathetic, and operates as a more elegant version of sensational newspapers. The elegance derives from the structure of the story, which is not directly about these sensational events (primarily an Italian man who has murdered his wife in a fit of jealousy), but rather about a genteel author in search of the real ghetto life. Matthews includes all the requisite ghetto sights: "a swarthy young fellow with his flannel shirt open at the throat and rolled up on his tawny arms... pushing before him a hand-cart heaped with gayly colored calicoes....other men, young and old...vending other wares—fruit more often than not; fruit of a most untempting frowziness"; "countless children...forever swarming out of the houses"; and of course fire escapes adorned with flowers in broken boxes and strung with "parti-colored Italian shirts" (Matthews 62-63). Such details are the bread and butter of journalism depicting the urban picturesque: vaguely disdainful, obsessed with the publicity with which tenement-residents conduct their lives. Matthews, however, distances his tale from the aesthetic within which it obviously works:

Rupert de Ruyter felt as though he were receiving an impression of life itself. It was as if he had caught a glimpse of the mighty movement of existence, incessant and inevitable. What he saw did not strike him as pitiful; it did not weigh him down with despondency. The spectacle before him was not beautiful; it was not even picturesque; but never for a moment, even, did it strike him as pathetic. Interesting it was, of a certainty—unfailingly interesting. (63)

There is no appreciable difference in the depiction of this slum between interesting and picturesque. Moreover, these two words share a common history. Inger Sigrun Brodey has traced the origins of the word “interesting,” and finds that by the mid-eighteenth century, the word’s older meaning, “of importance,” had given way to a new meaning that indicated “the stimulation of subjective emotions” (Brodey 190). The *Oxford English Dictionary* places the word’s first use in its modern sense in Lawrence Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey*, thereby aligning the history of the word with the novel of sensibility; *interesting* gradually became “a code word for identifying whether or not a scene or an individual conforms to the aesthetic requirements of the picturesque or sensibility” (Brodey 190). The emotions in Matthews’s sketch are, tellingly, not those of compassion or sorrow, but rather a feeling of being immersed in “real life.” This is the picturesque at its most banal: poorer people are merely aesthetic objects whose cramped conditions and foreign habits confer on the genteel viewer an unusual and invigorating sense of the profundity of life.

The attempt to remove the scene from the confines of picturesque aesthetics suggests a desire (of both authors) to avoid the banality of its imagery, and to focus instead on the sensibility of the writer. De Ruyter’s ability to perceive the slum aesthetically – which derives

from the picturesque, whether or not he wishes to claim the term – makes him a man of feeling, a Romantic figure for whom sensory experience provides moments of intense emotion. “Drawing on Adam Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Fred Kaplan counterposes sentimentality, as expressive of ‘innate moral sentiment’ (and associated with ‘the man of sentiment,’ a Victorian hero), to ‘sensibility,’ a response to external stimuli (associated with the ‘man of feeling,’ the Romantic hero)” (Samuels 4). De Ruyter is constructed as antithetical to the man of sentiment: the story’s final line is his blithe remark that the Italian man’s arrest “completes the picture. I can get a good *mot de la fin* now” (Matthews 72). He expresses no compassion for the dead woman or anyone else, and his excursion to the slum is purely provoked by the need for fresh subject matter: “I’ve studied the painters and the literary men and the journalists; I can describe a first night at the theatre or a panic in the Street; but I’ve pretty nearly exhausted the people I know, and I thought I would come down here and get introduced to a set I didn’t know” (Matthews 59). De Ruyter is too cynical and pragmatic to be a Romantic hero, but his sensibilities place him among the cultivated classes of the eighteenth century who sought novel aesthetic experiences in what they constructed as the rough and the natural.

“The Candle in the Plate,” the other story which concerns the upper classes’ taste for viewing poverty, functions as a type of rebuke to the first, and may have been a response to one: after the publication of *Vignettes of Manhattan* (which contains “In Search of Local Color”) William Dean Howells, a friend and fellow member of the New York literati, “reprimand[ed] Matthews for being a romanticistic writer” (Oliver 146). The Dean of American letters, as Howells was known, was the foremost advocate for realist literature and critic of the sensational and romantic fiction that he termed “romanticistic.” In a comprehensive re-evaluation of Brander Matthews work, Lawrence J. Oliver states that Howells was “the craftsman [Matthews]

most wanted to please” (146), and observes that “[a]fter receiving Howells’s frank criticism in 1893...Matthews attempted to replace the melodramatic lens through which he had envisioned his vignettes with a realist one” (147). For Howells, the picturesque became a means of commenting upon the relation between class, aesthetic taste, and ethical engagement with poverty, which is precisely its function in “The Candle in the Plate.”

Read in succession, Matthews’s later story undermines De Ruyter’s perspective and, by extension, the picturesque view that claims the aestheticization of poverty as the entitlement of the wealthy. Like many Gilded Age works interested in the working classes, this story also takes as its premise the stifling boredom endemic to genteel life. The vignette occurs during a dinner party expected to be dull: “although the cooking was ever excellent and the guests were selected from the innermost circle of Society, the bill of fare was monotonous and the conversation often lacked variety” (Matthews 323). The hostess has, however, assembled guests who could entertain the visiting Irish Lord, a young man who “went in for slumming and all that sort of thing” (Matthews 324). De Ruyter is there because Mrs. Canton “happened to have read one of his stories about the wretched creatures living down in the Italian quarter, and she was sure he would be able to tell Mr. Barry all that the young Irishman might want to know about the slums of New York. She had been fortunate enough to get the Jimmy Suydams, too; and she knew that Mrs. Jimmy took such an interest in the poor, acting as patroness so often, and all that” (Matthews 324). The “all that” of these sentences suggests Mrs. Canton’s view, later expressed explicitly, that an “interest” in the poor is merely a slightly distasteful pastime; it is, she states, “absurd for the younger brother of a peer to bother himself about such things” (Matthews 325). Her society friends, the Suydams (Mr. Suydam is De Ruyter’s guide through Mulberry Bend), despite their involvement with those in poverty, are hardly more sympathetic towards them; in

this story and others, their work among the poor is figured largely as something to do. The callousness and self-serving nature of the wealthy in this story is already a departure from Matthews's earlier vignettes, in which cross-class encounters never indicate that the poor are dealt with otherwise than charitably and prudently.

The dinner begins with De Ruyter holding forth on New York's slums, but the change in tone from the previous vignette becomes clear when we are given access to the silent criticisms of Miss Peters, the host's assistant and a formerly wealthy Southerner who has come north for work; she has been invited because she lives in a rough area and does charitable work there. Miss Peters notices with growing irritation De Ruyter's self-aggrandizement as he discusses the tenement district, and eventually becomes unable to bear his bloviating. After De Ruyter, echoed by Mr. Suydam, proclaims the poor "impossible to understand," Miss Peters breaks in to the conversation with the following speech:

"Isn't it because you persist in approaching them as though they were strange, wild beasts? ...You speak of them just as if they were different from us. But they are not, are they? They have their feelings just like we have; they fall in love and they get married and they quarrel and they die, just like we do. There is not more crime in the tenement-houses than there is in the rest of the city—not if you remember how many more people live in the tenement-houses. There isn't less joy there, or less sorrow either. There is quite as much happiness, I reckon, and a good deal more fun. They are not the lower animals; and it just makes me mad all over when I hear them spoken of in that way. They are human beings, after all—and if you can't understand them it's because you're not ready to go to them as your equals."

“That’s what I say,” the Irishman agreed; “we must approach them on the plane of human sympathy—that’s the only way to get them to open their hearts.”

“Why should we expect them to open their hearts to us?” Miss Peters continued. “We don’t open ours to strangers, do we?” (Matthews 329-330)

This surprising speech essentially delegitimizes the right of the wealthy either to aestheticize the poor or to seek their confidence through compassionating them. The Irish Lord who advances sympathy as the correct mode of interaction is dismissed as thoroughly as the bourgeois writer who finds them a conundrum; Miss Peters presents the entirely novel idea that in fact, the wealthy have no place at all among the poor, who are strangers to them, and will not become less so even if presented with the apparent compassion of those of greater means.²⁰⁶ Miss Peters’s perspective refutes not only the inhumane view of De Ruyter and, presumably, other people in search of rough objects to stimulate their sensibilities, but also the possibility that an affective response to their suffering can be of any use. As in Bunner’s sketches, the wealthy are denied the salve to consciousness which remote sympathy for those in poverty might provide.

The vignette thus argues for the overarching heartlessness of the picturesque, even when perceived by those who enjoy it as a conduit for sympathy. In an effort to regain control of the

²⁰⁶ Marjorie Garber traces the “problem with compassion” to its etymology and history. “From the fourteenth century to the beginning of the seventeenth, the word (deriving from Latin *com*, together, and *pati*, to suffer) was used to describe both suffering together with one another, or ‘fellow feeling,’ and an emotion felt on behalf of another who suffers. In the second sense, compassion was felt not between equals but from a distance – in effect, from high to low: ‘shown towards a person in distress by one who is free from it, who is, in this respect, his superior.’ When the first sense fell out of use, which it did fairly quickly, the remaining sense hovered between charity and condescension” (19). While the speaker in Matthews’s uses the term “sympathy,” the context of trying to get “them” to “open their hearts,” indicates the social and thus emotional distance between him and those with whom he would sympathize. Garber notes that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, sympathy came to mean “the quality or state of being... affected by the suffering or sorrow of another; a feeling of compassion or commiseration,” moving this term away from its original meaning – “a condition of equality or affinity, whether between the body and the soul, between two bodily organs, or, increasingly, between persons with similar feelings, inclinations, and temperaments” (24) – and towards that of compassion, or the feeling a nonsufferer has towards one who is suffering.

conversation, De Ruyter jumps in with the suggestion: “[i]f you want to pick up picturesque bits of low life in New York...you must get a chance to see a candle in the plate” (Matthews 331). The practice concerns the way poor families help one another when unable to meet the rent, and the wealthy guests take a sentimental pleasure in the thought. Miss Peters, however, questions the veracity of this account, which leads to a discourse on the unreliability of American newspapers, in which, the Irishman says, “you never know what to believe,” and which do “dreadful things” (Matthews 333). The thing he is referring to is an article he read about a girl who had become pregnant and committed suicide; a lady reporter had uncovered the girl’s identity by following her mother and sister home from the funeral, and thereby published a sensationalistic account of her death that brought shame and sorrow to her family. The twist, of course, is that Miss Peters was the reporter, who now lives and volunteers among poor people in the attempt to atone for her sin. The exchange is significant first for the negative light in which it casts newspaper reporting, which appears both immoral and indistinguishable from fiction. In her study of the new journalism of the late nineteenth century, Roggenkamp notes the awareness of this problem at the time: Matthew Arnold, who in 1887 coined the term “new journalism,” felt the style was “‘full of ability, novelty, variety, sensation, sympathy, generous instincts,’ but its one great fault was that, ‘to get at the state of things as they truly are seems [of] no concern whatever.’”²⁰⁷ While Miss Peters’s article did get a “true” story – its publication as salacious news was precisely its ethical failure – the drive to do so stemmed from the paper’s commitment to the “commericalized, sensationalistic, and above all dramatic style of reportage” (Roggenkamp xii) that characterized reporting of the era.

²⁰⁷ “Up to Easter,” *Nineteenth Century* 21 (1887): 629-43, p. 638. Quoted in Roggenkamp, xii.

Representations of the ghetto, therefore, are doubly undermined in Matthews's story, first in the morally obtuse vision of De Ruyter (who also used to be a reporter) and other genteel frequenters of slums, and second in the newspapers which profit from the sad and sordid events that occur in poor neighbourhoods. The vignette ends on a light and patronizing tone – the Lord asks the name of “that pretty little girl” (Matthews 336) – but Miss Peters's moral sentiments remain unchallenged. “The Candle in the Plate” thus stands as a rather surprising foil to Matthews's earlier vignette and to the figure of the genteel *flâneur*-author whose right to view the slums it uncritically presents. This story also presages changing attitudes toward both newspaper reporting and literary depictions of the slums, both of which, by the end of the century, were moving away from the sensationalistic accounts of the Gilded Age.²⁰⁸ As critical realism and naturalism became the dominant forms of the novel, the picturesque came to stand for a romanticized and essentially unethical mode of representing poverty. In the new generation's scramble away from personal and subjective depictions of slums, the ways in which the picturesque served, at times, to critique these perspectives and the class relations they articulate became as obscure as most of the writers who used it this way.

The Limits of Transcendence and the Birth of the Bohemian in Types from City Streets

One of the final, and at the time, most prominent writers to chronicle his experiences of what he perceived as the intense and authentic life of the ghetto was Hutchins Hapgood. Mostly now recalled for his ground-breaking book *The Spirit of the Ghetto* (1902), Hapgood was a Harvard-educated Midwesterner who rose to literary prominence working on the New York

²⁰⁸ See Roggenkamp, pp. 119-121; also pp. 53-55, on the decline Davis's reputation, including Frank Norris's satirical “Van Bubbles's Story.”

Daily Commercial Advertiser. He began there in 1897 under the editorship of Lincoln Steffens, who “urged Hapgood to investigate New York street life at its core and collect interviews from the disenfranchised, ‘picturesque’ inhabitants of the city. Over the next few years, Hapgood poured out a steady stream of articles that singularly portrayed the lives of vaudeville stage performers, Bowery bums, pickpockets, prostitutes, immigrant laborers, and anarchists” (Dowling 122).²⁰⁹ In his study of slum writing, Dowling positions Hapgood as possessing an unusual ability to gain an insider’s view of New York’s ghettos, and notes that he was, “in truth, extremely adept at forming close relations with first-generation Jewish immigrants” (121) such as Abraham Cahan, with whom Hapgood worked at the *Advertiser* and who aided him in the research that produced *Spirit*. Hapgood’s writing reflects fascination not only with the aesthetic pleasures of the ghetto or its perceived uniqueness and vibrancy, although his work shares these perspectives with other writers of urban picturesque, as well as their interest in ethnographic detail; more than this, however, his work conveys an effort to understand his own impulse to investigate these areas, and to explain their appeal to others. His work is unique among writers of the urban picturesque precisely for the ways in which it grapples with being a genteel writer who not only views and depicts the life of the ghetto, but participates in it.

This complex and problematic class position is most fully explored in Hapgood’s 1910 collection of sketches *Types from City Streets*, the most comprehensive attempt in the era’s literature to understand the social and aesthetic appeal of rough people and places for the bourgeoisie. In its navigation of distance from the ghetto and absorption into it, *Types* manifests a resurgence of the mystical picturesque, but it also charts a new trajectory for the bourgeois

²⁰⁹ Under Steffens stewardship, the *Advertiser* “ran stories that possibly for the first time appealed to both the reading public uptown who wanted to peek across the ‘Social Gulf’ and subjects who found affirmation in the fact that their lives were deemed newsworthy” – yet written about otherwise than sensationally (Dowling 124).

liberalism engendered by this way of seeing: the bohemian, for whom aesthetic engagement with roughness is not an expression of compassion, but rather an attempt to transcend the constraints of middle-class life and embody an alternative form of morality derived from the authenticity and vibrancy attributed to the urban ghetto. In this work, Hapgood can be read as offering the prose version of Whitman's ecstatic communion with structurally distanced others, and as sharing his belief in the moral and spiritual necessity both of observing and taking part in the life of the streets. Yet where Whitman, in much of his poetry, observes the limits of his perception but nonetheless creates an authorial persona that is a rapturous and literary version of a Bowery b'hoj, Hapgood's textual presence is that of an educated member of the bourgeoisie drawn to the slums and welcome there by long association, but nonetheless always a visitor. His appreciation for the picturesque both makes available the beauty of the common, and demarcates the class position that necessitates its aestheticization.

Types chronicles excursions to the Bowery and the Lower East Side, alternating between first- and third-person perspectives, as well as giving first-person accounts of other episodes in the author's life that serve to illustrate his class position and its relation to aesthetic taste. The leaps in perspective obscure the organizing principle of the book, not least because the text itself presents ambivalent positions on perceiving the ghetto as picturesque. At times, beliefs which Hapgood states in first person are also voiced by characters whose aestheticization of poverty is depicted as a type of false bohemianism. As in Bunner's much briefer sketch of the bohemian, Hapgood's depictions expose the contradiction of class and aesthetics at the heart of the bohemian subculture that was then emerging among bourgeois American men. Whereas for Bunner, however, the only true Bohemian is a European immigrant, Hapgood makes this identity available to Americans. He opens the possibility that through seeing right and feeling right, a

bourgeois person can become a bohemian, a figure which Hapgood depicts as fleeing from the dis-ease of bourgeois culture to the vitality of the ghetto, and as repudiating the incessant striving associated with his class and embracing instead a sensuous and intellectually alive idleness. Yet the American bohemian is, in Hapgood's representations, incapable of fully liberating himself from the dialectic of enervation and frenzied drive to achievement that defines the American middle class.²¹⁰ As in Emerson's mystical picturesque, pictorial sight is both a means of transcending one's finite self by absorbing the world beyond and of defining one's subjective position. In Hapgood's text, this subjectivity is radically inscribed by class position: picturesque aesthetics are simultaneously the portal to another mode of being and a boundary-line of class privilege. For Hapgood, the capacity to take pleasure in potentially offensive objects retains its existential or spiritual function, but transcendence is fleeting: the self is never dissolved, because no matter how much otherness one admires or absorbs, one cannot, ultimately, transcend one's class.

In providing a sustained investigation of genteel perspectives of roughness and connecting this viewing position to the emergence of the bohemian, *Types* is the fullest literary expression of the Gilded Age urban picturesque. It is also the final one, with the exception of Hapgood's article in *Century Magazine*, "The Picturesque Ghetto" (1917). This piece reiterates in brief Hapgood's ideas about the Jewish ghetto published in *Spirit of the Ghetto*, and includes illustrations by the same artist, Jacob Epstein. It presents, without the ambivalence of *Types*, the view that "[i]f one has the talent for knowing people of all sorts, one may never lack color,

²¹⁰ Hapgood's depiction anticipates by a century the concept of the bourgeois bohemian: a person who combines the class affiliations and expectations of the respectable middle class with creative impulses and countercultural values. David Brooks, author of *BoBos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (2000), defines the bobo – a portmanteau of Bourgeois and Bohemian – as people "who can turn ideas and emotions into products...highly educated folk who have one foot in the bohemian world of creativity and another foot in the bourgeois realm of ambition and worldly success" (Introduction). It is precisely the straddling of these two worlds that Hapgood grapples with.

picturesqueness, and charm in New York. There are infinite variety, vitality, and life” (“Picturesque” 471). Moreover, “[t]he element of melancholy, a quality always expressed in the paintings and literature of the quarter, adds to this picturesqueness; for it lends to it sympathy and pathos” (“Picturesque” 472). There can be no clearer statement of the genteel perspective of the aesthetic pleasures of the ghetto, and the article reads as a rather dry guide to this viewing position and its benefit to American society. The edification of the ghetto is both aesthetic and intellectual, because there one comes into contact with “the intense joy of ideas” (“Picturesque” 471), which Hapgood perceives as absent in the broader American culture. The piece works as a literary transposition of Ruskin’s noble picturesque, invested in rendering the ghetto’s roughness through an appropriate intellectual and affective lens. Hapgood insists that, “interpreted by the sympathetic artist,” the “seriousness...melancholy...[and] high idealism” of the ghetto “illuminates even the sweat-shop, the push-cart market, and the ambitious business man” (“Picturesque” 473). This is not the picturesque that provides mere charm; the artist properly attuned to his surroundings will see beyond the ghetto’s colorful surface, perceive the past brought stoically if gracelessly – the Jews “do not understand what is light and graceful” – into the present, and thereby gain access to “meaning and a certain kind of beauty” (Hapgood, “Picturesque” 469-470). As in earlier renderings of New York’s picturesqueness, Hapgood’s ghetto is a uniquely American version of this aesthetic, which evokes “the contemporaneous thing, the way the old culture meets and strives with the new ideas, the conflict between Old World and New World” (Hapgood, “Picturesque” 471). Where the tower of Calais merely persists, its roughness a testament to stoic endurance, the picturesque ghetto and ghetto resident are roughened by the friction between past and present. Pictorial sight fixes, long enough for aesthetic appreciation, a process of becoming.

After this point, however, the picturesque ceases to be a compelling frame for the “formation-stir” of American progress. The bourgeois lover of low life drops the frame provided by picturesque aesthetics, and the anxiety about class position which this frame represents. Naturalism, critical realism, and muckraking reporting had, before Hapgood’s belated article, already taken up the work of representing poverty as a social problem; meanwhile, a new generation ready to break with Victorian tradition was producing ever greater numbers of youth in search of the liberatory experiences perceived as available in rough neighbourhoods. When *Types* was published, Hapgood lived in Greenwich Village alongside other early American modernists, such as Edna St. Vincent Millay, Van Wyck Brooks, and Alfred Stieglitz, “who in the 1910s sought to redefine American culture with the moral ambiguities of immigrant and working-class life as their model” (Dowling 137). By “making the slums...neighborhoods in which cultural rebels sought ‘moral vacations’ from the realm of ‘Puritan conscience’” (Dowling 138), they helped to popularize the bohemian lifestyle first articulated by Hapgood. Transgressing the spatial and moral divide between gentility and roughness, these artists will contribute to the creation of the mythic Harlem sought by white Americans in the 1920s, and to the advent of Beat culture in the 1950s.²¹¹

Gandal traces a direct line from Riis and Crane to bohemian and hipster writers such as Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, and Norman Mailer. For Gandal, such a line is possible because, in embracing the spectacle of the slums, “Riis and Crane were absorbing a slum style into their own middle-class representations (and so it could be said that it was the lower class

²¹¹ Understanding why picturesque aesthetics are or are not popular in a given historical moment is a complex process. For instance, James Agee and Walker Evans’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) is arguably a direct heir to Riis’s work (while bringing a more self-critical lens to the position of genteel observer), and *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1941) shares strong resemblances to the romantic realism of the 1890s. The ways such works function similarly to or differently from those of the Gilded Age would be an interesting topic for further study.

that was converting the middle class to its aesthetics)” (133). Such a conversion might be evident in the bohemians and hipsters of mid-century who would follow writers like Kerouac through rough neighborhoods in search of “ecstasy [...] joy, kicks, darkness, music,” wishing to be “anything but what I was so drearily, a ‘white man’ disillusioned” (Kerouac 180).²¹² Hapgood’s work differs from Riis and Crane’s focus on the slum as spectacle, but is arguably the more direct antecedent to twentieth-century bohemians – although their rebelliousness and rejection of their class are more complete – because his text presents the ghetto as a place offering experiences in which the middle class can participate if in possession of a certain aesthetic taste. This aesthetic is also the basis of a “bohemian ethics [wherein] the relation one is supposed to establish with oneself is no longer control but aliveness, honesty, authenticity, and a liberation that results in joy” (Gandal 131). Hapgood shares with Crane this sense of “rebel or bohemian morality, that holds up the tough and the streetwise slum dweller as an ethical paragon” (Gandal 137). However, while Riis’s work upholds middle-class ethics, if incorporating into them an aestheticized view of the ghetto, and Crane’s ghetto narratives abandon the middle-class perspective entirely, Hapgood depicts the bourgeois subject in his conversion to lower-class ethics; the bohemian thus emerges as being specifically a middle-class person in flight from the culture into which he was born.²¹³ The cultural rebels of the mid-

²¹² That Kerouac specifically wishes to erase his whiteness and “exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America” (180) points to the ways in which race increasingly defined middle-class aestheticization of poorer people in America. That he defines himself specifically as a “white man” also indicates the ways in which gender are implicated in picturesque aesthetics. Gandal points to work by Kathy Acker as participating in hipster/bohemian conventions, but it arguably remains the case that uncritical fetishization of structurally distanced others is most commonly articulated by male artists. The reasons for this should be considered in another study.

²¹³ For the post-war writers, middle-class status did not necessarily mean being part of the relatively affluent bourgeoisie represented by Hapgood, Bunner and other writers of the urban picturesque. Rather than strictly class privilege, writers like Kerouac might be seen as fleeing “the earnest conformity to some external law of the petty bourgeois” (Eagleton 32), or the conventional pieties of respectability, hard work, and domesticity.

twentieth century are the heirs of gentleman adventurers in the slums and bourgeois lovers of the picturesque, however, aestheticizing the slums was for this new generation not a reification of middle-class status, but a rejection of it.

Hapgood's introduction to *Types from City Streets* positions him as a direct descendent of Whitman, albeit one whose early life was spent in more elite circles. Calling himself "an intellectual and esthetic adventurer" (9),²¹⁴ Hapgood posits that "the essence of democracy is to believe that the common things are the best; that most things deeply worth while are accessible to almost everybody" (9). Such a beginning indicates that he adventures out of the realms of the class into which he was born, and that his intellectual and aesthetic preferences have led him away from the lifestyle accorded to the privileged and towards "the common things"; Hapgood connects the ability to perceive the beauty of the common to the democratic project, reinforcing the relation between seeing right, feeling right, and the health of American nation. *Types from City Streets* is, he explains, "a volume of sketches intended to throw light upon the charm of what from one point of view is the 'ordinary' person – careless, human, open, democratic" (10). The language echoes that of Whitman's 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, in which the picturesquely free and open common person figures, above political or cultural elites, as the presiding spirit of the nation. For Hapgood, as for Whitman, the ability to see beauty in the common is a means of erasing hierarchies of virtue, but this introduction makes clear that his effort "to throw light" on the ordinary person is written for the benefit of those for whom such people might remain in shadow.

Throughout, Hapgood militates against the idea of poorer people as "the other half," at the same time as he works to justify writing about them by claiming that ghettos are aesthetically

²¹⁴ All references to Hapgood for the remainder of this chapter are to *Types from City Streets* unless otherwise specified.

and morally valuable for the genteel classes to observe. His introduction goes on to explain that, “interest in such things [as the Bowery ‘bum’ or the Jewish pedlar], with no sociological or reformatory purpose, is not commonly approved of in our community. And yet is not only the literary interest of such a disinterested attitude unquestionable, but also it is true that without such genuine interest and sympathy the real facts, without which no reform is possible, can not be ascertained” (14). The reference to “our community” sets up the position which he maintains throughout his work, as a member of the bourgeoisie familiar with ghettos and thus able to critique the former and offer insight into the latter. This position also marks his difference from that of Whitman, whose “our” is invariably that of the American nation, or of human beings generally, and never a demarcation of a social class. Hapgood is writing from and to a class whose knowledge of poverty has been gleaned through such works as *How the Other Half Lives*, and thus he makes a partially-veiled pitch to middle-class readers that his book is sociologically useful, even as he denounces this approach as dehumanizing to the subjects under view. What he calls disinterested is not the position abstracted from personal desire of eighteenth-century aesthetic discourse, but rather a position that replaces an interest in poorer people as problems to be solved with an aesthetic interest which he relates to human, personal interest. He wishes readers to approach the people in his work not “as outsiders who force their sympathy” but “as human beings moved by spontaneous interest in the lives of their kind” (13). The “lives of their kind” offers a correction to Riis’s “other half,” which in its very phraseology renders those represented as being structurally, essentially different from their viewers. Appealing to spontaneous emotion, to a felt response to others (even when they are represented as “types”), Hapgood echoes the eighteenth-century language of taste, in which aesthetic judgement is expressive of moral sentiment. This connection between moral and aesthetic judgement does not

only apply to the bourgeoisie; the virtue of the Bowery tough is, Hapgood argues, expressed most fundamentally in his taste, and by aligning one's taste with that of poorer people, the bourgeois person can become more moral. Hapgood thus moves away from the more cynical depiction of aesthetic interest in poverty presented by Matthews, and expands on Bunner's call for sympathetic observation, to contend that aestheticizing the slums can yield not only worthwhile literature but also positive social change. The nature of this change, however, is profoundly unclear, and this chapter concludes with a consideration of the ongoing social ramifications of unifying aesthetic and ethical responses to poverty.

Hapgood follows both Bunner and Matthews in warning that the remote sympathy that can be generated by representations of poverty is unwelcome by those towards whom it is directed; he presents it as a type of aggression. Hapgood's frank scorn for the trivialities and superficiality of the class into which he was born, and his admiration for Bowery toughs, move beyond the emergent liberal cosmopolitanism predicated on the ability to aestheticize difference and sympathize with the poor; he flatly rejects depictions of low life "for charitable purposes," and the motivations of the affluent who consume them "to relieve distress or their own consciences" (Hapgood 13). Instead, he seeks immersion into the life of the ghetto, which provides the intellectual and sensory stimuli necessary to be fully alive. Hapgood's need to distance himself from the condescending reformist impulse evident in much writing about the poor results in a pronounced effort to align himself with the "types" he represents. Throughout this work, he depicts himself not as an "outsider" in search of local color, but as the friend of the Bowery characters he wishes to make legible to the affluent reader. This effort, however, at times results in problematic language:

A civilized man from up-town who, over a glass of beer, will converse with a representative of low life, with, perhaps, a “bum,” or an ex-thief, with any half-developed being he may meet, and thus convey to his lowly friend an idea of what his own life and interests are, is in a position to do far more human good than the conventional immaculate reformer who hates to get near the people he is trying to help. (Hapgood 27)

It is unclear whether “half-developed” is intended to mimic the language of the wealthy, but such a designation, alongside the phrase “his lowly friend” indicate the difficulty Hapgood experiences in his attempt to straddle the upper and lower classes. At times, his prose reads like an instruction manual for cultivating a taste for slum life. Arguing that people who have grown up in the slums are “full of rich material for literature,” Hapgood informs his readers: “You can take not only your plots from the lives of these people, but you can also derive the vigor and vitality, the figurative quality, of your style, from the slang and racy expressions of your lowly friends” (22). By “low,” he explains in his Preface, he means “to include any section of human life or character which is open to the public, so to speak; anything in which special privileges, or advantages due to wealth or social position, play no part” (10). His is, however, rather a broader definition than might be strictly applicable to the “types” available for view in this book, which do not include the lowly clerk or shopkeeper of middling means, who apparently do not possess the same intellectual or aesthetic appeal. His admiration for the Bowery bum and other “lowly” types indicates that for Hapgood, this designation is meant as a term of affection for those outside conventional society; it implies the lack of artifice or “secretiveness” which is “a bourgeois characteristic” (Hapgood 22). Yet it is unlikely that his friends in the Bowery would

appreciate the title and, moreover, the idea of lowliness directly undercuts the vision of democracy which Hapgood states as his ideal.

This social hierarchization constitutes the work's fatal flaw, and has likely contributed – along with a confusing and outmoded form – to its relative obscurity today. *Types* is structured around a peculiar argument, which is both ideologically incoherent and socially unhelpful. It rests on Hapgood's interest in arguing for the “bum” or Bowery tough as a type of aristocrat, and thereby in proving an equivalency between the very poor and the very wealthy:

Now, the very lowest people, like the very highest, in the social scale, come very close to the facts of life. They are, through poverty, through toughness, through crime, brought up hard against the “limit.” Like the highest, they are often cultivated, in a real way, through real experience. They are uneducated and dirty, but they have the simplicity and directness which is the mark of the aristocrat.

(17)

Hapgood's certainty that poverty fosters an authenticity unavailable to the bourgeoisie follows in the American tradition of seeking spiritual and existential enrichment among the poor, but his insistence on attributing similar qualities to the very rich is never substantiated. He returns to this comparison many times, and thus it forms a discordant leitmotif throughout the book.

His position stems from an abhorrence of bourgeois tastes and values, and from a belief that the self-possession of the very poor is akin to that of the very rich. Hapgood's absolute rejection of the middle class is evident in such bizarre passages as the following:

Everything, in this time of democracy, leads to the people, even literature. We have very little literature now, for the reason that there is very little that expresses the highest and the lowest taste. There is an enormous middle class that reads,

and so our literature is middle class. When society becomes better sifted, when more definite classes are again formed, and there is a larger highest class, then we may again expect literature of a high order. And that highest class will appreciate literature which deals with the lowest class because of the similarity in taste existing between the two social extremes. (27)

In his repudiation of bourgeois culture, Hapgood also skewers “genteel” literature; he particularly dislikes novels concerned “with a lot of inessential, meaningless refinements” which he terms “over-civilized Henry Jamesism” (24). This language offers a by-now familiar critique of gentility, but does so in a way that raises the question of who Hapgood thinks is likely to be reading his book, and to whom his defence of the aristocracies – both wealthy and poor – is addressed. The most troubling aspect of the passage above, however, is Hapgood’s anticipation of a more established class hierarchy and the connection he makes between democracy and an enervated and ineffectual middle class; he apparently looks forward to the decline of both. In all, this aspect of *Types* ultimately accomplishes only the potential alienation of those middle-class readers whose sympathies he presumably wishes to obtain for the lower classes; I have included it in my discussion in order frankly to acknowledge the essential failure of a work which I nonetheless feel merits critical attention, and to expose the problematic position inhabited by a writer whose work expresses both the wish to shed his class affiliation and the impossibility of doing so.

The basic claims of this work which makes it a worthwhile object of study in a discussion of picturesque aesthetics and which Hapgood unfortunately frames within this obtuse language of class hierarchy, are that poverty creates a vivid and intense existence and that genteel people become not only more ethical but also more fully alive when they engage with those who live in

the slums. Most significantly, Hapgood's efforts to position himself as a bohemian, and thus as an insider to ghetto culture despite his class status, indicate the ways that picturesque aesthetics contributed not only to liberalizing American morality but also to the absorption of roughness into first countercultural and ultimately mainstream culture. Maxine Greene, in her Preface to *Types*, observes that Hapgood is "in the romantic tradition when he chose the spontaneity of the poor as superior to the ... hardworking business man" (vii). This tradition, given lasting form by "Jean-Jacques Rousseau and William Wordsworth" (Greene vii), is part of the philosophical and literary context for the popularity of picturesque aesthetics, but as the previous chapter shows, the picturesque tradition as practiced in America does something new: aestheticizing poverty becomes a means of experiencing a sense of unity with the object under view.

Pictorial sight can render the eye a porous organ, allowing it to absorb the "not-me" into the self and alter the perceiving subject. In the works discussed earlier in this chapter, this change is figured as the development of sympathy. Although writers like Bunner and Matthews represent the imperfection of the visual medium, the former, at least, follows Emerson and Whitman in taking the position that visual contact with poverty can generate moral sentiments towards suffering which one has not personally experienced. Hapgood, in his Introduction, appears to share this view, although he asserts the need to represent poverty in order to generate the "genuine interest and sympathy ... without which no reform is possible" (14) on the page following his excoriation of those who only "pay any attention at all to 'low' things" when "the object for doing so is reform" (13). This paradoxical stance can be read as an unintentional but powerful articulation of the problem of liberal sympathy: reform is unethical, because condescending, but not caring is unethical, because callous; ergo, the only ethical position is to care, and yet not wish to produce social change.

The only way forward, in Hapgood's analysis, is aesthetic. To view the poor as picturesque can allow the viewer to perceive them sympathetically – that is, to truly sympathize with their lifestyles and characters, to create an affinity – and thus to extract oneself from the paralysis induced by class stratification. Aesthetic taste is, however, an imperfect cure. Its limitations are embodied in Hapgood himself, whose autobiographical sketches depict the author alternating between bohemian “low liver” and member of the enervated bourgeoisie whom he appears to despise. The section “Meditations of an American Bohemian” begins with this self-depiction:

I am a Low Liver. I have known some men who would call me a High Liver, but the fact that I have known such men shows how low a liver I am. Else how could I have met men who thought me a High Liver.

I remember that when I was in Germany the students whom I knew thought that I ate and drest too expensively. Do all that I could – and my ability in that line is not mean – I could not rid them of the idea that I was a dude. I wore only one suit of clothes – and that was an old suit – all winter, but my Socialist friends detected me by the cut of it. (Hapgood 184)

This characterization is notable for two things: first, Hapgood's evident wish is to emphasize his association with the “low,” both through his primary assertion of being a Low Liver and by referencing his acquaintances who were sufficiently low to think him High – which nonetheless excludes him from fully belonging to the Low. Second, his desire as a student is to shed the appearance of gentility, and he expresses a humorous frustration at his inability to do so. Despite choosing friends who are poorer than he, Hapgood's tastes and his ability to satisfy them betray his class identity: “how could I pretend to be one of the people and a real student when I gave on

average twenty-five cents for dinner and forty pfennige (ten cents) for breakfast?" (185). The solution to this conundrum is to become a writer who draws both pleasure and subject matter from the ghettos, who is able "to loaf intelligently and temperamentally" (118), who has not "give[n] up the habit of trying to make his work a part of his real life – an expression of his visions of beauty and character" (98) – and who is thus a bohemian.

"Meditations of An American Bohemian" goes on to chronicle various genteel pleasures, such as laying on his sofa and smoking "a good cigaret [sic], with fine, curling smoke" (188) before an evening getting drunk at a Hungarian restaurant; there, he observes with "satisfaction... a lot of faces, mostly dark and foreign, but most of them smiling or talking with animation" (190-191). He orders "an unusually good wine," which raises the cost of his dinner "to seventy cents" – a sum which positions his taste as extravagant in comparison to his fellow diners but laughably cheap for his class; imbibing this wine, Hapgood reports:

I only knew that I saw with progressively keener insight that there were a number of very interesting things in the room. The glasses sparkled with rather more than their usual cheerfulness. The color of the wine seemed wonderfully rich and wonderfully symbolic of things not purely of sensation. The thought, rather irrelevantly, perhaps, of Eastern seas, of magic, and of Keats came to me for a moment. I became aware, too, of the deeper meaning in the dark faces about me.... They seemed pleased not at any little trivial circumstance that was amusing, but because they were feeling, in physical content, the satisfaction of their own deeper needs and the beauty and interest of their companions. Trivial in its origin, of food, drink and leisure, the feeling nevertheless had something of the

religious depth which is impossible without thoroughgoing happiness. Spinoza was supremely religious because he was capable of supreme happiness. (191)

Taking his cue from the Romantics, but immersed in an apodictically late-nineteenth-century American scene, Hapgood digresses on the sensuous and imaginative pleasures of heightened sensibility. Pictorial sight – aided by the good wine – makes available not mere surfaces but the feelings and “deeper needs” of the dark and foreign people around him. Their perceived ability to access “religious depths” of experience through the trivial medium of a night’s pleasure functions for Hapgood as an ontological lesson, one which he documents in order both to demonstrate his credibility as a guide to aestheticizing roughness and to convey the spiritual need for unity with the foreign others to whom the uninitiated members of his class are strangers. By terming this sensual and intellectual experience “bohemian,” Hapgood sets up a position inhabited to this day by young members of the bourgeoisie desirous of intense and authentic experience – and also, often, of an intellectual framework that posits such experience as philosophically meaningful.

The following sketch in the “American Bohemian” section, “In a Disagreeable Mood,” reads as Hapgood’s cranky hangover. He chronicles, with some self-mockery, though not enough to undermine his real sense of effrontery, minor irritations such as having to wait for his bath in the morning (191), or the crowds on the elevated car (194) – incidents, presumably, that would not even rate as inconveniences in the lives of the lowly whom he loves, though this is not a comparison Hapgood indulges. The dynamic these two sketches set up – Hapgood as intrepid adventurer of the urban streets and Hapgood as effete gentleman – persists throughout the work. The section “An American Bohemian Abroad” begins with the sketch “Loafing at Waikiki”: “I had a gentle case of nervous prostration and spent several weeks on the beach of Waikiki” (220);

“I, this gently prostrate man” (221) is depicted enjoying the warmth and languor, and watching without being seen the island’s natives performing a Hula dance (223). Hapgood here occupies the conventional viewing position of the picturesque traveler in search of local colour; he emphasizes the neurasthenia that necessitates such a sojourn, but does not critique either his genteel malady or its remedy. The bohemian thus emerges, in Hapgood’s text, as being thoroughly a sub-type of the bourgeoisie, one for whom the pleasures of roughness are explicitly an antidote to the enervating forces of material comfort.

As a result of its class origins, bohemianism is a precarious state, and one which can become permanently unavailable. Several of Hapgood’s sketches concern characters who were formerly loafers and sensual idlers among the poor, but whose bourgeois drive to succeed has ultimately caught up with them. Other sketches suggest that the portal to otherness opened by pictorial sight can close when the bohemian becomes too aware of his viewing position. In “The Limitations of Our Country,” a sketch in the section “An American Bohemian,” Hapgood reverts to the third person to depict a conversation between two men in a downtown café. At first the men are pleased with their view of the “happy crowd of the unnoticed and the unambitious” (215), and feel “that they [are] are part of their surroundings” (216). The picturesqueness of the scene has absorbed them. Presently, though, one man begins to talk of his peregrinations among “the common people.” He finds that, [t]he contented masses of humanity gently vibrating through the broad street flooded with warm and liquid light, make me hate my individuality, despise my intelligence and my ambitions, and minimize the importance of everything except the essentials of life” (217). His companion scoffs and calls him “a gentle sensualist,” for whom the essentials include “a good cigar, an armchair, and a pleasant companion.... You idealize the instincts of the original human animal and, like Walt Whitman, who was also a very civilized

man, you, through excess of refinement, put the merely pleasant in the category of the excellent” (217). The exchange suggests that, for the bourgeois *flâneur*, immersion into the masses is merely another sensory stimulus to pleasure, and that he is not capable of absorption into the crowd which he aestheticizes.

The problem with the American bohemian is that his powers of pictorial sight are the means of both his pleasure and his art, and the drive to produce this art cannot be extricated from the desire to succeed as an artist. Hence, the older man accuses the younger of merely using these experiences in the ghetto “to further [his] own egoistic ends of material gain” (219). The dialogue reads as a possible exchange between two aspects of Hapgood himself: the man drawn downtown in search of pleasure but unable to experience this pleasure without turning it into literature, and the man who perceives this transmutation as undermining the pleasure itself. The former is explicitly related to Hapgood by his statement that, “[t]he good people are they who never try to go higher, because they are at the bottom or at the top. It is the attempt, and not the deed, confounds us” (218). Yet they are both ultimately dismissed as “fakers”: the younger man says “I am a hypocrite. But so are you. All modern, metropolitan persons who compete in our fierce struggle are hypocrites when they pretend to enjoy anything. The nearest we can come to enjoyment is to see what we miss. When I look now at the mob passing along the avenue, they mean nothing to me. The mood has passed. Let’s go up-town, where we belong” (219). The scene moves from the suggestion that wandering among “common people” lays bare the essential and authentic experience of life, to depicting such excursions as hypocritical, because inextricable from the striving bourgeois mentality that necessitates such excursions. They are variations on Matthews’s *De Ruyter*, believing themselves beyond picturesque tourism and immersed in ghetto life, but in fact only there for copy. Even Whitman, elsewhere invoked

approvingly as “the great poet” who “would have reveled in the scene” of a downtown bar in which a rich man is floundering (137), is here depicted as a mere sensualist. If pictorial sight is necessary to touch the beauty of the common, then this capacity is also the stigmata of wealth: it marks the viewer’s social position to himself, and makes impossible his full or permanent absorption into the crowd.

Picturesque aesthetics are consequently a tool about which Hapgood is profoundly ambivalent: he uses the term to designate the ghetto’s appeal, but also disavows it as being necessary only for those without a full understanding of low life. For instance, Hapgood claims that, for the young reporter, “a thoroughly commonplace vaudeville show means something wonderful to his ingenuous mind and senses, and the slang of the Bowery tough stands out in his imagination as something picturesque and significant”; such a view is a sign of the young reporter’s “[i]ntellectual and moral superficiality” (100). Hapgood’s disdain might seem odd in the context of his directive, in the first section, “Literature in Low Life”: “go to the Bowery and talk with the first Irish tough or east-side Jew you may meet. You will be struck with the vigorous, straight-forward, and genuine character of his thought and expression. His language is largely figurative and yet altogether simple. It is highly picturesque, and at the same time goes straight to the point” (20). His characterizations here and elsewhere of poorer people’s speech is a precise illustration of Emerson’s theory, which he explains in “Nature,” of “picturesque language” (23):

Because of this radical correspondence between visible things and human thoughts, savages, who have only what is necessary, converse in figures. As we go back in history, language becomes more picturesque, until its infancy, when it is all poetry; or all spiritual facts are represented by natural symbols. The same

symbols are found to make the original elements of all languages.... This immediate dependence of language upon nature, this conversion of an outward phenomenon into a type of somewhat in human life, never loses its power to affect us. It is this which gives that piquancy to the conversation of a strong-natured farmer or back-woodsman, which all men relish.²¹⁵ (22)

Like “savages,” the “lowest people... talk not of trivialities, as your sheltered comfortable person...but of fundamental and universal things – of what they deeply need” (Hapgood 17). Both Emerson and Hapgood believe words are most powerful when they convey the “necessary elements of ... being” (Hapgood 18). The conversation of those who live “close to the bone,” to use Thoreau’s evocative phrase, relates these fundamental necessities; their words are “fasten[ed]...to visible things” (Emerson 23), to “hard facts” (Hapgood 17). Hence, in “low life” there is “many a man or woman who has the strange gift of expression, the power, in a few words, of composing a spiritual picture” (Hapgood 164). Such figurative language is powerful because an authentic expression of the speaker’s life and environment; he conveys “spiritual facts.” His language, like his experience, is genuine. Whereas the speech of “the middle-class person” is “confused and pointless” (Hapgood 18), those who speak directly and forcefully of “the simple things” are not guilty of using the “rotten diction” (Emerson 23) that obfuscates meaning and sentiment. It is as though privation strips away a deadening layer between the self and the world, and makes possible a spiritual link between fact and word.

It is this spiritual element, the authenticity to which rough speech gives form, which the person simply perceiving the tough’s picturesqueness does not access. The reporter’s failure, for Hapgood, is that he remains on “the surface of life.... But he never gets to the ultimate” (100).

²¹⁵ This is, in Ian F. A. Bell’s analysis, a “sensationalist account of language,” first articulated by John Locke (291).

This is Hapgood's version of the low picturesque, a mere captivation with outward forms that lacks any sense of the object's true character. If, for Hapgood, the ghetto is picturesque, its aesthetic pleasures are signifiers for the ontological necessities such neighbourhoods can satisfy. His ability to enjoy these pleasures is, presumably, what allowed him, as a young reporter, to go beyond the superficial and become not only familiar with but accepted into ghetto life. As opposed to "[t]he reporter whose life sinks to the level of his work" (98), Hapgood has "raise[d] his work to the level of his life" and is thus "a reporter no longer" (98). Despite his moments of nervous prostration and drinking whisky-and-sodas on ships in the Chinese sea (224), Hapgood takes pains to show that he not only appreciates but feels part of the life of the ghetto. Accordingly, many of his sketches portray his friendships with the Bowery toughs and other denizens of the underclasses. Discussing the uneasy relationship between the thief and the bum, Hapgood writes: "One night I was walking down the Bowery with my friend, the ex-thief, when I met my friend, the tough. We all had a drink together, and it was amusing to see them eye each other, and watch to take the other at a disadvantage. There was a kind of hostile equality between them" (51). Hapgood figures himself here as not only viewer but participator, and as being sufficiently accepted into "low" society that he can mediate between two otherwise incompatible factions. The tough even refers to him as "Hutch" (51). What this sociality demonstrates is that the ability to see the beauty of the common can dissolve boundaries between individuals of different classes, even if it cannot remove the stain of one's class, and this is the democratic potential Hapgood perceives within the picturesque.

Such a democratizing function explains the insistence, in *Types*, that there is a reciprocal relationship between the writer and his objects of depiction. In "The Pathos of Low Life," Hapgood recounts "a visit to the lower Bowery for one of those 'near,' tho to some people

unsavory, experiences for which his nerve and his intelligence sometimes longed” (158). At the bar to which the narrator’s friend Jackie Doodles takes him, a woman is singing “songs of the peasantry, and they had a spontaneity, sweetness, and beauty which seemed in striking contrast to the surroundings, a contrast which was only seeming, however, for wit and charm spring in unlimited quantity from the most sordid environment” (159). The longing, and its satisfaction, are not materially different from Bunner’s compulsion to visit slums, but Hapgood’s position within the scene is new: he is a participant, and this participation is made possible by his relationships with ghetto residents. After her songs, the woman “burst out into a violent fit of profanity” (159), and the man from up-town tosses her a dollar and asks her to sing another song. To this she replies: “You dude! You blankety blank, you come down here in your swell clothes and pipe us off. You’re a detective, that’s what you are! Well, what are you going to do about it?” In an outburst that could have meant trouble for the up-town man, she tells him “who these guys are”:

the whole name of every adventurous spirit about her. She did it with an elan and bravado, a temperamental violence, a pure joy in the defiance of the thing that had an element of the picturesque.

She certainly was an artist.

But it was lucky for the up-town investigator that Jackey Doodles was with him, and that some of the gorillas knew he was “right.” (Hapgood160)

Hapgood’s designation of the woman as an “artist” is true in two senses: she has the “low” person’s gift for creating beauty, and she has also created for the uptown viewer a picturesque scene; the line’s isolation, and the “certainly” convey a mildly ironic tone that suggests her artistry is, in both cases, unwitting. The woman’s outburst has “an element of the picturesque,” a

phrase that indicates the outsider's perspective yet refuses to commit to it. The scenario depicts the tensions inherent in cross-class encounters, and also displays the way in which Hapgood's art has become intermeshed with his life. His sketch frees him – for a moment at least – from the shame of being a faker: his unification of aesthetic and affective responses to the “sordid environment” functions not simply as an expression of moral sentiment but as a reorganization of social hierarchy signified by the bourgeois man's acceptance into ghetto life.

Fakery or falseness is the great crime of the bourgeoisie, and one of which Hapgood's Bowery toughs are never guilty – even when they are making picturesque art of their own lives. In the section “The Real Bowery,” Hapgood discusses Bowery resident Chuck Connors, whom he calls “the supreme arbiter of Bowery taste. ‘De real ting,’ ‘on de level,’ are two phrases which best express the canons of Bowery morality” (33).²¹⁶ Connors, to whom Hapgood devotes ten pages, much of it rendered in dialect, is invoked as the living embodiment of ghetto authenticity. Hapgood chronicles many conversations with this “aristocrat of the Bowery” (42), in a section which works to document both Connors's status as genuine Bowery tough and Hapgood's status as a bohemian able to imbibe the philosophy of this exemplary Low Liver. Connors was, however, already “famous simply for his day-to-day behavior” (Sante 125). He had gained notoriety from a collection of his witticisms, *Bowery Life* (1904), published by *Police Gazette* publisher Richard K. Fox, as well as from appearances on the stage: “In 1896 he appeared in a quasi-autobiographical sketch oddly called ‘From Broadway to the Bowery,’ ... mounted at [Oscar] Hammerstein's theater [on Broadway]” (Sante 129). Hapgood does not reference these

²¹⁶ Luc Sante, whose interest in documenting “low life” might make him a descendant of Hapgood and Bunner, observes that Connors “is said to have originated such catch phrases as ‘the real thing,’ ‘oh, good night,’ ‘oh, forget it,’ and ‘under the table’ (meaning drunk)” (127), a legacy that suggests Connors's cultural influence.

specific works featuring Connors, although he does inform readers of the intersections between Connors's life and the Bowery's aestheticization:

He is well known to a certain set of newspaper men and sporting characters, but he has personal and intellectual qualities which would render him attractive to any refined esthete who could penetrate the disagreeable atmosphere in which he lives. He is said to be the original Chimmie Fadden,²¹⁷ and certainly he figures in many a Chinatown tale under his own and assumed names [...] At present he makes a living by occasionally guiding the curious stranger through Chinatown, going on the stage for short engagements, and organizing Bowery balls. (32)

The first sentence distances Hapgood from less sophisticated visitors to the Bowery, those who can only appreciate Connors's roughness and ribaldry and cannot commune with him on a personal or philosophical level. The second sentence informs readers of Connors's mythic status, which makes the friendly relationship Hapgood goes on to depict appear more noteworthy. The third sentence is either an obfuscation or a misunderstanding. Luc Sante, in his detailed research of New York's ghettos in the late nineteenth century, describes Connors's role as guide thus:

Connors's principal occupation in the nineties was as a "lobbygow," a pidgin Chinese term for tour guide. Connors would take parties of slummers around the Bowery, where he had a certain amount of competition, and through Chinatown, where he had the field all to himself.²¹⁸ Chinatown was his turf. He knew the people and enough of the language to make for a veneer of verisimilitude on a

²¹⁷ Edward Townsend's famous fictional Bowery tough.

²¹⁸ Hapgood calls him "the mayor of Chinatown" (32).

spiel that was principally fable. He would point out innocent-looking pedestrians and identify them as notorious tong hatchet men, while any woman – Chinese or Caucasian – glimpsed in an upstairs window was liable to be labeled a “slave wife.” His prize exhibit was a spurious ‘opium den’ with a man and woman who “posed as addicts.” [...] Connors would not, of course, escort just anyone on these tours. Ordinary pikers could take the “haywagons” or “rubberneck wagons” that plied down from Times Square. Connors was much in demand as a guide for celebrities. (128-129)

Sante’s account makes it clear that Connors had a well-established business, complete with set-pieces to provide maximum shock value to his customers. Moreover, this “spiel” was prepared to give him an edge in a market crowded with slum tour guides, a fact which speaks to the type of effect that writing about the slums – both more and less sensational – produced on its middle-class readership.

That Connors was a particularly prized guide, primarily available to celebrities, suggests that his relationship with Hapgood may have been not purely disinterested friendship, but in fact a way to maintain and promote Connors’s status as ghetto legend. Hapgood was by then a well-known writer; his interest in Connors could certainly have been a means of shoring up the cultural capital of both men. By the time Hapgood was writing *Types*, Connors’s tourist business may have been less frequent, but this suggests only that the fad for slumming was (temporarily) in decline – although aesthetic interest in the ghetto was not.²¹⁹ Hapgood, however, gives no

²¹⁹ The fascination with Bowery life persisted, and Sante provides a detailed account of Connors’ imitators and influence until the end of the First World War (see pages 126-140). Moreover, between the 1930s and 1950s, films such as *Dead End* (1937), starring Humphrey Bogart, a series featuring The East Side Kids (*Bowery Blitzkrieg*, 1941; *Neath Brooklyn Bridge*, 1942; *Smart Alecks*, 1942, and others), and even horror films (*The Bowery Boys Meet the Monsters*, 1954) brought the Bowery tough into mainstream popular culture.

indication of the commercialization of Bowery culture. He does not want the marketplace to enter into his relations with his lowly friends, because commercial interests would contaminate the ethical function which, for Hapgood, these relationships possess. The social value of such cross-class friendships is that they indicate the possibility for a society in which class stratification does not isolate people of different classes from one another. Insofar as his equation of aristocrat and low liver can be made legible, it suggests that an aesthetics that values authenticity above all else can foster a *sensus communis* that transgresses class boundaries. Such a society would be thoroughly liberal and democratic, produced by the judgements and choices of its members, held together by the personal authority of affinity. “The whole point of aesthetic taste, as a model of spiritual community, is that it cannot be forced” (Eagleton 63). *Types* depicts a spiritual community predicated on shared tastes between bourgeois bohemian and tough. Such a community would be undermined if economic necessity were to enter into the relationships between more and less wealthy, or more or less socially powerful, individuals. Moreover, Hapgood values the tough because “the emotions he has are genuine” (44); to view him as manipulating his sentiment about the Bowery for monetary gain sullies this authenticity. Hapgood’s text conveys the ardent desire to exclude commerce from his experience of the ghetto, but it returns as his neurasthenic self, or the self whose writing cannot be extricated from a desire for recognition or financial success.

What the contradictory accounts provided by Hapgood and Sante indicate is, first, that the bourgeoisie had become entirely adept at aestheticizing ghettos, a fact which renders irrelevant Hapgood’s continual arguments for their aesthetic appeal; and second, that Hapgood is invested in a narrative of the ghetto’s authenticity which its commercialization by Connors and others would undermine. The broad popularity of picturesque aesthetics by the time of *Types*’s

publication is a fact which Hapgood's text assiduously excludes, or rewrites to position as a superficial appreciation of ghetto culture. His depictions of this culture and the ways it is by then participating in its own aestheticization thus read as naively credulous, or as attempts to preserve some facet of ghetto authenticity for those whom Hapgood sees as fully understanding its moral and spiritual lessons. Hapgood's description of one of Connors's appearances on stage provides a particularly poignant example:

Some time ago "Chuck Connors and Company" played for a few weeks at a Bowery vaudeville theater. Chuck's associates were all genuine Bowery characters. There was no "fake" about it. They all enacted themselves, talked Bowery slang, gave Bowery songs and dances, and reproduced the life with great fidelity. This was what Chuck said about it:

"It's de real t'ing. We don't act, we just play ourselves – see? We're a bunch of blokes and bundles from de Lane. The scene of our play is in Barney Flynn's saloon. Dere ain't no plot in me play, fer it's de real t'ing. Dere ain't no plot in life, is dere? De rest of de bunch has been rehearsed every day. But I never rehearse. I go on the stage and I talk what I want – see?" [...]

None of the actors exaggerated for the sake of stage effect. It was all in the low relief of life, admirably true and admirably indicative of that intense if ragged culture always attending the uncompromising living out of any set of conditions. (34-35)

There is no suggestion here of the two decades of slum plays that have brought Bowery life to theatres frequented by both more and less affluent people, nor of the pecuniary advantages such an endeavor might have had for its participants. Unlike the bohemian, whose aestheticization of

roughness bars him from full absorption into ghetto life, the Bowery resident can make himself picturesque without any loss of authenticity – particularly if he declines even to rehearse. Because it is the picturesque objects themselves, and not the bourgeois consumer, who are composing roughness as art, Hapgood can present the play as exemplary of a culture which he finds in every way more interesting, invigorating, and moral – because more authentic – than that of bourgeois society. Hapgood does not call the play picturesque; rather, it is “realistic to a degree” (35), a designation that removes the frame of a bourgeois viewer’s vision and posits the play’s ability to provide direct access to the life of the streets. Yet his description of the “intense if ragged culture” the play represents uses the terminology, and betrays the desires, associated with picturesque aesthetics for more than a century. Connors’s play, in its convincing artlessness, is the apotheosis of picturesque aesthetics, in which “every pleasing object more will please,/ As less the observer its intention sees” (Knight, *Landscape* 520-521). In both Connors’s self-conscious self-creation as Bowery character and in his stage appearances, the collapsing of picturesque object with its creator allows Hapgood to believe he is imbibing an unmediated experience of the ghetto, when in fact both the product and the demand for it are the perpetuation of an aesthetic tradition which has always functioned to mediate the relations between disparate classes.

While the class anxiety that drives Hapgood’s love of the common, and the language he uses to praise it, are well-established by the time of its publication, *Types* does chart new territory for the intersections of class and sentiment articulated by the picturesque. Hapgood’s chronicle of immersion into the ghetto marks a new manifestation of bourgeois liberalism, predicated not on tolerance or compassion, but on absorbing and enacting the values of structurally distanced others. While he understands and laments the damaging aspects of poverty – Connors’s wife, for

instance, is described as being killed by “the bad air and the general conditions of the Bowery” (42) – neither *Types* nor “The Picturesque Ghetto” convey any need for the reform which he ambivalently offers as requisite of the sympathy that aestheticizing the ghetto can engender. Rather, his works offer the hope that the forthrightness, vibrancy, and intensity he finds in ghetto life will overtake the emptiness of bourgeois culture. As in the Transcendentalist texts discussed in Chapter Two, in Hapgood’s work the picturesque is a means of unification with otherness which is also, in this text, a process by which moral sentiments become the site of personal agency.

This focus on personal experience over reform is to have far-reaching consequences for how liberals approach structural inequality. Newfield observes that “Emerson...devises a liberalism of moral relations, which is meant to suggest democratic interdependence; liberty exists only through ethical ties with the members of the overlapping communities to which one belongs” (9). *Types* testifies to the moral and spiritual necessity of creating precisely such ethical ties, and to the democratic possibilities inherent in “defin[ing] the free self through equitable relations to others” (Newfield 19). Yet, just as pictorial sight both offers and debar access to the ghetto, and just as the bourgeois bohemian both rejects and is defined by his class status, Hapgood aestheticizes the Bowery as an antidote to bourgeois insipidity while helping to inscribe Bowery values into bourgeois culture, neutering the social critique Hapgood sees as embedded in the ghetto and making it a commodity.

His ambivalent presentation of the bohemian, however, conveys the ambivalent function of aesthetics for the bourgeois subject. Pictorial sight allows someone sufficiently attuned to the beauty of the common to absorb it, and consequently to perceive differently behaviors, such as stealing or being a scantily-clad dancer, which are generally seen as immoral. It might be said

that, in response to the lack at the centre of bourgeois subjectivity so often represented as a sense of unreality, the affluent individual introjects the ideal of an Other whom he perceives as being characterized by authenticity. The bohemian, or the bourgeois subject as shaped by this ego ideal, thus perceives as altered his relation to social mores and expectations. The aesthetic in this sense makes possible “new forms of autonomy and self-determination, transforming the relations between law and desire, morality and knowledge, recasting the links between individual and totality and revising social relations on the basis of custom, affection and sympathy” (Eagleton 28). Yet at the same time, an affluent person who elides the suffering inherent in poverty and behaves as though certain types of aesthetic and moral judgment, or “low living,” can create “ethical ties” with structurally disadvantaged people, makes the locus of change entirely individual and undercuts movements for structural change, or “reform” efforts, which become aligned with conventions the bohemian wishes to repudiate.

If Hapgood’s work makes reform a suspect convention, then it also sets the stage for forms of resistance that arise within marginalized populations to be absorbed by bourgeois bohemian aesthetics. By inscribing as aesthetically pleasing a certain class of potentially suffering others, both their pain and possible resistance can become products for bourgeois consumption. This is one important way aesthetics work to “[insert] social power more deeply into the very bodies of those it subjugates, and so operat[e] as a supremely effective mode of political hegemony” (Eagleton 28).²²⁰ The mystical picturesque offers the possibility that a

²²⁰ Bramen notes the way that for Hapgood, “Socialism is to Jewish immigrants what ‘bonnets’ are to Italian women: quaint and charming indicators of cultural authenticity, which pose no real threat to the cosmopolitan nation” (“Spectacle” 463). While it might be argued that Hapgood’s positive depictions of socialist immigrants help to inscribe them into American society and thus to de-escalate concerns that might lead to greater invigilation or political repression, it is also the case that the intellectual and political fervor Hapgood documents becomes an aesthetic pleasure for the bourgeoisie, rather than a social movement with the potential to contribute to the American political arena.

perceiving subject can be absorbed into, or unified with, the lives of structurally distanced others; in this way, it expresses an ethics of equality and sympathy, yet is based in the internalized power system that upholds the bourgeois viewer as separate from and dominant to those she observes. Hapgood wishes to be friends with the tough so that this power dynamic will be erased, but it is still his text depicting his relationships with poorer people and offering them as being of benefit to the wealthy, and not the other way around. Economic and cultural dominance are inextricable, and thus pleasure in an aesthetics of poverty normalizes and in some ways valorizes the lifestyles that result from entrenched inequality. Hapgood's text demonstrates the impossibility of fully abandoning bourgeois cultural values, yet his obsession with the ghetto's authenticity and the true bohemian's ability to access it makes him unable to admit the ways that bourgeois taste for the picturesque was always already absorbing roughness into the consumeristic society which the bohemian wishes to reject.

This absorption was a process that began with the picturesque tours of Britain and Wales and the marketing of picturesque art and handbooks, satirized at the time by Jane Austen and others who saw that a taste for the natural was a highly marketable commodity. "Unlike Edmund Burke's categories of the Beautiful and the Sublime, the Picturesque was an aesthetic uniquely constituted to serve the nascent mass-marketing needs of a developing commercial culture; one in which appearances were construed as essence and commodities were sold under the signs of art and nature" (Bermingham, "Ready-to-Wear" 81). In the eighteenth century, a taste for the picturesque allowed bourgeois individuals to display their natural sensibilities (as shaped by a popular aesthetic theory); in the late nineteenth century, absorbing the lifestyles and moral values of the ghetto functioned to display a sensibility at odds with bourgeois culture (if also disseminated through its media). Such aesthetic displays of personal values become particularly

complicated when the moral sentiment being expressed concerns marginalized or oppressed populations. Hapgood's text, more than any other depiction of the urban picturesque, presents the possibility that one's moral sentiments, and thus social critique, are most fully and directly expressed through personal lifestyle choices. Today, the fact that personal expression is perceived as a form of social activism is well understood, but manifestations of this type of counterculture are generally traced only as far back as the youth movements of the 1960s; critics have observed how capitalism co-opted these cultural expressions within the same era.²²¹ Hapgood's text demonstrates that the commodification of countercultural values has its roots in the nineteenth century, and specifically, in the American tradition of aestheticizing roughness.

The mystical picturesque, transposed to the urban ghetto, made possible a new form of bourgeois identity, in which critiques of bourgeois values and culture were manifested by adopting the speech, the style, and the moral values of poorer people. The nineteenth-century belief in reform that begins with sentiment, and thus in aestheticizing suffering to evoke feeling for others, becomes the imperative to foster subjective experiences that absorb otherness: an aestheticized unity intended to display solidarity with – or at least interest in – suffering others. If in the nineteenth century, the ability to view class and ethnic others as picturesque was a sign of middle-class status, then in the twentieth this status could be both expressed and critiqued by becoming picturesque oneself. By the end of the twentieth century, after the cultural expressions generated by Beats, hippies, punks, grunge music and hip hop – all of which are predicated on

²²¹ The most thorough examination, Thomas Frank's *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*, tells "the story of the bohemian cultural style's trajectory from adversarial to hegemonic" (8), but this story begins in the 1960s. See also Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*; Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*; Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, *The Rebel Sell*. Guy Debord's classic Situationist text *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) proclaims that era as "the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life" (Thesis 42) – including intellectualism and political radicalism.

repudiating mainstream culture by embodying raggedness, roughness, and knowledge of “the streets” – had been thoroughly absorbed into consumer capitalism, the socio-political significance of displaying signs associated with poverty dissolved; but the sense that one can be more “authentic,” live more intensely, outside the bounds of respectable middle class culture has filtered into every possible taste, from fashion to interior design to where one chooses to buy a home.²²²

The Power of Moral Sentiment

This chapter and the previous one traveled from seventeenth-century London to twentieth-century New York, tracing the path of genteel explorers of rough urban streets. In their many iterations, these figures have contributed to envisioning and articulating a cosmopolitan society, one in which the individual must learn constantly to encounter strangers, to manage what Georg Simmel, in “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” calls “the intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli” (11). An aesthetics of roughness, or the ability to see aesthetically that which might be perceived as ugly or offensive, provides wealthier people a mode of incorporating unfamiliar people and neighbourhoods; picturesque aesthetics function both to inscribe unknowable others into a functional worldview and to structure the relation between viewer and viewed. It is telling that the 1850s, when narratives of rough places began to flood the American market, was the decade during which a taxonomy of rank began to be articulated as hierarchies of class. The latter half of the century

²²² “Hobo Chic” is its purest expression (see for instance *Trendhunter*’s “46 Derelict Chic Fashions”); so pervasive is this style, it was memorably parodied as the clothing line “Derelict” in the 2001 movie *Zoolander*. There is also a recent make-up line called “Urban Decay,” which is particularly suggestive of how capitalist society has absorbed the bourgeois taste for the picturesque. In its home décor iteration, the picturesque has contributed to trends from industrial chic to Rough Luxe (see Kahi Lee’s *Rough Luxe Design: The New Love of Old*.) In the Conclusion I discuss other current trends, as well as gentrification, as outgrowths of the urban picturesque.

was beset by financial crises that destabilized faith in a meritocratic system that would unfailingly reward prudence and hard work, and began to undermine a morally deterministic view of poverty. Class awareness, or a sense of differences in rank, becomes class consciousness, or an understanding that these differences are “characterized by different attitudes, beliefs, and styles of life” (Giddens 111). If class awareness “involves beliefs which place a premium upon individual responsibility and achievement” (Giddens 111), then class consciousness involves the recognition that such individual agency is limited by structural phenomena. As downward social mobility began to present itself as a very real threat to members of the middle class, representations of poverty provided a framework of aesthetic taste to structure class hierarchy, and at the same time began to engender the view that the poor were not simply objects of moral opprobrium, but objects of aesthetic interest precisely because their cultures differed from that of the bourgeoisie.

In the mid-century, as a culture of gentility began to coalesce around ideals of domesticity and Protestant virtue,²²³ sentimental literature was creating a counter-image of suffering others. Narratives of slaves and the poor helped to knit together the disparate strands of American society through concerned or compassionate responses by the more powerful towards the less, reifying individual moral sentiment as the basis of social cohesion. Aesthetic products and their construction of affective bonds, as Fichtelberg and Berlant both argue, work to obscure or to inscribe within individual relations a social order mediated through volatile and impersonal market forces. Eagleton makes clear the essential function of such relations, particularly in a

²²³ Dolan situates these values within the “ethos of modern republicanism” embraced by the Founding Fathers of America: “a firm line was drawn to protect the sacrosanct private sphere from public interference, and moral precedence was given to domesticity and inner spirituality. The virtues in demand were the middling commercial ones of prudence, thrift, sobriety, orderliness, and moderation. Rather than heroic self-sacrifice for one’s fellows, it encouraged an attitude of cool but peaceable tolerance” (20-21).

nation founded on the principles of liberalism: “The ultimate binding force of the bourgeois social order, in contrast to the coercive apparatus of absolutism, will be habits, pieties, sentiments and affections. And this is equivalent to saying that power in such an order has become aestheticized. It is at one with the body’s spontaneous impulses, entwined with sensibility and the affections, lived out in unreflective custom” (Eagleton 20). Narratives about the urban poor – whether sensationalistic novels, charitable tracts, ethnographic studies, or picturesque narratives – instructed wealthier Americans in the cultivation of moral sentiments, which was also a lesson in the consolidation and exercise of social power.

Pictorial sight is thus both an expression of aesthetic cultivation and of the viewer’s ability to “feel right,” or to navigate the appropriate closeness to or distance from others’ suffering. Rorty argues that a liberal society of tolerance and inclusion depends on our ability to imagine others’ experiences, and that “[s]olidarity...is created by increasing our sensitivity to the particular details of the pain and humiliation of other, unfamiliar sorts of people” (xvi).

Picturesque narratives provide exposure to these details, if often in a soft focus that obscures their full implications; such narratives incite imaginative connections, but as Bunner’s and Matthews’s work makes clear, the gap between sensitivity and solidarity remains wide and deep. While I agree with Ruskin that an appreciation for the picturesque, even when purely aesthetic, is more ethical than the desire to blot poverty or dereliction from sight, engagement with poverty primarily as an aesthetic product is ethically and politically fraught. Foremost among the limitations of art as conduit to sympathy is the satisfying act of sympathizing itself:

narrative affords the pleasure of consuming the feeling of vicarious suffering – and its putative moral precipitate, the feeling of self-satisfaction that we wish to do the right thing and hence are virtuous. But the experience of being moved by

these sentimental scenes of suffering, whose ostensible purpose is to awaken us to redress injustice, works instead to return us to a private world far removed from the public sphere. Hence, in a crippling contradiction ... the result of such empathetic identification is not the impulse to action but rather a “passive” posture. (Woodward 71)

The usurpation of political or social action by aesthetic and affective responsiveness is briefly if suggestively voiced in Matthews’s “A Candle in the Plate,” and is implicit throughout *Types*, but the fullest expression of this contradiction appears in the works of William Dean Howells, to whose work I turn in the following and final chapter. Like Rorty, Howells believes in the necessity of representing structurally distanced others to generate sympathy for their suffering, but his work also grapples incessantly with the ways in which this aestheticization creates distance between viewer and viewed, and, rather than spurring privileged people to redress inequality, simply mitigates their guilt about it while further entrenching the structures that create it.

Howells has been described as a *flâneur*, both by scholars²²⁴ and by friends such as Van Wyck Brooks, who was, however, “careful to qualify Howells's enthusiasm for New York, adding that his friend was dismayed by urban poverty” (Bramen, “Failure” 83). Like the *flâneur*, Howells often perceives the city as a theatrical spectacle, but it is precisely this spectacularization which he finds ethically questionable, and which his work undermines by depicting cross-class encounters that force the viewer to acknowledge his viewing position. Because the picturesque is an aesthetic framework applied by the viewer to a scene, it also offers a discourse through which to consider the moral sentiments and social position expressed by this

²²⁴ See for instance Amy Kaplan, *Social Construction*, p. 21.

act of aesthetic judgement. The application of this framework is the primary development of the picturesque tourist away from the detached and anonymous spectatorship of the *flâneur* and towards an aesthetic engagement that actively constructs a social and ethical relation between viewer and viewed. As the *flâneur* moved into American cities and absorbed the language of the picturesque – particularly as filtered by the Transcendentalists – the distancing, panoramic view of the city as spectacle becomes a distinct position within the scene. If for the *flâneur*, “the city is ... a theatrical display” (Benjamin, *Arcades* 347), for the picturesque tourist, this urban theatre breaks the fourth wall: the bourgeois observer can talk to, haggle with, and even befriend the characters they encounter. Yet, as the work of genteel writers engaging with rough places makes clear, their encounters remain aesthetically mediated. Howells’s work suggests that members of his class who feel sorrow or compassion for those in poverty are most honest when acknowledging the frame, the aestheticized sight, that structures their relation to poverty.

For bohemian inheritors of the mystical picturesque, aesthetic interest is not only moral but social, offering immersion into a culture which the bourgeoisie, beset by a sense of their unreality and enervation, perceive as offering authenticity and vitality. I have concluded this chapter with Hapgood’s *Types* because it demonstrates most fully the limits of pictorial sight as transcendental act, and the socio-political hazards that arise when aesthetic interest comes to serve as social critique. When discussing what she calls “the paradox in appropriation” (117), Spelman considers the ethical duality implicit in the privileged person’s desires to unify her experience with suffering others. She discusses “designer homelessness” and a Calvin Klein ad that glamorizes the digging of subway tunnels as “grotesque expressions” of the desire to appropriate the experiences of those who have suffered, but she also maintains that “in some important sense people can and should try to put on the experiences of others” (119). There are,

Spelman concludes, “experiences we desperately don’t want to have had, but we seem ready to attach ourselves, at a safe distance, to any glamour that is associated with such experiences” (119). That there is glamour associated with poverty or labor is entirely the work of the picturesque, which taught members of the bourgeoisie to aestheticize, and potentially sympathize with, people whose lives are hard in order to be more comfortable with not having hard lives ourselves. Hapgood’s *Types* registers the awkwardness of relying on aesthetics to critique a falsified society and to access “real life,” but in Howells’s work the problematic necessity of bourgeois aestheticization becomes a consistent theme. His later writing is obsessed by the paradoxical ethics of representation, a problem he articulates with the self-directed irony that has sustained and undermined liberal values since the Gilded Age.

Chapter Five

William Dean Howells and the Ethics of Discomfort

In the years since I began this project, the creed of liberalism has come under intense scrutiny; the ascendance of right-wing populist and nationalist movements in Europe and North America and the undeniable persistence of racial and economic inequality are throwing into doubt the viability of liberal principles and ideals. As Adam Gopnik writes in a 2017 review of several books on this topic, “the death-of-liberalism tomes and eulogies are having their day” (88), and many authors are presaging the end of an ideology finally collapsing beneath the weight of its own contradictions. Liberalism, it would seem, is a belief system particularly vulnerable to such a collapse: Gopnik points out that the fraught relationship between elite class position and egalitarian principles has bedeviled liberal idealism at least since the time of Voltaire. As we have seen, picturesque aesthetics in America provide a means of expressing both class distinction and concern about poverty, and the previous chapter examines the ways that by the end of the nineteenth century, picturesque narratives also probed the problematic position of genteel viewers whose sympathy with poorer people is evinced primarily through aesthetic products or distanced cross-class viewing. For these reasons, the picturesque is uniquely useful in discussions about the conflicts between liberal values and the bourgeois class position that often supports them.

The moral, ethical, and material dilemmas that arise among those who occupy a position of economic privilege yet abhor institutionalized inequality pervade the Gilded Age writings of William Dean Howells, which form the subject of this final chapter. This study has so far traced the evolution of picturesque aesthetics in American culture into the early twentieth century, finding in their popularity a bellwether for bourgeois anxieties about class

position and disparity. I argue in this chapter that Howells, so often derided by later generations of writers and critics for his genteel liberal failure to attend to structural oppression, may be much more productively read as nineteenth-century America's foremost critic of the self-divisions, hypocrisies, and fears within bourgeois culture that hampered (and continue to impede) efforts to create a more just society. Concerns about inequality and the cruelties such a condition entails are, as contemporary theorists such as Lauren Berlant and others tell us, often experienced affectively and in response to aesthetic products. The rifts between feeling and action, and between ideals and feelings – for what one believes and how one feels are often at odds²²⁵ – are the fault lines that shape much of Howells's best writing. Its continued relevance derives from the prescient understanding it conveys of the complicated relationship between aesthetics, class, sentiment, and social consciousness.

Aesthetic interest in structurally distanced others, Howells's work shows us, is an essential aspect of the dilemma that besets all middle-class liberals who confront the yawning gap between their values and the possibilities for enacting them. Picturesque aesthetics, in Howells's writing, make provisionally pleasurable that which is otherwise painful to apprehend, and can manifest points of contact between genteel and poor. Rather than engendering the viewer's absorption of or into otherness, however, such contact invariably marks the perimeter of the genteel subject position. The earliest theories of the picturesque claim that its effect depends upon the suppression of offensive sensory experience; in the mystical picturesque, however, no such caveat exists: Emerson does not insist that for the corpse to be beautiful one must not be

²²⁵ Studies of implicit bias or implicit association make this division amply apparent. Even those who believe themselves unprejudiced towards racial or sexual others often display measurable feelings of bias. A nonprofit group called Project Implicit, led by researchers from Harvard University and the University of Virginia, has constructed tests available online which measure "thoughts and feelings outside conscious awareness and control" (projectimplicit.net).

close enough to smell it; Whitman wants us to smell everything. In Howells's writing, the picturesque scene once again requires the deliberate obfuscation by the viewer of objects too grotesque to be made pleasurable, and this elision signifies the tenuous grounds of the sympathy engendered in bourgeois subjects by their aestheticized sight.

Howells explicitly depicts the boundaries of aestheticized roughness early in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*. Shortly after the Marches have been attempting to rekindle the enjoyment of picturesque raggedness they had once found in Italy, they are driven through a street whose squalor makes them uncomfortable; this discomfort is figured, significantly, first as a sensory experience, but the Marches' revulsion has an affective correlate with political ramifications. Italy enabled Mrs. March to broaden her self-conception, not simply as a now-cosmopolitan American, but also a compassionate republican, whose American democracy extended to the poor, gracious in its sympathy. Her carefully cultivated aesthetic sensibilities cannot, however, shield her from the street's odor or forestall her sense of umbrage at encountering it. "It was to the nose that the street made one of its strongest appeals, and Mrs. March pulled up her window of the coupé. 'Why does he take us through such a disgusting street?' she demanded, with an exasperation of which her husband divined the origin" (Howells, *Hazard* 65). Her exasperation arises not simply from the stench, but also the experience of being brought up against the limits of her sympathy: her sentimentalized view of the poor and her sense of herself as a compassionate citizen are threatened when brought into contact with the materiality of poverty. The function of the American picturesque as articulated by Emerson, Whitman, and Thoreau is primarily to enable an expansion of the self; this is what Isabel rejects and Basil, fleetingly, experiences. "'The driver may be a philanthropist in disguise,' he answered, with dreamy irony, 'and may want us to think about the people who are not merely carried through this street in a

coupé, but have to spend their whole lives in it.... Should we should be as patient as they are with their discomfort?" (*Hazard* 65-6). The view from a carriage window has brought into view the Marches' perspective of others. As in Emerson's passage in "Nature," their separation from the scene enables its aestheticization; however, the artistic effect is contaminated by sensory stimuli that remind the viewers of their connection to the scene they view. Basil's sense of his own class position and its contiguity with those in poverty is made available to him by recognizing that what he finds unpalatable is what others must learn to live with; he wonders "what they must think of us" (*Hazard* 65). Ruskin explains that the noble picturesque is the perception of "*suffering ... poverty ... decay, nobly endured by unpretending strength of heart*"; it is "the world's hard work being gone through all the while, and no pity asked for, nor contempt feared" (6). When Basil questions the patience of the poor, he is not merely asserting their animal stolidity; his question is an expression of wonderment about how they bear hardship, and of the impossibility of true sympathy with them because his very identity depends on comfort. Rather than providing aesthetic pleasure, poverty and its imperfect appearance as picturesque scene becomes the impetus for a reflection on class and the nature of suffering. Here and elsewhere in Howells's writing, the awareness of the act of elision necessary to perceive poverty as picturesque reveals the viewer's position in relation to the objects he apprehends and makes it available for critique.

This self-awareness, the "dreamy irony" with which Basil recognizes his aesthetic framing of others' suffering, is Howells's unique contribution to the picturesque tradition, and marks an important phase in the construction of American liberalism. Howells, champion of realist representation, depicts the aestheticization of poverty as not merely ineffectual to create social change but as a barrier to it. In his work, aesthetic responses to injustice by genteel

people bring them into contact with suffering others, but the awareness of this act of aestheticization and of the constrained and contingent position which necessitates it produces an uncomfortable self-consciousness that irony makes bearable. Basil's dreaminess undercuts the irony but does not abolish it, and indicates a type of wistful wish that he could be serious. Indeed, Howells depicts moments in which the Marches are aware that their ironic distance bars them from living out both their social and their religious ideals. On a Sunday stroll, after venturing "into this tabernacle and that" and having listened "to those who dealt with Christianity as a system of economics as well as a religion," Basil makes a joke of his spiritual promiscuity: "And so they got their laugh out of it at last, but with some sadness at heart, and with a dim consciousness that they had got their laugh out of too many things in life" (*Hazard* 306). Basil, like Howells himself, is moved by creeds he cannot follow; the imperfect answer to this problem is irony.

The irony Basil embodies and employs reflects a "peculiar species of anxiety" (Lear 98) that arises from moments in which the values most deeply embedded in one's identity appear both intensely important and utterly meaningless. To examine the ethical value of irony, Jonathan Lear, in a collection of essays that take a psychoanalytic perspective on irony, revises Kierkegaard's "fundamental ironic question": "In all of Christendom, is there a Christian?"²²⁶ Replacing "Liberalism" for Christendom, Lear gives the example of a man

²²⁶ Lear clarifies that the Christendom of which Kierkegaard writes is not "unreflective or unself-critical. Christendom is the social pretense of Christianity, the *myriad* ways in which the social world and its inhabitants put themselves forward as Christian. The problem would not be so difficult and irony would not be so important if reflection and criticism were not already part of the social practice" (12, emphasis in original). That which contradicts one's values "is the occasion for disruption and disorientation [because] [i]t is as though Christianity has *come back* to show me that *everything* I have hitherto taken a Christian life to be is ersatz, a shadow. Even when I am pricked by conscience and experience myself falling short – that *entire package* I learned in Christendom bears at best a comical relation to what it would actually be to follow Jesus' teaching [...]. In that sense, irony breaks open a false world of possibilities by confronting one with a practical necessity. The form of this confrontation is disruption: disruption of my practical identity as a Christian, disruption of my practical knowledge of how to live as a Christian [...]. It is as though an abyss opens between our previous understanding and our dawning sense of an

walking in New York, “confronted by a beggar” (97). For the liberal subject, with his commitment to human dignity and human rights, such a confrontation at first spurs a moment of reflection on his values and behavior, but this reflection breaks down under its affective weight, which is that of anxiety:

The anxiety is itself a manifestation of human dignity mattering to me – *hugely*, enough to disrupt my normal ways of going on. But the anxiety is *also* a withdrawing of significance from my worldly involvements with human dignity. What used to feel so important to me now feels empty; yet there is also intense desire that it should somehow feel genuinely full. Thus the anxiety is experienced as an uncanny doubling: it is as though my life with human dignity is suddenly haunted by its ghostly twin. (Lear 99)

Much of Howells’s later writing depicts and, I argue, engenders such a haunting by principles which the liberal subject not only fails to enact but which are themselves proven unstable, even unreal, by the materiality of poverty. As both a Christian and a member of the emerging republic of Liberaldom, in which care for others has constantly to contend with suffering he cannot ameliorate, Howells becomes an ironist because his life is a constant contradiction of his values. Friedrich Schlegel claims that “[i]rony is the form of paradox. Paradox is the *condition sine qua non* of irony, its soul, its source, and its principle” (qtd. in Muecke 24).

The problem which Howells’s work uniquely conveys is how to live with the perpetual

ideal to which we take ourselves already to be committed. This is the strangeness of irony: we seem to be called to an ideal that transcends our ordinary understanding, but to which we now experience ourselves as already committed” (Lear 14-15, emphases in original). This analysis helps to explain why irony, as Paul de Man claims, “is not temporary but repetitive, the recurrence of a self-escalating act of consciousness” (220). The ironic subject does not experience a momentary breach with himself, only to be reconstituted as a more aware and thus less paradoxical person; rather, the practical necessity with which one has been confronted and the practical impossibility of performing it trap the subject in an inescapable sequence of ironies. Thus, as Rorty argues in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, liberalism is predicated upon self-reflexiveness about its own paradoxes – but his assertions that such a stance can be socially useful seem naïve and, perhaps, self-serving.

anxiety of at every moment inhabiting a paradoxical identity, one for which human rights do and do not matter.

Aesthetics itself presents a paradox for Howells, and is, alongside the bourgeois life from which it is inextricable, the foremost object of his ironic discourse. Howells's quintessential cosmopolitan liberal is a tragic *flâneur*, whose spectatorial consumption of the world emanates from a desire for communion but also registers its impossibility. His viewing contains the desire to extend the bounds of his self and sympathies beyond his kinship group or those to whom he is immediately responsible; yet the process of the Marches' successful reinvention of themselves as New Yorkers involves the contraction of these sympathies, a turn inward forced upon them by the scale of the injustice they encounter and the new understanding it generates that their previous self-concept was grounded in aesthetics rather than politics. The contradictions in Emerson's work between proximity and distance are played out in the Marches' struggle to acclimatize themselves to New York, during which they aestheticize roughness in order to make it part of themselves and their worldview; this process makes them conscious of their bounded subject position and the economic structures upon which it depends. Newly aware that their moral sentiments and their self-interest are radically opposed, the Marches embody the liberal lack of agency that Emerson's work articulates as well as the desire for spiritual transcendence through pictorial sight.²²⁷ Their ironic self-awareness signals the incapacity of pictorial sight to expand the self; it performs and makes amusing their spiritual barrenness. In Howells's work, aestheticized seeing maintains the

²²⁷ In "New York Streets," from *Impressions and Experiences*, Howells writes that "in this land, where people have such a dread of civic collectivism of any kind, lest individuality should suffer, the individual is practically nothing in the regard of the corporate collectivities which abound" (194). Walter Benn Michaels asserts that "Howells saw quite clearly ... that the capitalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries acted more to subvert the ideology of the autonomous self than to enforce it" (51).

moral significance with which writers of the mystical picturesque imbued it – the perception of the common as beautiful retains its necessity to moral attunement – but the spiritual value is lost. The liberal American Howells's work constructs is one for whom spiritual connection to others is impossible yet who must care about them to be moral; whose happiness in the face of others' suffering can only be achieved by aestheticizing both the happiness and the suffering.

Many critics have identified Howells with the self-divided, ironic stance of the liberal. Kenneth Lynn calls *A Hazard of New Fortunes* “the most unsparing study of the middle-class liberal mind in American literature” (302); Bramen calls him “the personification of liberal guilt” (“Failure” 93). These statements appear to me to be perfectly accurate. Also significant however, particularly to a discussion of the divisions between aesthetics and social values or ideals, is that when Howells was writing *Hazard*, he did not self-identify as a liberal, but rather as a socialist. By the late 1880s, Howells believed in the kind of Christian socialist ideals he articulates through Reverend Peck in *Annie Kilburn* or Conrad Dryfoos in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, although these characters die before they can begin to act on their beliefs. That socialist ideals belong, in his social novels, only to doomed characters (they are played out in his utopian *Traveler from Altruria* trilogy) suggests both that Howells could not envision how such ideals could be manifested in the actual world and also that he was grappling with his own failure to live in accordance with his beliefs. He was an excellent businessman and managed his affairs so that he and an increasing number of dependent family members could live in comfort, yet this material comfort was a source of deep moral discomfort. He was acutely aware that his prosperity was increasing even as labour strikes intensified and the numbers of those in poverty continued to rise. “In the private correspondence of the aging Howells we feel ourselves in the presence not only of an uneasy

conscience, but also of a profoundly disoriented imagination and shattered morale” (Lynn 9). The ironic tone for which Howells is known²²⁸ proceeds from his own self-mocking sense of personal hypocrisy. Howells’s 1890 letter to his father, in which he calls himself a “theoretical socialist and a practical aristocrat” (*Life in Letters* 310), fairly sums up his self-conception; he goes on to say that, “it is a comfort to be right theoretically and to be ashamed of oneself practically,” a phrase which tidily conveys the compromised moral position much of his writing depicts (*Life in Letters* 310). Although the focus of this chapter will not be biographical, it is easy to read the biting irony of Howells’s works of the late 1880s and ‘90s as being directed not least towards himself.²²⁹ What interests me about this concordance is that in these works pictorial sight emerges as a rather conventional aspect of bourgeois life, and thus as fodder for satire, yet its transcendental possibility – the belief that to view others is to attend to their experience, and that this act is necessary to be a moral person – is never wholly undermined. The sentimentality of viewing rough people and places as picturesque is a source of the liberal’s self-reflexive irony, as is her understanding that such ethically problematic viewing is nonetheless necessary to one’s liberal ideals.

²²⁸ See for instance Redding: “Howells is deeply anxious about the limits of his imagination to fully comprehend difference and so is deeply ambivalent about his own tendency to defuse violent action and his failure to fully comprehend class difference. As is often the case in Howells, the irony totters on the brink of abysmal degeneration, from which it is redeemed merely by the saving grace of good manners. But this is a particularly ephemeral redemption, and makes for a particularly strange read. Irony occasionally devolves into satire but is unwilling to admit it; likewise, irony itself is *almost* satirized but never pointedly so” (94, emphasis in original). While it is inarguably the case that Howells’s satire is profoundly understated, I think it is possible to read all of *Hazard* as satire; as I argue below, Howells correlates the Marches’ personal triumph to the collective failure of society; they are sympathetic because recognizable, but it is only possible to be happy for them if one admits the limitations of one’s ideals. The humorous lightness with which Howells treats them does not fully conceal the failings that make them pathetic.

²²⁹ This argument has already been made; see for instance Lynn: “The irony with which Howells treated the Marches’ taste for theatrical escapism was really aimed at himself” (8). Sarah Daugherty claims that, after the publication of *Hazard*, “writers echoed his theories of realism but failed to notice his self-directed irony” (167).

Many of Howells's genteel protagonists are those who perceive profound inequalities to be wrong and cruel, but who feel powerless to effect political change; their stories reveal, as Julie Ellison calls it, "the long history of liberal sensibility [...] devoid of any rearrangement of authority" (*Cato's Tears* 176). The wealthy socialist writer whose work evinces the ironic stance of the liberal is giving voice simultaneously to ideals of social and economic equality and to a profound uncertainty about how such a state could be brought into being. This uncertainty derives, in part, from a lack of specific knowledge: "He knew little about taxation, supply, or production methods. He was in reality an intellectual amateur, the product of an earlier America, in a field which was rapidly becoming specialized" (Hough 56). His 1895 essay in *Century*, "Who Are Our Brethren?" seems predicated, like much of Dickens's work, on the belief that if people were simply better to one another, most of the world's suffering could be resolved.²³⁰ Howells's work depicts the emergence of what we now know as liberal guilt: the feeling that things should be different, sorrow for others' socially constructed suffering, and a conception of how to intervene in these problems which ranges from hazy to nonexistent. The guilt is thus both for one's privilege and for the sense of inefficacy to do anything about it.

This divided self – split between ideals of social equality and personal success, between compassion and self-interest – haunts Howells's later work and has arguably contributed to the critical ambivalence that has characterized responses to it since the heyday of his popularity in the late 1880s. Although Howells lived and wrote well into the twentieth century (he died in

²³⁰ "When the voluntary bond of sympathy, the tie of the same feelings, purposes, wills, shall unite the commonwealth, fraternity will have nothing of that painful obligation which very good people dread now, and shrink from" (Howells, "Brethren" 935).

1920), an oft-quoted letter to Henry James conveys Howells's awareness of his encroaching literary obscurity.²³¹ In the decades after his death, younger realists would excoriate Howells for his primness,²³² his prudery, and above all, what they perceived as his commitment to depicting "the smiling aspects of American life" – a quotation from an *Editor's Easy Chair* article of 1886 that critics have erroneously taken as being his artistic creed.²³³ Despite a mid-century resurgence of interest in his work, Howells since his death has never enjoyed the critical or popular acclaim of his friends and contemporaries Mark Twain and Henry James. The temperate admiration he inspires is, I believe, not only because of the unfailingly temperate climate of his novels, but also because, in their very moderation, understated self-mockery, and ideological divisions they reproduce too faithfully the hypocritical position of the American liberal. Howells's realism, which later practitioners of this literary mode would consider insufficient because it failed to document the lives of poorer people, is perhaps rather so real that it discomfits middle-class readers. As Paul de Man writes in "The Rhetoric of Temporality," irony "may start as a casual bit of play with a loose end of the fabric, but before long the entire texture

²³¹ "I am comparatively a dead cult with my statues cast down and the grass growing over them in the pale moonlight" (29 June 1915, collected in Anesko p. 460).

²³² "By 1895 Howells was falling from favor, and by 1928 he had completed the fall, and during the descent of his reputation no more damaging accusation has been made than that of his prudery. 'Sissy,' 'bourgeois,' 'dull,' 'timid,' 'respectable,' 'narrow' – these epithets have been applied to his general choice and treatment of materials" (Carter 140).

²³³ Everett Carter observes that "[a] single phrase has succeeded in damning [Howells] in the eyes of subsequent critics and writers: 'the smiling aspects of American life.' In every history of American literature, these words have been quoted as the summary of his myopic and uncritical optimism" (185). Kenneth Lynn observes that the backlash against this phrase occurred when it was included in Howells's 1891 *Criticism and Fiction*, which is "an unreliable guide to Howells's state of mind in the nineties. Put out because both publisher and author wanted to make money, the book was hastily assembled out of 'The Editor's Study' pieces that Howells had written for *Harper's Monthly* in the previous five years" (11). As Lynn points out, the phrase comes in a review of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, and central to Howells's argument is "the assertion that the American artist, unlike his Russian counterpart, was not an alien and helpless figure in his society" (11). Nonetheless, in the era of labor strikes and economic crisis that was *fin de siècle* America, Howells's phrase was taken as evidence either of a genteel naivete of no relevance to contemporary society or of callous disregard for those in need.

of the self is unraveled and comes apart” (215). Within the fundamentally bourgeois institutions that support critical scholarship, tugging too insistently at the ironic undertones of Howells’s work poses an existential threat: it is precisely the comfortable intellectual, the armchair radical, at whom his irony takes aim. His writing stages an encounter with the very futility, self-doubt, and sense of contingency that stalks the bourgeoisie and which other late-nineteenth-century works were trying, in various ways, to elide. His bourgeois characters are unfailingly unheroic and often subtly ridiculed; cross-class encounters in Howells’s work are neither invigorating nor productive of moral growth: they are inevitably reminders of the insurmountable barriers between rich and poor people, and of the necessary – and necessarily problematic – role of aesthetics as mediator between structurally distanced people and classes.

The works I discuss in this chapter – *Annie Kilburn* (1888), *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), and *Impressions and Experiences* (1896) – depict a movement toward increasing despair, about both the conditions of American life and the possibility that the realistic and compassionate depiction of poverty can help to ameliorate them. Each of these works considers the ways in which genteel concern about class disparity and the suffering it engenders is experienced and expressed aesthetically, because in the absence of actual relationships with those experiencing material want, narrative – or the imaginative construction of other’s lives – must supply the details of such hardship. Narrative and the pictorial sight upon which it relies, Howells repeatedly concludes, are profoundly insufficient and yet utterly necessary media in which to convey understanding or to create fellow-feeling with those beyond one’s social world. While the potential for imaginative connections to others to create social change dwindles over the course of these three books, the scale of the problems increases. “Writing in the 1890s, William Dean Howells noted how the virtual institution of inequality in a nation ‘that means equality if it

means anything' causes a crisis of literary representation whereby poverty seems unreal, or is distanced by a recourse to the picturesque that treats with callous indifference the ruin and misery of the poor" (Jones 19). Howells's work documents this crisis of representation, both in what it omits – detailed depictions of impoverished people²³⁴ – and in its investigation of the picturesque, which in the works under discussion is not simply a sign of insensibility but a means by which to explore the crossroads of callousness and caring, revulsion and fascination at which many members of the bourgeoisie found themselves when confronted with the major social question of their day.

As the previous chapter shows, picturesque aesthetics in late-nineteenth-century America offers a more complex intervention into class relations than simply a distancing mechanism necessitated by genteel comfort: in Howells's work, as in Bunner's and Matthews's, the aesthetics of the picturesque make available for analysis the bourgeois problem of feeling compassion towards structurally distanced others. Given his role as the foremost advocate for literary realism in America, it is unsurprising that Howells's work expresses deep concern about whether literary depictions of poverty by wealthier people most serve or hurt the poor. In *Impressions and Experiences*, Howells's bleakest and bluntest exploration of this topic, he writes: "I think there is nothing more infernal than the juggle that transmutes for the tenderest-hearted people the misery of their fellows into something comic or poetic" (206). The word *infernal* has both a monstrous and an inescapable quality, and suggests that writing about the poor presents a moral conundrum: to encourage wealthier people to attend to the existence of

²³⁴ "Howells has long been unfairly criticized for his lack of lower-class characters – and therefore for his lack of 'realism.' *Hazard*, in fact, explores the way the urban community defines itself in an ongoing, if repressed, relation to the city's absent 'other half.' Like any knowable community, this one is delimited by what it excludes or fails to assimilate. The specter of class conflict that so haunted Howell's contemporaries puts pressure on the course of his narrative to tell a countertale of the city's unsettling force" (Kaplan, *Social Construction* 47).

poorer ones requires that the latter be depicted or narrativized, but such representation creates an aesthetic distance that undermines the moral work of the representation. The sympathy such depictions might evoke is unavoidably entwined with an aesthetic experience;²³⁵ the emotions one feels toward the suffering other are thus primarily – that is, in their first iteration – a response not to an individual person in his particularity but to an aestheticized version necessarily reliant upon codes or strategies that supersede individual experience.

Howells's conception of the infernal juggle in some respects anticipates the Levinasian concept of the image, a correspondence which yields insight into the unique way in which, for Howells, realist writing appeared to have failed. In "Reality and its Shadow," Levinas writes: "*Every image is already a caricature.* But this caricature turns into something tragic. The same man is indeed a comic poet and tragic poet" (9, emphasis in original). That which is available to representation is necessarily that which captivates the eye of the observer, and the comic effect proceeds from the exaggerated proportion of these qualities. The tragedy emerges from all that is left out. It is fascinating, considered particularly in the context of Howells's writing, that Levinas appropriates and redefines the term "picturesque" to signify the tragi-comic dynamic subtending any representation depicted in perceptive consciousness. If the appreciation of picturesque beauty, for earlier aesthetic theorists, consisted of uniting rough objects in a unified whole, for Levinas this process points to the necessary distortion that characterizes the act of perception. Simply put, to see a thing, to identify an object, is to perform a picturesque aesthetic operation that can produce only caricature, including of the self to itself. In this context of pure

²³⁵ This is true whether or not the product in question considers itself to be "art": a charity pamphlet which tells the story of a suffering person performs the same transmutation of experience to representation, and its intent, even more straightforwardly than, for instance, realist novels, is to inform its reader of circumstances different from their own. While aiming for neither comedy nor poetry exactly, the effort to cause an affective response with language or pictures remains in essence a poetic endeavor (at least as I believe Howells is using the concept): to make an idea a felt experience; to captivate.

perceptual process, the picturesque for Levinas names the irony of seeing, the irony of identification as such. The identity of a thing, of the self, of the other for the self, is an image of distortion unseen, unknown, and normalized. For Levinas, the image is “[t]he consciousness of the absence of the object”; it is “equivalent to an alteration of the very being of the object” (“Reality” 7). “In being, a transcendence revealed is inverted into an immanence, the extraordinary is inserted into an order, the Other is absorbed into the Same” (Levinas, “Meaning and Sense” 60).

The aspects of a person that exceed identity thematized as the *self* are precisely those which become consciously unidentifiable. They “escape from under the identity of his substance.... Thus a person bears on his face, alongside of its being with which he coincides, its own caricature, its picturesqueness” (Levinas, “Reality” 6), and it is in this sense that “[t]he picturesque is always to some extent a caricature” (Levinas, “Reality” 6). Howells’s ironic relation to the picturesque, his probing of what realism *does*, is his engagement with this tragicomic structure of representation and its heavy stakes for social being. Howells becomes persecuted by the question of whether and how art can respond to this normalized, unrecognized subjective (mis)shaping of human subjects. For both Levinas and Howells, while perception as picturesque may be ironic by definition, the *tragedy* is that it renders all social relations unethical. Is there no way, then, to reduce distortion, mitigate caricature, for instance by using art to perform the perceptual process, to depict images and social relations that cause subjects to analyze how they see – others, themselves, and their inextricable interrelations?

The infernal juggle that Howells describes is his recognition of how identification and representation trap objects in a purgatorial state of non-being, neither real nor unreal: a person becomes a caricature, and this caricature elicits emotion in its tender-hearted writer or reader, but

that emotion – “sensation,” in Levinasian terms (“Reality” 5) – is only for the aesthetic object and not for the object itself, which eludes representation. Howells’s repeated probing of the picturesque raises the specter of this absent object. His *realism*, this is to say, does not make available to perception all the alterity of others lost to perception as covered by representation. Howells understands that impossibility. Rather, what is real in Howellsian realism is its *struggle to make available to perception the forms by which people fix, and thus erase, the being of others*. The elements that represent an object “do not serve as symbols, and in the absence of the object they do not forge its presence, but by their presence insist on its absence. They *occupy its place fully to mark its removal*, as though the represented object died, were degraded, were disincarnated in its own reflection” (Levinas, “Reality” 7, emphasis added). Howells had devoted his professional life to the hope that realistic representation would, as it were, bring to life its objects of depiction by engendering feeling for them in their readers. His realization that such representation evacuates the object rather than incarnating it must have been a bitter one.²³⁶ He concludes his explanation of his vision of “Democracy in literature” with the hope that realist literature can be a source of unity: “Men are more like than unlike one another: let us make them know one another better, that they may all be humbled and strengthened with a sense of their fraternity” (*Criticism and Fiction* 87). As pictorial sight was for Emerson and Whitman, realism, for Howells, was a way to forge relations between people. It is important to remember that Howells conceived of realist literature as offering the possibility of a community united in mutual readership. He believed that for literature to be “in the service of humanity” (*Criticism*

²³⁶ Writing about responses to traumatized workers in “The Subject of True Feeling,” Berlant observes that “mourning can also be an act of aggression, of social death-making: it can perform the evacuation of significance from actually-existing subjects. Even when liberals do it, one might say, others are ‘ghosted’ for a good cause” (51). The tragedy of images, for Howells, is arguably that they instigate such “social death-making,” relegating living subjects to “the definitional perfection of no longer being in flux” (Berlant, “Subject” 50). The liberal reader mourns, and this mourning supplies the action required by the traumatic situation or event, but ultimately serves to create “an experience of irreducible boundedness” (Berlant, “Subject” 50).

86), it must be for “the many” – not only for “the few whom it can bring no joy in their idleness” (*Criticism* 85). For most of his career Howells hoped that realism could help to ameliorate social problems not only by “extending representation beyond the genteel classes to groups formerly neglected or idealized in literary representation” (Palmer 211), but also by extending representations to those neglected by writers of literature. Yet *Impressions and Experiences* reads as a sorrowful and at times cynical effort to theorize the role the picturesque had played in realist literature, and which *A Hazard of New Fortunes* depicts, which is imperfectly to mediate the self’s relation to unknowable others through aestheticized sight. *Impressions* offers the admission that the pictorial sight which realist literature relies upon and encourages unavoidably caricatures those whom Howells hoped would be rendered more fully human to genteel readers through literary representation.

Howells, therefore, cannot dismiss art as completely as does Levinas. Howells’s juggle – the process by which life is transformed into art – is infernal precisely because it is inescapable. Howells’s writing is shaped by the sense that the very way in which we perceive one another is mediated by aesthetics, by the image which has fixed and exiled the object. Of looking at the prisons across the East River, Howells writes:

I was aware that they [the inmates] were each an image of that loveless and hopeless perdition which men once imagined that God had prepared for the souls of the damned, but I could not see the barred windows of those hells in the waning light. I could only see the trees along their walks; their dim lawns and gardens, and the castellated forms of the prisons, and the aesthetic sense, which is careful to keep itself pure from

pity, was tickled with an agreeable impression of something old and fair.

(*Impressions* 189)

The final sentence conveys disgust – the levity of *tickled* is vulgar in this context – and it is the way in which the eye’s captivation by beauty alters the viewer’s perception of an object which is the source of this ironically-stated disgust. The irony emerges from the paradoxical moment of caring deeply and not at all for others, and from the fact that both affective relations have been constituted by aesthetics: the prisoners are only understood as image, one which is then obscured by the picturesque lights and shadows and contained within a species of beautiful ruin.

Howells’s passage and its referent in the picturesque, which converts ugliness to beauty, portrays the ways in which Aesthetics exceeds the aesthetic: to see is to aestheticize, to reach meaning via an image that is necessarily caricature, exaggerated and incomplete. And this process is equally true of poorer subjects observing wealthier ones, in Howells’s work, if far less often depicted: the gaze of classed others in *Annie Kilburn* and in *Hazard*, when it rests on Annie or the Marches, is determined by (and unsettling because of) their representation to the perceiving consciousness as caricatures of their class position. As when Bunner admonishes the picturesque tourists not gawk too openly at the ghetto residents, Howells’s work contains occasional moments in which the bourgeois subject is brought up against facets of his being that “escape from under the identity of his substance.”

Realism fails for Howells – and the picturesque is uniquely implicated in its failure – because he comes to realize that classed and racialized Others are vulnerable to especially distorted caricature by wealthier viewers. Their depiction only further entrenches the signifiers that occlude their being, because of the overdetermined nature of the structures through which such Others are perceived: they are not only objects – a concept which, for Levinas, fails to

register the alterity of other humans – but “suffering,” “poor,” “derelict.” If any attempt to grasp the alterity of another is always already unethical, because the mechanisms that attempt to represent the other’s alterity belong to the perceiving subject, then renditions of marginalized people into understandability are necessarily more so. This is because the epistemes through which to understand such others are shaped by the structures that have disenfranchised them, and because the stakes for making them legible are high: to not know is potentially to be at their mercy, whereas to conceptualize is to attain a degree of mastery. Yet it is precisely this mastery Howells laments. The picturesque, which offers a vocabulary for the conceptualization of objects beyond someone’s sensory apparatus – the interiors of tenements; the languages of immigrants – pins others to meanings that are extrinsic to them.²³⁷ In *Criticism and Fiction*, Howells claims that the worth of all art is to “make the race better and kinder” and it does this “from and through the truth” (87); five years later, the only truth that seems available is the bridgeless chasm between classes. Yet Howells’s writing nonetheless returns to the picturesque – to the ability to see beauty in the common – as the mode by which objects that might be reviled or ignored (repressed) are made available to perception. It is preferable, his work suggests, to have a relationship with an image that has what Levinas calls “resemblance” with an object (“Reality” 6) than to have no relation at all, or one formed solely from *negative* caricature. Unable, therefore, to abandon the aesthetic as the path away from ethical relations with others, Howells thus writes toward an understanding of the compromised nature of the sympathy that aesthetic engagement with classed others engenders or expresses.

²³⁷ The ethnographic writing that developed alongside and within picturesque literatures points to this drive to classify and categorize, a claiming for and within knowledge.

In his work, genteel characters' experiences of rough people and places as picturesque illustrate precisely this infernal juggle between representation, moral sentiment, and behavior. Picturesque representations of ghettos make poetic the misery of those who inhabit them for people who, like the Marches, believe that they care about the suffering of others but whose untested tenderness toward strangers powers the mill that transmutes misery into art and social concern into aesthetic taste. Howells's introduction to the Marches indicates the degree to which, for members of the bourgeoisie, moral sentiments are experienced and expressed aesthetically. That their values are primarily expressed as aesthetic tastes is also, early on, gently mocked for its hypocrisy: "if it had ever come into their way to sacrifice themselves for others, they thought they would have done so, but they never asked why it had not come in their way" (*Hazard* 27). The Marches are tender-hearted – "they were very sympathetic; there was no good cause that they did not wish well; they had a generous scorn of all kinds of narrow-heartedness ... and they taught their children to loathe all manner of social cruelty" (*Hazard* 27) – but these feelings or values are not enacted in any way except through their "cultivated tastes" (*Hazard* 27). The reader learns simultaneously about the couple's cultural and social values; they are entwined, mutually reinforcing. The Marches take pride in the "distinction" of their "tastes"; "their house had some good pictures ... and it abounded in books on which he spent more than he ought They felt, with a glow almost of virtue, how perfectly it fitted their lives and their children's, and they believed that somehow it expressed their characters – that it was like them" (26). Basil's sense of virtue proceeds from his feeling that his home's display of good books and pictures expresses his and his wife's sympathetic natures, as well as the "intellectual achievement" which at the novel's opening is a mere "dream" (26), albeit one which is partially lived out in "reading critically" and in Basil's publishing occasionally. Basil's actual career has

been in insurance; however, the aesthetic taste his house displays assures the Marches of both their cultural distinction and their social values. The Marches' taste and home life "all seemed to him, and to his wife at second-hand, very meritorious" (27), a phrase which leads directly into the description of the couple's social values. Neither Basil's literary talent nor the couple's social sympathies have ever truly been tested; the novel is the story of this coming to pass. That Basil's career succeeds while their principles are mostly abandoned suggests both the limitations of art to remediate injustice and of the bourgeoisie to make the sacrifices necessary to help others.

Howells's introduction of the Marches is a subtly searing indictment of bourgeois liberal humanism, the first of many in that novel, and it is of primary importance both to Howells's work and to this study that the essential failing of the Marches is to mistake aesthetic taste for social consciousness. Throughout Howells's later work, genteel characters' tendency to conflate these two qualities, or to allow the former to stand in for the latter, exposes the rift between belief and action that emerged simultaneously with bourgeois American liberalism. In her reading of *Hazard*, Carrie Tirado Bramen sees the genteel protagonist Basil March and the Christian socialist Conrad Dryfoos as representatives of a dichotomy between "aestheticism and moralism." She argues:

the two perspectives, two competing frameworks through which the metropolis can be depicted, remain distinct, embodied in two separate characters who are in constant tension with one another. This tension is useful for Howells, for it gives him license to censure Basil for his superficiality while at the same time appreciating his ability to capture the excitement of urban growth, where a

cosmopolitan *joie de vivre* characterizes the “contact zone” of the city. (“Failure” 89)

It is true that these two characters represent competing frameworks and that Howells did at times share Basil’s enthusiasm for New York’s vibrancy, including that which was provided by its rougher neighborhoods. I want to suggest, however, that for Howells aestheticism and moralism are not as wholly separate as Bramen suggests they are in *Hazard*, and that the tension between these views proceeds from their connection rather than their distinction. As Bramen observes,²³⁸ by the end of the novel Basil has not produced a single city sketch – he has failed to capture the cosmopolitan excitement which he rhapsodizes about. Arguably, this failure to produce actual literary depictions formalizes the intrusion of ethics into aesthetic experience which Basil increasingly experiences, until he abandons his efforts to aestheticize the city’s poor entirely.

While in *Hazard* aestheticism is often punctured by moralism, moral considerations are at times given form by aesthetics. Conrad sees the city from a moralistic or religious perspective, but when presented with the idea of Basil’s city sketches, he says: “If you can make the comfortable people understand how the uncomfortable people live, it will be a very good thing, Mr. March. Sometimes it seems to me that the only trouble is that we don’t know one another well enough; and that the first thing is to do this” (*Hazard* 147). Conrad is, however, a tragic figure, and his hope that aesthetics can function in service of moral ideals is no more realized than his dream of a society based in brotherly love. Basil, meanwhile, is not able to experience

²³⁸ Bramen observes that in Howells’s 1902 *Literature and Life*, the conclusion to “Worries of a Winter’s Walk” echoes Basil’s failure: “just as Basil March’s urban sketches of his ‘East Side travels’ never surface, Howells’s sketches lie ‘useless on [his] hands.’ Plagued by guilt, he is finally unable to reconcile the two perspectives he had articulated in *Hazard of New Fortunes*; in other words, he finds himself incapable of combining the urban picturesque with a moral conscience so that it would ‘wring our hearts in fiction’” (Howells *Literature* 40; 43-44, qtd. in “Failure” 97). My argument here is simply that this guilt emerges in *Hazard* itself, embodied in the morally impoverished Marches and Basil’s creative failure, and that this novel makes clear the failure of the picturesque that Bramen finds articulated in Howells’s later works.

the unalloyed enjoyment of picturesque poverty which he felt as a younger man in Italy when confronted with similar scenes in New York:

[The Marches'] point of view was singularly unchanged, and their impressions of New York remained the same that they had been fifteen years before: huge, noisy, ugly, kindly, it seemed to them now as it seemed then. The main difference was that they saw it more now as a life, and then they only regarded it as a spectacle; and March could not release himself from a sense of complicity with it, no matter what whimsical, or alien, or critical attitude he took. A sense of the striving and the suffering deeply possessed him; and this grew the more intense as he gained some knowledge of the forces at work – forces of pity, of destruction, of perdition, of salvation. (306)

Basil's moments of joy in his cosmopolitan surroundings are fleeting and connected to moments of self-doubt and to feelings of both artistic and ethical failure. His whimsical, critical attitude cannot transmute the suffering he perceives into art without feelings of guilt, which manifest in his ultimate inability to write the sketches his pictorial sight creates of the urban scene.

Aestheticism in Howells's work is never entirely opposed to moralism but rather a complicated, imperfect way of engaging with it. The "infernal juggle" is kept in motion by the bourgeois liberal dilemma: moralism relies upon aesthetics for its development and expression, while aesthetics gain meaning and value from their role as sign of liberal humanist values.

Howells is probably best remembered as America's first and most passionate advocate for a realist mode of representation, a role which many scholars have documented, along with the erosion over his lifetime of belief in the ability of realist literature to alter society. In *The Social Construction of American Realism*, Kaplan examines Howells's changing attitude toward realism

in the context of his expanding sense of American class divisions which compromised his faith that realism could be, as he initially conceived it, “democracy in literature” (Howells, *Criticism and Fiction* 187). Kaplan argues that:

Howells criticizes the Arnoldian defense of high art, in the name of the whole social order, against what some see as anarchy and the realists view as a democratizing society. A partner in this political process, realism extends literary representation to ordinary people whom artists have either neglected or idealized. If the romance chains literature to outdated artistic conventions, realism frees it to represent contemporary life and thereby expands the range of culture beyond the traditionally “cultured classes.” (*Social Construction* 16)

Each of the works under discussion in this chapter, however, articulates progressively greater doubt about the possibility that such artistic interventions can benefit American democracy. The essential lesson that Annie Kilburn learns is that she can neither live amongst poorer people as their equals, nor truly understand them from her socially higher vantage point. The novel does indeed portray “ordinary people,” but none of the major characters in the book are other than the traditionally cultured classes. At the heart of the book is its upper-middle-class heroine’s struggle to create a genuine and ethical relation towards the poorer people in Hatboro – to envision a means of offering help which is not essentially a self-serving fantasy.

By the time he published *Impressions and Experiences*, Howells had concluded that in America, “as Shakespeare says of the living and the dead, the rich and the poor are ‘but as pictures’ to one another, without vital reality” (*Impressions* 167). The expansion of literary representation, such a statement suggests, had not made the newly represented underclass any more real to wealthy readers. Kaplan thinks that for Howells, “[t]he major work of the realistic

narrative is to construct a homogeneous and coherent social reality by conquering the fictional qualities of middle-class life and by controlling the specter of class conflict which threatens to puncture this vision of a unified social totality” (21). I would suggest instead, however, that Howells’s writing expresses a persistent doubt about the viability of such a project. As Kaplan herself points out, a unified social totality exists only in fiction, and Howells knows it. As she writes in “Knowledge of the Line” of the marriage at the end of *Hazard*: “It both fulfills the convention and undermines it by exposing its pure conventionality” (79). The series of tidy endings *Hazard* presents may register an artistic failure, but this failure is not necessarily that of Howells’s abilities; rather, it indicates the failure of his faith art’s ability to refer to anything beyond itself.²³⁹ Kaplan argues that, “[t]he problem with *Hazard*’s ending is neither the absence of a conclusion nor the infinite openness that critics have noted but the presence of too many different finite and limited conclusions” (“Knowledge” 78-9). The series of conventional endings for realist novels that Howells employs in *Hazard* – “the reconciliation of enemies in death, marriage, nonmarriage, a move to Europe, and the Christian scheme of atonement and sacrifice” (Kaplan, *Social Construction* 61) – shatter the tenuously unified social totality briefly constructed by the novel’s events. Read in the light of the influential theory of consensus as integral to realist representation articulated by Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *Hazard* violates a basic precept of realist literature because it fails to build “consensus among multiple viewpoints” (67). There are too many types of life, too many disparate points of view, and their perspectives are, in the end, irreconcilable. No one can see anyone else clearly, and all the narrator can do is depict

²³⁹ Kaplan argues that “Howells at the end of *Hazard* exposes the drive toward moral unity in realism as a dream of mastery to compensate for the lack of control” (“Knowledge” 79). I would suggest that for Howells the dream is not so much of control as of cohesion.

their separate vantage points. The conventions upon which the novel's ending relies lay bare the novel as construct, and suggest the ways its formal constructs work to shore up middle-class readers' sense of security after the brief insurrections of class strife. That this security feels false and unsatisfying has perhaps relegated the novel to second-tier status in the American canon, but for a culture which continues to perceive artistic works as potential interventions into social problems, *Hazard* is also a poignant statement of the insufficiency of this strategy. Works by and for genteel people, this novel suggests, cannot permeate or depict the experiences of those beyond the perimeter of genteel life.

Liberal Guilt and Social Justice: William Dean Howells and the Limits of Genteel Sympathy

Of the three works under discussion in this chapter, *Annie Kilburn* has the least to do with picturesque aesthetics and the most direct things to say about liberal guilt. It is also the only work that is not set in New York but rather in a small town without either immigrants or poverty enough to present picturesque sights; moreover, the tentative resolution the novel offers to the problem of class disparity and the baffled compassion of its well-to-do heroine is only possible in a small community. Annie returns from a decade living in Rome to Hatboro', Massachusetts, after the death of her father. She tells an elderly friend in Rome: "I feel that I must go back. I can't tell you why. But I have a longing; I feel that I must try to be of some use in the world – try to do some good – and in Hatboro' I think I shall know how'" (645).²⁴⁰ This announcement is met with gentle derision – "Oh! ... If you want to be of use, and do good –' She [the older lady] stopped, as if then there were no more to be said by a sensible person" (645). Annie has already been cast as a potential oddity, a soon-to-be spinster with romantic notions about doing

²⁴⁰ All citations for *Annie Kilburn* refer to Howells's *Novels 1886-1888*.

charitable works as a means of finding purpose in the world. Her lack of fitness for such work is made apparent immediately upon her return to Hatboro' and, significantly, is figured as an aesthetic failure – she has donated money for a statue commemorating Civil War heroes, but upon seeing it she finds it gauche and pretentious, and is ashamed of it. Her anxiety about this statue is the first materialization of her generalized sense of inadequacy before the social problems with which she wishes to engage. This episode initiates the novel's exploration of the misalignments between ideals and actions, the ways that ideals can come to appear grotesque, absurd, or useless when one tries to enact them. Annie's desire to help others is specifically directed at helping those poorer than herself, but she comes to learn that this ideal grows out of her need to be "of some use" and not from either an informed understanding of American inequality or personal feelings towards those who suffer under it.

The disheartening message that genteel people can do nothing about structural injustices may have contributed to Howells's reputation as a staid and conventional member of the bourgeoisie, despite interventions into political matters ranging from the executions following the Haymarket riot to his anti-imperial position during the Spanish-American and Philippine-American wars. As though in mockery of his own increasing activism, people with strong political opinions in Howells's social novels are routinely referred to as "cranks," an epithet applied to the socialists Lindau and Conrad Dryfoos in *Hazard* (323; 358) and the Reverend Peck in *Annie Kilburn* (845). There is no depiction, in either of these novels, of successful radicalism or attempts to address structural inequality. Yet part of what makes Howells's work relevant today is its insistence that members of the genteel classes – his primary readers²⁴¹ –

²⁴¹ Brodhead finds that "[i]n the years between 1860 and 1900, the *Atlantic Monthly*, *The Century Magazine*, and *Harper's Monthly Magazine* achieved an identification as the three American 'quality journals.' This means that these three journals produced the same high or distinguished zone in the literary realm that the classical museum or symphony orchestra produced in art or music, a strongly demarcated high-status arena for high-artistic practice.

should be uncomfortable with their inefficacy, and perhaps also with their own role in perpetuating inequality by censoring behaviors that might disrupt or undermine bourgeois ways of life.

Annie Kilburn's eventual success in finding a way to do good is also the story of her successful navigation of different social groups in her town, and of finding a place between convention and scandalous eccentricity from which to act upon her conscience and desire. Annie's first opportunity to do good works is offered to her by the nouveau-riche bourgeoisie of Hatboro', who are planning an event to raise money to start a Social Union for the mill hands who constitute the town's lower class. The committee wants Annie's involvement because of her standing as a member of one of the town's oldest families; despite her long absence, her established wealth and family history garner social influence. In explaining the plan for the event, Mrs. Munger – the embodiment of American new money and its tendency to censure the unusual – explains that, “the design is to let everybody come to the theatricals, and only those remain to the supper and dance whom we invite. That will keep out the socially objectionable element – the shoe-shop hands and the straw-shop girls” (672). Annie, somewhat discomfited, queries whether the Social Union isn't ““for just that class?”” (672), and Mrs. Munger replies, ““Yes, it's *expressly* for them, and we intend to organize a system of entertainments – lectures, concerts, readings – for the winter, and keep them interested the whole year round in it. The object is to show them that the best people in the community have their interests at heart, and wish to get on common ground with them”” (672). Mrs. Munger's speech lays out the culture of charitable involvement available to Annie, and it depresses her at first – Hatboro's wealthy

And though actual audiences are notoriously hard to establish, there is reason to think that they produced literary writing toward a similarly constituted social public” (124). *Annie Kilburn* was serialized in *Harper's Monthly* in 1888 (Hough 110).

patrons seem “terribly self-sufficing” and not especially in need of her help; she hopes this plan might “be the stepping-stone to something better, something really or more ideally useful” (673). What Mrs. Munger’s speech also makes clear, however, is the essential hypocrisy of her position: the “best people” can obviously not “get on common ground” with those with whom they refuse to interact socially. Ironically, her concept of this common ground hinges on the dissemination of genteel culture – intellectual and artistic edification – to the lower classes, a project which will be funded by the inter-class event of watching a play (performed entirely by the upper classes). Art is thus figured early on as the pathetically insufficient and essentially offensive offering wealthier people make to poorer ones, and as a point of fleeting contact between classes that does nothing to bridge their mutual alienation.

These contradictions are clarified soon after by the Reverend Peck, the town’s new Orthodox minister. Mrs. Munger has charged Annie with obtaining his approval of the theatricals, and it does not go well. His first objection is to the project of the Social Union itself:

“I’m not satisfied ... that it is wise to provide people with even harmless amusements that take them much away from their homes. These things are invented by well-to-do people who have no occupation, and think that others want pastimes as much as themselves. But what working people want is rest, and what they need are decent homes where they can take it. Besides, unless they help to support this union out of their own means, the better sort among them will feel wounded by its existence, as a sort of superfluous charity.” (680)

The Reverend’s objections cause the first shift in Annie’s perspective, a change reinforced by the fact that at this point in the conversation Mr. Peck’s young daughter knocks Annie’s glasses from her nose: “[t]he minister’s face and figure became a blur, and in the purblindness to which she

was reduced she had a moment of clouded volition in which she was tempted to renounce, and even oppose, the scheme for a Social Union” (681). Her blurred vision negates the clearly defined space between her and Mr. Peck, and in its absence her sense of social position and alignment with others of her class is similarly smudged. Her view of Mr. Peck has from the start of the conversation been impeded by his daughter standing on Annie’s lap, “so that [Annie] had to look first around one side of her and then another to see” him (680). The scene poses a reversal of the significance of sight in works by Emerson and Whitman, in which vision is a means of unification: here, it manifests distance and the imperfect apprehension of observed objects, which are only revealed partially and through continual awkward adjustments of position.

That Idella obstructs Annie’s view gains significance during a later conversation in which Annie expresses the extent of her self-loathing as the beneficiary of injustice and as someone who, worse yet, does not “love any of the people that I help, or hurt, whichever it is”; she explains that “[t]he only kind of creature that I can have any sympathy with is some little wretch like Idella, who is perfectly selfish and naughty every way, but seems to want me to like her” (819). The ascetic minister’s daughter who loves pretty dresses and covets others’ belongings represents the essential desiring nature of human beings, who must be taught to feel the claims of others. Annie’s adoration for Idella, her sense of sympathy with her, is also the admission of her own nature which refuses to give up earthly things for the principle she has come to possess – namely “[j]ustice” (818). The natural selfishness – and its corollary desire to be liked, or accepted by others – which Idella embodies is the obstacle that necessitates Annie’s adjustment of her perspective. It is typical of Howells’s representations of moral compromise that although

Annie comes to believe in the minister's concepts of social justice, the novel concludes with Peck dead and Idella adopted into Annie's comfortable home.

Once Annie's glasses have been restored to their proper position, her conventional sense of social relations is re-established and she regains her view of herself as "a consistent and faithful person" (681) – that is, faithful to her class. As such, and despite her momentary qualms, she continues to lay out the committee's plans. Their main concern is that, as an Orthodox minister, Mr. Peck will oppose the play, but this fear is quickly allayed: it is not the aesthetic aspect that presents concerns – he has "read Shakespeare a great deal" (681)²⁴² – but the social one. When he comes to understand the plan, he explains: "I could not join at all with those who were willing to lay the foundations of a Social Union in a social disunion – in the exclusion of its beneficiaries from the society of their benefactors" (682). This moment, in which "the grotesqueness of the situation" (682) becomes apparent, is the first in which Annie's vague discomfiture about the plan becomes acute. Her first response is to fall back upon the arguments and sentiments with which she is familiar, but by the end of the conversation Annie's former perspective has been permanently obscured. "Annie had the obtuseness about those she fancied below her which is one of the consequences of being brought up in a superior station"; her first line of defense, therefore, is to argue that to have the social event include classes "whose manners and breeding were different ... might be very embarrassing all round" (682-3). When Annie attempts, in her increasing helplessness, to parrot Mrs. Munger, Mr. Peck insists that richer and poorer "can never get on common ground ... in this way" (683), an assertion that brings about Annie's first glimmer of the intractable nature of class division given disparities of wealth

²⁴² Peck's appreciation for Shakespeare indicates both the cultural knowledge he has gained as part of the upward social mobility about which he is so ambivalent as well as the possibility that working-class people will of their own volition seek out the cultural artifacts which wealthier people desire to bestow upon them as a type of "civilizing" mission.

and opportunity. “‘Then you mean to say,’ Annie asked, half alarmed and half amused, ‘that there can be no friendly intercourse with the poor and the well-to-do unless it is based upon social equality?’” Mr. Peck responds by asking Annie to put herself in the place of one of the poor whom she offers to help on the terms she describes; to this, Annie replies with the wisdom imparted by her father, a judge:

“Well, then, I trust I should have the good sense to see that social equality between people who were better dressed, better taught, and better bred than myself was impossible, and that for me to force myself into their company was not only bad taste, but it is foolish. I have often heard my father say that the great superiority of the American practice of democracy over the French ideal was that it didn’t involve any assumption of social equality. He said that equality before the law and in politics was sacred, but that the principle could never govern society, and that Americans all instinctively recognized it. And I believe that to try to mix the different classes would be un-American” (683).

Annie’s speech exemplifies the conflict between liberty and equality that has characterized the American project since its inception. At this stage in her education, Annie has no recourse, when faced with the ethics of inter-class relations, but to fall back on the entrenched genteel belief that the different social classes remain distinct not through institutionalized force but essentially through choice and character. Like Basil March’s “democratic instincts,” which allow him to see his “inner elegance” as superior to that of other men while believing that “he was not arrogant about it, because he did full justice to the good qualities of those other people” (*Hazard* 27), Annie believes herself to be upholding American democracy by recognizing that there are separate classes yet believing them to be equal because the legal and political frameworks

designate them as such. For Basil March as for Annie Kilburn, a cultured tolerance for others of lower social stature is a sign both of their liberal humanism and of their class distinction.

Annie's faith in separate but legally equal classes is part of her broader faith in class mobility which has both prevented her from perceiving inequality as structural and has helped to underwrite her belief in a nation united by shared feeling if not experience.²⁴³ Peck's fundamental lesson, however, is that no such sympathy is possible – he demolishes the notion that the poor man who becomes wealthy can sympathize with those still in poverty by observing that the fluidity of social rank encourages identification upwards rather than down: as Annie explains, “rich people like that are apt to be the hardest masters, and are eager to forget they ever were poor, and are only anxious to identify themselves with the rich” (816). Peck's opinion is embodied in the character of Mr. Gerrish, the prosperous merchant who began with nothing and whose treatment of his employees suggests only the desire to subjugate them as he once must have been subjugated.²⁴⁴ If Gerrish enacts Peck's conviction that shared experience does not necessarily promote shared emotion, then Peck's own reserved affect displays the possibility that social justice does not require such affective responsiveness. In his first conversation with Annie, Mr. Peck quietly and relentlessly queries both the logic and the feeling behind Annie's assertions. His approach, here and throughout their interactions, is notably unemotional and

²⁴³ This belief, or hope, in class mobility as shared experience and thus emotion hearkens to the America that formed her father's opinions; as northern liberal elites, they would have believed in the class fluidity described by Abraham Lincoln: “The man who labored for another last year, this year labors for himself, and next year he will hire others to labor for him.” (Quoted in Wai-chee Dimock 196.)

²⁴⁴ It is also significant that Gerrish leads the charge to oust Peck from the congregation for his socialist views. Howells expands on this topic in “Glimpses of Central Park”: “The self-made man, when he has made himself of money, seems to have been deformed by his original destitution, and I think that if I were in need I would rather take my chance of pity from the man who had never been poor. Of course, this is generalization, and there are instances to the contrary, which at once occur to me. But what is absolutely true is that our prosperity, the selfish joy of having, at the necessary cost of those who cannot have, is blighted by the feeling of insecurity which every man has in his secret soul, and which the man who has known want must have in greater measure than the man who has never known want” (*Impressions* 174).

dispassionate; Annie later calls him “cold,” and questions whether he might be “guilty of a kind of hypocrisy if he doesn’t *feel* as well as see” (815). The novel militates against this perspective, however, by depicting Annie’s intensifying distress over matters of social justice and suffering as merely a self-inflicted wound. It neither helps her to understand others nor to devise plans for meaningfully doing so. Annie’s dis-ease grows until it manifests as bodily disease, a fact conveyed by the increasing scrutiny of her friend and potential love interest, Dr. Morell. As her internal conflict over how to “be of use” escalates, she becomes increasingly pale and nervous; Dr. Morell eventually terms her “a little morbid” (820). While this diagnosis might be seen simply as typical paternalistic pathologizing of feminine emotion, it is also the result of Dr. Morrell’s ultimately helpful sense that her acute guilt is socially useless and personally harmful, and it functions to bolster the novel’s argument that sentiment cannot be the source of a just society.

Howells’s depiction of overwrought bourgeois sentimentality is particularly compelling because Peck’s affective remoteness foregrounds the emotions of others, while his line of reasoning often hinges on the universal experience of human emotion. Discussing the Social Union he asks Annie: “Would you suffer such a slight as your friends propose” – of being excluded from a social event meant to benefit one’s class – “to be offered to any one you loved?” (684) Central to Peck’s philosophy is that, while all people share the same capacity for love, shame, and pride, emotional connections between classes are rendered impossible by social structures that foster inequality. Annie, dismayed, asks if “people can’t do any good at all with their money,” and Peck replies that money “can sometimes create a bond of gratitude perhaps, but it can’t create sympathy between rich and poor.” Annie, perpetually hoping to engender such sympathy, asks why this is impossible: “Because sympathy – common feeling – the sense of

fraternity – can spring only from like experiences, like hopes, like fears. And money cannot buy these” (684). Annie’s first efforts, then, to be of some use, are revealed as a combination of guilt about her privilege and the sense of obligation felt by a feudal lord to his subjects. Such a relation fundamentally unsettles her ideal of American democracy, in which the well-to-do can freely choose to help the poor, upon whose choices and natural tendencies hinge their ability to “rise,” as Annie says, or not (798). Her conversations with Peck reveal a paradox in Annie’s thinking between the American belief (bestowed by her father) in an individualistic system that allows the development of innate nature and a society based in mutual feeling.

Annie’s interactions with Peck reveal that her desire to “be of use” is in fact a desire for a sense of common feeling with others – to be known, to be connected. She is suffering from the gendered bourgeois malaise of Whitman’s twenty-ninth bather, trapped behind her rich curtains wishing to be part of free (and male-privileged) life. Thus, in an effort to make more direct contact with those whom she would help, her next effort at being of use is to send sick children to the seaside, a plan suggested to her by Dr. Morrell. The approach is abandoned after one of the children dies there, an event which “was treated as a great trial for Miss Kilburn; but the mother’s bereavement was regarded as something those people were used to, and got over more easily than one could imagine” (752). Howells repeatedly draws attention to the ways in which wealthier people attribute a different emotional life to those of different social station, even as their self-worth involves displaying an interest in the welfare of poorer people. Their callousness illustrates Peck’s belief that “[t]hose who rise above the necessity of work for daily bread are in great danger of losing their right relation to other men” (799). Annie becomes acutely aware of the solipsism of her emotional life in an encounter with the parents of the dead child. “Annie realized, in her resentment of the poor thing’s uncouth sorrow, that she had spoken to her with

the hope of getting, not giving, comfort” (750). This is the moment in which Annie realizes that her guilt about her privilege has not only failed to engender positive action, but rather has caused her to behave immorally, asking for absolution from those she believes she has hurt while resenting their pain. Ellison observes that “the embarrassments of liberal guilt arise from the authenticity of a more absolute pain discovered by the white intellectual in the gaze of the racial Other” (“Liberal” 358). The otherness here is classed rather than racialized, and the pain personal rather than structural, but the working-class mother’s loss and the response to it from the townspeople and from Annie make visible precisely this dynamic: the mother’s pain is more absolute than Annie’s; she is embarrassed by the insufficiency of her own emotions to encounter it, which emphasizes the distance between herself and those whom she would help, while her increasing discomfort with how others in her class perceive poorer people heightens her sense of guilt about both her attempts to help and about the social structures which make these attempts futile.

The guilt generated by this experience exacerbates Annie’s physical malaise, and Howells’s treatment of this embodied affective pain illustrates the possibility that feeling pained to incapacity by others’ suffering can be a form of excessive sentimentality. Martha Nussbaum writes about the need to approach others’ suffering as “a certain sort of reasoning” (28), rather than as a shared affective experience. A person can learn to be sensitive to suffering and about the social structures that can cause it, and thus one can “ha[ve] pity whether he experiences this or that tug in his stomach or not [...] No such particular bodily feeling is necessary” (Nussbaum 38). Annie has yet to gain enough understanding of social injustice to have pity and act appropriately; her abstract understanding of inequality manifests for much of the novel as the desire to sympathize with the working class, to *feel with* them, despite her increasing sense that

she does not understand them. Her emotional failure to feel care for actual classed others manifests as both this generalized desire for sympathy and as physical debility. Howells embeds the dichotomy between useless indulgence in sentiment and effective care for others in the characters of Annie and Dr. Morrell: where she is increasingly enervated by her growing compassion and guilt, he explains that his profession requires that his sympathy not overtake his ability to work (736). Significantly, this conversation occurs after a dinner in which Putney describes Reverend Peck as possessing “a most unexpected, hard-headed cold-bloodedness” (727), which foregrounds the fact that right feeling – feeling pain for suffering others – does not necessarily correlate with right action, or efforts to ameliorate the suffering one perceives. Nussbaum’s distinction between felt responses and reasoned compassion for others “makes a crucial theoretical distinction, one that has significant aesthetic consequences: it allows her to distance herself from the aesthetic of the sentimental. One need not be, in Nussbaum’s world, moved to tears in order to be moved to pity” (Woodward 68-69). Annie’s development over the course of the novel depicts her liberation from the debilitating snare of sentimentality, an essentially aesthetic response to imagined suffering that fails to produce right feeling or action when faced with actual sufferers.

Where Annie must learn to transform feelings into actions, Morrell learns that his actions imply feelings which have moral and social implications. Morrell’s initial response to Annie’s malaise is to help her “forget it” (735) with humour and pleasant talk; when this fails, he prescribes medicine. The contrast in their outlooks appears in a conversation in which Morrell asks, ““what’s the use of brooding on such ideas? We can’t hurry change, but we can make ourselves uncomfortable.”” Annie’s response is, ““Why should I be comfortable?””; to which Dr. Morell replies, ““Why shouldn’t you be?”” ““Yes, that’s what I often ask myself. But I can’t be’

[Annie] said sadly” (821). To this Dr. Morrell replies that he will send more tonic; Annie refuses. Her refusal, and the implied union of these two characters at the novel’s end, constitutes Howells’s prescription for the appropriate moral and affective relation towards others whom one can neither serve nor hurt: discomfort is appropriate, yet useless and damaging if too extreme. United, the positions of Annie and Dr. Morrell represent the balance between caring and dispassionate observation required from genteel people who exist within an unequal system which they cannot change. This balance upholds Adam Smith’s contention that overly demonstrative sorrow for strangers is immoral, a type of narcissistic masochism in which pleasure from one’s own pain makes impossible correct relations to others,²⁴⁵ while also suggesting that there can be an ethics of discomfort. Annie’s awareness of her unease and her refusal to treat it as physiological allow her to integrate the uncomfortable relation between herself and those poorer than her into a worldview in which she is both slightly more comfortable and also less apt to give offense to those whom she cares about but cannot befriend.

Annie’s awareness of her privilege and the discomfort it causes her makes possible the novel’s conclusion, in which she gains an understanding of her position in relation to those she seeks to help. In her paroxysm of shame about her privilege and confusion about what to do with it, Annie conceives a sudden hope that she can solve her trouble by abdicating this position and aligning herself with those she wishes to serve. Mr. Peck outlines his plan to abdicate his own privilege as a preacher and move to a mill town to teach, and Annie pledges that she will join him. “You might come,” he replies, “but you couldn’t stay. You don’t know what it is; you

²⁴⁵ This is the position Smith attributes to that set of philosophers who “would have us feel for others as we naturally feel for ourselves” – those he calls “whining and melancholy moralists” (196) who “have commonly nothing but a certain affected and sentimental sadness, which, without reaching the heart, serves only to render the countenance and conversation impertinently dismal and disagreeable” (197). Their excessive, and thus false, sentiment prevents rather than promotes sympathy with others.

can't imagine it, and you couldn't bear it" (839). It is important that he explains the gulf between working people and her as a failure of knowledge and of imagination – he recognizes that her wish to help, however real, cannot be carried out in the way she proposes, because that proposal is entirely a fantasy, a product of desire, and not based in any real knowledge or understanding of what would actually be required of her. Howells illustrates the limited scope of her imagination immediately upon Mr. Peck's departure, when "she fell into one of those reveries of hers – a rapture in which she prefigured what should happen in that new life before her. At its end Mr. Peck stood beside her grave, reading the lesson of her work to the multitude of grateful and loving poor who thronged to pay the last tribute to her memory" (839). In this fantasy she evidently dies well before old age, a martyr to the poor, who – still an undifferentiated throng – hail her for her sacrifice. It is a dream of relief from guilt, not of providing help to those in need. The sympathy Annie feels gets diverted into sentimentalism; unable to grapple realistically with her position in relation to the poor, she takes refuge in romantic images of her own sacrifices. Yet she does have moments of awareness that this sentimentalism is merely another product of her privilege. Her guilt – the persistent feeling that she is the beneficiary of injustice which she is failing to do anything about – is the self-flagellating gesture that she performs instead of trying either to understand or to help those in need.

It is how close Annie comes to carrying out her plan, and the fact that she divulges this plan to someone she loves and respects, which causes her to gain clarity about her position in relation to the poor and her potential to help them. After the sudden death of Mr. Peck, Annie learns that there is a good sum of money that was raised towards the Union. Ironically, and significantly, another townspeople suggests using the money to beautify the grounds of Annie's

monument. She tells Dr. Morrell that she'd rather pay to have it dynamited, after which he suggests using the money to start the Social Union. At first Annie vehemently disclaims involvement:

“I believe most heartily with Mr. Peck that no person of means and leisure can meet working people except in the odious character of a patron, and if I didn't respect them, I respect myself too much for that. If I were ready to go in with them and start the Social Union on his basis, by helping do house-work – *scullion*-work – for it, and eating and living with them, I might try; but I know from experience I'm not. I haven't the need, and to pretend that I have, to forego my comforts and luxuries in a make-believe that I haven't them, would be too ghastly a farce, and I won't.” (861)

This is one of Howells's clearest articulations of the basic problems of charity or good works by the wealthy for the poor – all attempts to help, no matter how well-meaning, are either inscribed with class difference that degrades the recipient of charity, or rely upon a kind of fantasy abdication of one's privilege.²⁴⁶ To be a patron one accepts inequality as a possibly desirable aspect of life; it hearkens back to a feudal order in which privilege comes with responsibilities, and these are discharged by an interest in the moral and physical hygiene of the poorer classes. For wealthy people to try to meet poor ones in a position of economic equality while operating from privilege is, as Annie says, a ghastly farce – unseemly play-acting – and again, based in a

²⁴⁶ Larzer Ziff writes that, “*Annie Kilburn* is not a good novel. In a narrow sense it failed because, as Howells found, even sympathetic readers, for want of any other dramatized relation between the classes, took it as a plea for the rich to exercise charity toward the poor. Hamlin Garland wrote a review which reflected this attitude and in exasperation Howells wrote him that ‘*Annie Kilburn* is from first to last a cry for *justice*, not alms... and you and the *Standard* coolly ask me why I do not insist upon justice instead of alms” (37). I do not agree that a novel can be said to fail because the interpretations made available by the environment into which it was received failed to correlate with the author's intentions. It is telling, however, that Howells was ever perceived as the foremost mouthpiece of genteel values, even in a novel which so clearly militates against them.

desire simply to ignore social divisions that do exist, or, more charitably, to enact in one's life an equality that is most obviously lacking in the country as a whole.

The ethics of Howells's solution are a more absolute version of those depicted in Bunner's descriptions of slumming, and that is to recognize the unsurpassable boundaries between wealthy and poor.²⁴⁷ Dr. Morrell's solution is to take the money to the family with whom the preacher initially planned to start his communal household in the mill town, and say:

“Here! This is what Mr. Brandreth's theatricals swindled the shop-hands out of. It's honestly theirs, at least to control; and if you want to try that experiment of Mr. Peck's here in Hatboro, it's yours. We people of leisure, or comparative leisure, have really nothing in common with you people who work with your hands for a living; and as we really can't be friends with you, we won't patronise you.” (862)

While it may seem callous or high-handed to proclaim that one has nothing in common with another human being, here it is an act of moral courage. It recognizes the alterity of people whose experience is entirely beyond imagination. And this recognition of otherness does not function to denigrate that experience, but rather to recognize its validity – the person of leisure perceives that it is less ethical to fantasize, to make assumptions based on generalities, prejudices, and romantic images and then act on such assumptions, than to admit a lack of understanding. It is a position which straightforwardly recognizes the existence of inequality, and does nothing to ameliorate guilt over it.

²⁴⁷ In Bunner's work, some kind of friendly intercourse between classes still exists: the organ-grinder is welcomed into the narrator's home; the businessman in his office gives the poor girl he observes a Christmas present. While Howells's Annie, at the novel's end, does have interactions with the mill-hands, they are mediated through economic transactions, and their personal lives remain entirely separate.

Over the course of the novel, Annie moves from class awareness to class consciousness, able to recognize both the contingency of class structure upon environmental factors and the cultural differences between herself and those less wealthy. The novel's resolution leaves her with a bearable degree of discomfort: she is voted in by the members of the Social Union to manage their funds, a position for which they make her accept a small fee.

She is aware that she is a pensioner upon the real members of the Social Union for a chance to be useful [...] She has thought of doing the work and giving the pay to another; but she sees that this would be pauperising and degrading to another. So she dwells in a vicious circle, and waits, and mostly forgets, and is mostly happy. (863)²⁴⁸

In this way, Annie Kilburn mostly solves the problem of her feeling that “something must be done; but I don't know what.” As Ellison argues, “[i]n the throes of liberal guilt, all action becomes gesture, expressive of a desire to effect change or offer help that is never sufficient to the scale of the problem” (“Liberal” 349). It is precisely Annie's ability to perform an action – utterly insufficient to affect the overall problem of inequality but not merely gesture – which breaks her out of the cycle of mere performative guilty liberalism, of simply acting out her sense that “we are all guilty – all guilty” (Howells, *Novels* 820). Interestingly, Howells has her keep

²⁴⁸ Ziff claims that the novel attempts to represent a vision of social justice, or “a felt harmony among men which made class differences cooperative expressions of the same group will rather than the signs of a basic division of interest,” and that in so doing Howells has “strangely imitated that class of writers to whom he was most deeply opposed – the romancers But he was a realistic novelist, not a romancer, and so Never-Never-Land was unavailable to him. The detailed community of Hatboro which he constructed in his usual accomplished fashion no sooner came into existence than, quite naturally, like the hundred towns on which it was modeled, it began to resist any scheme of social harmony offered it, and *Annie Kilburn* trailed off into ineffectuality” (37). The problem with such a critique is that Howells does not attempt to represent this felt harmony but rather its impossibility, which is what Annie and Morrell articulate at the novel's conclusion. Moreover, Annie's actions do not represent social harmony within the town, but merely a personal and idiosyncratic response to her own guilt. If the novel feels ineffectual, it is because Annie's actions are so wholly disconnected from those of any other wealthy person in her town or which are available to most people in America.

a portion of her guilt – the portion derived from her payment for services to the Union, which she cannot give away lest she become a patron. This guilt keeps her aware of her position, which is ultimately one of dependence on the working people for something useful to do.

The satisfying resolution available to the residents of Hatboro' is nowhere to be found in New York, where the Marches move to hazard a new life of literary accomplishment. Like *Annie Kilburn, A Hazard of New Fortunes* is concerned with the ways that sentiment interacts with social consciousness, but the latter novel is far more caustic and less hopeful that guilt can be transmuted into useful action. Immediately after the pages introducing the Marches as "sympathetic" people, Isabel explains her terror of moving to New York: "I couldn't make my sympathies go round two million people; I should be wretched" (*Hazard* 28). Isabel's belief in her natural feeling for others is rooted in her home and the aesthetic predilections it displays; her well-appointed library signifies not only the couple's "distinction" (26), but also their willingness to sympathize with others, as Howells makes evident by his conjunction of the couple's aesthetic and social ideals. The experiences of those beyond Isabel's own family are interesting to her only as narrative, however; faced with the possibility of witnessing actual suffering, Isabel weeps for her own insufficiency. In the process of the famously interminable apartment-hunt the Marches endure in New York, they see an apartment for rent by a widow who has come to the city for her daughter who studies art. The Marches' discussion of the lodging delineates the perimeters of their sentiments:

"I dare say we could be perfectly comfortable there," March suggested when they had got away. "Now if we were truly humane, we would modify our desires to meet their needs, and end this sickening search, wouldn't we?"

“Yes; but we’re *not* truly humane,” his wife answered, “or at least not in that sense. You know you hate boarding; and if we went there I should have them on my sympathies the whole time.” (61, emphasis in original)

March expresses the sense that their desires are at odds with their humanitarian sensibilities – albeit with an irony that characterises all such observations by him. Isabel, when her ideals are tested, generally stands firmly and unapologetically upon her bourgeois sensibilities. In this case, the mere possibility of mingling domestic circumstances with people slightly lower in the social scale is a taxing proposition, both because boarding would deprive Isabel of the domesticity that embodies both her values and her class distinction, and because of the appeals the lonely newcomers to New York would make on Isabel’s compassion (they also might seem disconcertingly similar to the Marches despite their class difference). Like Annie, Isabel finds she cannot modify her desires to meet others’ needs, but the pessimism of *Hazard* emerges in the fact that any discomfort Isabel ever feels about her limitations is dissipated either by humour or by recourse to social convention.

The ironic *if* of Basil’s statement is a central aspect of the Marches’ self-concept: self-mockery about their ideals is an aspect of their cultivated taste. “They were not sentimental, they were rather matter-of-fact in their motives; but they had both a sort of humorous fondness for sentimentality. They liked to play with the romantic, from the safe vantage-ground of their real practicality, and to divine the poetry of the commonplace” (25). Their humour is a self-protective maneuver which allows them the pleasure of sentimentality while preventing such sentiments from encroaching upon the pragmatic pursuit of their own self-interest. In “*A Hazard of New Fortunes* and the Reproduction of Liberalism,” Charles Harmon observes that, “[i]n order to maintain their sense of distinction, the Marches discover that they need simply to regard every

object, no matter how unprestigious, with the right *attitude*. The line between gentility and shabbiness may well be endlessly negotiable, but the Marches find that the mediocre can be transformed into the chic simply by ladling on the irony” (189). It is significant that Basil is almost always the one wielding the ladle: his sympathies are apt to overflow their aesthetic boundaries, a tendency only his wife’s implacable pragmatism can prevent from becoming actual, dangerous compassion; in response to her recalling him from his sentimentalism, he becomes ironic. During their house-hunt, Isabel expostulates with Basil:

“I don’t want you to sentimentalize any of the things you see in New York. I think you were disposed to do it in that street we drove through. I don’t believe there’s any *real* suffering – not real *suffering* – among those people; that is, it would be suffering from our point of view, but they’ve been used to it all their lives, and they don’t feel their discomfort so much.”

“Of course I understand that, and I don’t propose to sentimentalize them. I think when people get used to a bad state of things they had better stick to it; in fact they don’t usually like a better state so well, and I shall keep that firmly in mind.”

She laughed with him, and they walked along the L-bestriden avenue.

(69-70)

Basil’s response leaves open the possibility that he is satirizing his wife’s sentiments. Here and elsewhere, however, he puts placating his wife above the pursuit of his own sensibilities. His commitment to keeping in mind the pleasure the poor take in their circumstances is undercut elsewhere by a sense of the injustice such conditions bespeak, but his commitment to his domestic life is inviolable. Within this dynamic, Isabel is the “straight-man,” comically

oblivious to her moral obliviousness, whereas March can, with his lightly ironic stance, observe both her and the world. The Marches' ironic distance from their romanticized seeing signals a new, more sophisticated phase of the bourgeois liberal's relation to the common, in which the conventionality of such perceptions is itself the subject of mild ridicule and thus less apt to erupt in ungovernable sympathy for others.²⁴⁹

Their ironic self-awareness does not, however, protect them from moments in which their sentimentality overrides both pragmatism and decency. The most prominent instance of this runaway romanticism occurs when the couple enters the domain of the picturesque during their apartment hunt. They view an apartment in an old mansion that “had kept some of its former dignity, which pleased people of their sympathetic tastes” (46). These tastes allow them to see the flat as a species of ruin – a relic of an earlier New York – just as they transform the ugliness of the decorations, the “rough pine floors” and the shadowy rooms into a kind of beauty. Although the flat meets none of the Marches' qualifications, Mrs. March nearly persuades herself to take it, mostly swayed by her instant love for the kind and jovial janitor, who is black. “If I had such a creature,” she says, “nothing but death should part us, and I should no more think of giving him his *freedom*–” (46). This is the sentiment expressed by the proud possessor of humanitarian sentiments and democratic impulses. It is a response only to the man as aesthetic object; through her gaze, Isabel's janitor enters what in Levinasian terms is “a lifeless life, a derisory life which is not master of itself, a caricature of life” (“Reality” 9). When Basil

²⁴⁹ In his “Sensus Communis, an Essay on the Freedom of Wit and Humour,” Shaftesbury states: “’Tis the persecuting Spirit has rais'd the *bantering* one: And want of Liberty may account for want of a true Politeness, and for the Corruption or wrong Use of Pleasantry and Humour” (I: 72, emphasis in original). The wrong use, in the Marches' case, is the application of humor as salve for their own discomfort. Their lightness is a dodge, a kind of sublimation necessitated by the persecutions of their own consciences. If the picturesque provides a way to discuss the problem of the bad conscience that haunts the bourgeoisie, the Marches' banter – and Howells's use of light irony rather than didacticism – is a response to the social constraints around discussing the ethical failures of their class.

observes to his wife the effect the janitor's "glamour" has on her, she replies that "we shall all be black in heaven – that is, black-souled" (Howells, *Hazard* 48), the perception and its phrasing overdetermined by American political and religious contexts. Her joke – or hope – that in heaven everyone will be black suggests that for her, utopia is fusion with the oppressed Others whom she fetishizes in her earthly state, a place in which the only Master is God. In heaven, there will be no plutocrats to crowd her into shabby apartments, her sympathies will no longer be incommoded by the sight of the unfortunate, and she will no longer have to rely on her sophisticated sense of their aesthetic qualities to ameliorate her sorrow for their suffering or her unease about her own class position.

Having, Shining, Truckling: Civilized Life and its Discontents

Aesthetic sensibility, in particular the taste for the picturesque, is more pronounced in *Hazard* than in Howells's earlier works because it is explicitly a book about the hazards of being bourgeois. Pictorial sight, or the ability to find beauty in the common, is a defence against permeable class boundaries and against the guilt engendered by the self-interest necessary to remain solidly among the better-off. Annie Kilburn's guilt begins as an impersonal sense that her wealth comes with responsibilities she has been failing to fulfil. Her concept of America is derived from her father's idea of democracy, which is comprised of self-sorting lords and masters; when she encounters Peck, inequality begins to appear other than inevitable and thus her own feelings and beliefs announce themselves as complicit in its perpetuation. This complicity is the guilt she cannot escape, but it is mitigated by the mutual recognition of difference with which the narrative concludes. Crucially, this comfort requires only a recalibration of moral sentiment and imagination, but not of her finances. Moreover, the town's

size and social composition solidify its members' positions within it; Annie's social standing is never in question, despite her unusual social choices.²⁵⁰ Although Annie is a single woman prone to peculiar behavior, her inherited money and good name shield her from the possibility of social or financial damage, and this freedom enables both her descent into self-loathing and its remediation through an unusual alliance with the working class. The Marches, however, have no such freedom, and the limitations of their sympathies are partly imposed by their fear of sliding down the social ladder. Annie's existential angst is a generalized feeling of guilt and uselessness related to her freedom from work; the Marches' is specifically tied to their precarious existence within the middle class. In the anonymity of the big city, severed from the home that signified their values and their class position and newly aware of their vulnerability to the impersonal forces of market capitalism, the Marches require a way to signify their belonging in the genteel world in a way that Annie does not. These social and financial concerns, alongside the enormity of class disparity in New York, quash any possibility that individual actions, such as Annie ultimately undertakes, can ameliorate their discomfort about the suffering they perceive around them. The Marches' cultivated aesthetic taste expresses this discomfort by providing a medium through which to attend to the difficult conditions they encounter, while containing it within a structure that mitigates their sense of responsibility and affirms their belonging within the genteel classes.

Critics have observed that many of Howells's novels use the trope of home and habitation to signify his characters' morals and values;²⁵¹ this is nowhere more true than in *Hazard*, which

²⁵⁰ Annie's closest friends include the alcoholic and labor-sympathizer Putney, member of another prominent Hatboro' family, and Lyra Wilmington, whose relations with the nephew of her elderly husband make her the subject of town talk. Dr. Morrell's frequent visits to her house are also the subject of gossip, and her desire to adopt Reverend Peck's daughter cause people to speculate that she wants to marry the minister.

²⁵¹ David L. Frazier, for instance, argues that in the works he discusses, "houses may be associated with the characters' social stations and spiritual conditions, in both their stops and changes, so that the places help convey

devotes a full sixty-three pages to the Marches' apartment hunt. Some scholars, Lionel Trilling most notably, read this section as a long, senseless shlep (*Opposing Self* 92-93).²⁵² Arguably, though, it is a central quest in the narrative: the search for a home that will embody the Marches' liberal humanist values – and they cannot find it. Their pursuit is a Goldilocks nightmare of too big or too small, and there is no happy middle: the modest, settled gentility they know in Boston is impossible in New York, where they are faced with both the scale of American poverty and the contingency of their own economic position. The Marches' income consigns them to be, like most of city's inhabitants, tenants, a condition that destabilizes identification with their domestic environment and compromises their class identification. Amy Kaplan observes that in the 1880s, there were “no clear legal or semantic differences separat[ing] the ‘tenement’ from the ‘apartment’” (“Knowledge” 73). The proximity of wealth to poverty in New York, and the scarcity of affordable family-sized dwellings, means that the Marches' search takes them often into neighborhoods that do not reflect their conception of their social position. “Flattering advertisements took them to numbers of huge apartment-houses chiefly distinguishable from tenement houses by the absence of fire-escapes on their facades, till Mrs. March refused to stop at any door where there were more than six bell-ratchets and speaking-tubes on either hand” (Howells, *Hazard* 58). To buttress their conceptions of themselves as cultured middle-class people, the Marches rely on their aesthetic sensibilities, which include a patronizing enjoyment of tenements with fire-escapes as picturesque art.

what the people have been, what they are, what they aspire to become, what they turn out to be” (277). His article, “Howells' Symbolic Houses: Plutocrats and Palaces,” provides an overview of criticism on the significance of the home in Howells's work.

²⁵² By contrast, Amy Kaplan's “‘The Knowledge of the Line’: Realism and the City in Howells's *A Hazard of New Fortunes*,” provides an excellent discussion of the Marches' house-hunt as knowledge-gathering about the city.

Mrs. March's identification of external fire escapes with buildings she cannot inhabit is telling: poor neighbourhoods are, for the Marches, characterized by the breakdown of private space, by a more communal existence. As we have seen throughout this study, pictorial sight and specifically the aestheticization of roughness emerges within a genteel culture stifled by its own conventions and yearning for a sense of community and vibrancy. During their drive through the tenement district, the Marches observe a scene that would already be familiar to genteel readers as picturesque: a lively street, brimming with joyously raucous children, gossiping women, and people buying cheap fruit. "I haven't seen a jollier crowd anywhere in New York," Basil declares (65). The Marches associate the absence of material comfort with the absence of conventions that formalize social interactions and dull emotional responses; this association proceeds from the Marches' sense that their own emotions have been flattened by the demands of appropriate middle-class behavior, as well as by their own ironic self-awareness. The picturesque allows the Marches to join poetry to practicality, to reconcile their democratic instincts with their accumulative ones. This economy of sympathy and self-interest is, in Howells's work, integral to the functioning of American liberalism and the unequal society it unhappily upholds.²⁵³

Their apartment-hunt, which is also their first effort to acquaint themselves with a radically new type of urban environment, reveals the first signs of the Marches' discontent with their class position. The elevated trains, which Basil declares "incomparably picturesque" (62), allow visual contact with the poor while preserving the Marches' physical and emotional distance

²⁵³ Harmon argues that "[t]his often-patronized writer challenges contemporary readers to question easy assumptions regarding cultural crisis, and to entertain the possibility that, from Howells's time to our own, we liberals have been the managers of a culture whose guiding precepts we neither believe in nor plan to change" (193-4). This rather terrifying statement describes well the Marches' position – particularly Basil's, who is more willing to admit that he does not believe in the culture in which he is striving so hard to succeed. Written in 1997, Harmon's article also seems to diagnose accurately the absence of guiding principles that would allow liberalism to succeed in America as anything other than guilty conservatism: the politics are almost indistinguishable, but the sentiments express regret about the inequalities these political decisions engender.

– and thus their bourgeois status. Framed by the train windows, and often the windows of the apartments they pass, the unknown poor should become “a puppet-show” for the Marches, to import Emerson’s phrase in “Nature” (33) – productive of a pleasurable sense of detachment and of their stable subjectivities as they create the scene. Instead, like the opened window of the coupé, the view from the elevated provides a disconcerting simultaneity of distance and proximity. One of the greatest pleasures of the elevated roads is that they allow “a fleeting intimacy ... with the people in second and third floor interiors” (Howells, *Hazard* 76). Rather than simply forming a pleasing spectacle that affirms the Marches’ class position, the poor – for Basil at least – induce a desire for unification with others of which he feels incapable. In a characteristically passionate yet ironic outburst, March exclaims:

“Why, those tenements are better and humaner than those flats! There the whole family lives in the kitchen, and has its consciousness of being; but the flat abolishes the family consciousness. It’s confinement without coziness; it’s cluttered without being snug. You couldn’t keep a self-respecting cat in a flat; you couldn’t go down cellar to get cider. No: the Anglo-Saxon home, as we know it in the Anglo-Saxon house, is simply impossible in the Franco-American flat, not because it’s humble, but because it’s false.” (67-68)

This sense of his class’s falseness helps to explain the Marches’ passion for the picturesque, which has always constructed the poor as living more intense and authentic lives than the wealthy. Basil sees in the habitations of the poor a perfect confluence between domestic space and domestic life: he idealizes the poor family as possessing a unity and spontaneity denied to the urban middle class. But Basil’s idyll on the tenement and mockery of his class is also a

bulwark against the collapse of class boundaries, and his evident pleasure in his own rhyming rhetoric preserves the necessary ironic distance from his stated beliefs.

The irony that liberates the Marches from their sentiments imprisons them in the falseness they claim to revile, and perhaps the greatest irony of the novel is the flat they are ultimately forced to rent. (After Basil's discourse on flats they briefly consider a house in a slightly rougher neighborhood but run away fearing for their lives.) Their future home, which they visit immediately after the apartment with the janitor Isabel would like to own, is in the Xenophon, a name which invokes both the Greek democracy cherished by American idealists and the Otherness the Marches both celebrate and fear.²⁵⁴ As they ride the elevator, "they tried to keep their self-respect under the gaze of the superintendent, which they felt was classing and assessing them with unfriendly accuracy" (48). This is an important moment for two reasons: first, because throughout the novel the Marches class themselves by directing their gaze at others. This is one of only two instances in which they are beheld by a lower-class Other, and in both cases the gaze makes them uncomfortable.²⁵⁵ Second, their discomfort comes from the sense that their class position and its attendant tastes are being accurately assessed, which, as it turns out, they are. The Xenophon is the place for them, despite their initial repugnance toward the flat, which is decorated as a kind of eastern bazaar. The owner has filled the space with layers of Japanese, Chinese, Armenian, Turkish, Persian and Arab artifacts (49) – "gimcracks," as the

²⁵⁴ That Xenophon was both a philosopher and a mercenary soldier also speaks to the divisions within the Marches' divided position.

²⁵⁵ One shorthand that Lacan provides for "the gaze" is this one: "*You never look at me from the place from which I see you. Conversely, what I look at is never what I wish to see*" (Lacan *Four* 103, emphasis in original). In the Marches' case, the gaze of the classed Other is destabilizing because it makes them (briefly) aware that the objects of their pictorial sight are in fact subjects. This gaze forces two realizations: the Marches themselves are perceived as caricatures by classed others, and the Marches' conceptual representations of those others also are caricature.

Marches call them, a pejorative term that asserts their sense of the owners' bad taste. They have done what the Marches cannot countenance: like Conrad and Lindau, who die trying to defray union violence, or Margaret, who joins a religious order, the owners of the Xenophon apartment have brought their taste for the exotic into their domestic lives. For the Marches, Otherness is a quality to be appreciated from afar. The gimcrackery, with its excess of exotic commodities, breaches the distance between spectator and objectified Other. Rather than signifying sympathy for subjugated people through talismans of elevated taste, like old pictures and good books, this middle-class domestic space has been violated with actual physical symbols of exoticized Others. The apartment horrifies the Marches because it places on display the superficiality of their sympathies; it is Mrs. March's unseemly desire to "have such a creature" as the black janitor rendered in a profusion of possessions.

Despite the Marches' mockery of the owners' taste, when they meet, Isabel feels an instant sympathy with Mrs. Green. Immediately upon her departure, however, Mrs. March begins berating the gimcrackery owner for going to Europe to study art: "I can't help feeling sorry for a person who mistakes herself to that extent," says Isabel (74), whose own mistaken sense of self is displayed on the following page, when she confesses her "infatuation" with elevated trains, unabashed by Basil's observation that she had once thoroughly scorned them (Howells 76). (It is also noteworthy that one of Isabel's first concerns about leaving Boston is her recent triumph of getting the children into a popular artist's class.) The Marches' own exoticist impulses are reiterated in the same scene, in which the picturesque trains waited "like fabled monsters of Arab story ready for the magician's touch" (77). Mrs. March has, in fact, already begun imagining her family into Mrs. Green's apartment – until she interrupts herself by shrieking "it isn't to be thought of!" (75). They can, however, think of nothing else. They pack

away several barrels of gimcracks, suppressing this embarrassingly un-ironic manifestation of the romanticism to which their class is prone. Basil persists in occasionally rebelling against the constraints of his class which mean that he must “go on trembling before Dryfooses and living in gimcrackeries” (Howells 438), a line which exposes Basil’s perception of his rented flat as the symbol of his class limitations: aspirations that mean truckling to nouveau riche captains of industry and social demands that condemn him to a degree of falseness. The Marches’ apartment hunt does, therefore, yield a space that appropriately encompasses their liberal humanism, in all its anxious hypocrisy.

Like Annie Kilburn, the Marches are confronted with real manifestations of problems which they had previously considered only in the abstract. Immediately after the conversation in which Isabel expresses her feeling that the poor do not really suffer, laughing at Basil’s witticism and planning their evening at the theatre, the Marches are arrested by the vision of “a decently dressed person who walked beside them, next the gutter, stooping over as if to examine it, and half halting at times”; they watch the man pick up a bit of cracker and “cram it into his mouth and eat it down as if he were famished” (70). Whether or not he is in fact famished the Marches, as we shall see, consider later; at the moment however, “[t]hey kept up with him, in the fascination of the sight, to the next corner,” at which point Basil runs after the man and gives him money. When the man grasps his hand and tearfully thanks him, Basil “pulled himself away, shocked and ashamed, as one is by such a chance” (70-71). Howells’s reference to a generalized totality represents the type of narratorial intervention that critics appear generally to have attributed to Howells himself, under the assumption that these statements offer an implicit affirmation of such genteel sentiments. Arguably, however, the narrator’s “as one is” serves a

dual function: it aligns the narrator with genteel readers, offering them a moment of identification and relief – *of course, one would be shocked and ashamed!* – while, in its bland assertion of a singular and obvious response, also conjuring the other potential responses so firmly foreclosed by that tidy phrase. That Basil experiences shame in this situation indicates the fact that his response arises in relation to the gaze of a classed Other: shame originates in publicity, in being seen; Basil is not embarrassed – he has not failed to live up to his own ideals – but rather is degraded by the judgment an Other’s perception implies. Such vulnerability to the vision of themselves presented by poorer people indicates why, despite considering themselves to be generous and sympathetic people, the Marches cannot allow those who perceive them from radically different subject positions into either their emotional or physical space. Every instance in which the Marches are compelled by their self-idealizations as progressive liberal humanists to transcend their purely spectatorial relationship with the lower class, they pull away, ashamed. Sight for the Marches must remain unilateral: in this way, they are free to constitute themselves as members of the cultured middle-class through their gaze outward toward the poor.

The materialization of previously abstract social problems is primarily embodied in Lindau, the German socialist with whom Basil was acquainted in his youth and meets again upon moving to New York. The Marches’ interactions with Lindau place them on a collision course with the limits of their sympathy, and these are both economic and social. Self-interest is the defining moral imperative of their lives despite their liberal humanist values, which thus remain mere sentiment, at best an imaginative connection to those with whom the Marches believe themselves to sympathize. The dream of personal intervention in social injustice emerges for Basil, as for Annie, in flights of fancy. Upon first encountering Lindau, Basil falls into a “pensive reverie” in which he imagines paying Lindau, with interest, for lessons in German he

gave Basil long ago; the sum raises his wife's ire, so he imagines Lindau refusing the interest, and then Basil gets him a job at the magazine and looks after him until he dies (98-99). The imagined sacrifice here is merely pecuniary – and possibly that of marital felicity – but the premise is similar to Annie's reverie of dying among the mill hands: faced with the suffering of another person, Basil takes refuge in a narrative that emanates from a sense of compassion but is propelled by images of the daydreamer's own actions. The story Basil tells himself derives from his sense of the "pathos" of his own position, ensnared in middle-class domestic cares: "He was not master of himself, as he once seemed, but the servant of those he loved" (98). Basil's sudden apprehension of his class position, with its attendant restrictions and responsibilities, leads to a yearning for connection with a world beyond his own. Yet he cannot escape his world: his reverie immediately turns to money, the source and sign of March's limited power. These limits demarcate the degree to which he feels he can enact his sympathy for others, and consequently Lindau ceases to be a real person to whom March feels he owes a debt, or even through whom he can enact his principles: Lindau becomes a character March manipulates, and his imagination makes him a moral man.²⁵⁶

In *Hazard*, Howells undermines individuals who dare to transcend the role prescribed for them by society. This dynamic is most evident in his depiction of Margaret Vance, the upper-middle-class girl drawn to charitable work rather than to social success. At the novel's opening,

²⁵⁶ In *Marxism and Literature*, Raymond Williams traces the spiritualization of the inner life: "The religious emphasis weakened, and was replaced by what was in effect a metaphysics of subjectivity and the imaginative process. 'Culture', or more specifically 'art' and 'literature' (themselves newly generalized and abstracted), were seen as the deepest record, the deepest impulse, and the deepest resource of the 'human spirit'. 'Culture' was then at once the secularization and the liberalization of earlier metaphysical forms. Its agencies and processes were distinctively human, and were generalized as subjective, but certain quasi-metaphysical forms – 'the imagination', 'creativity', 'inspiration', 'the aesthetic', and the new positive sense of 'myth' – were in effect composed into a new pantheon" (14). Such a pantheon helps to explain the spiritual significance the Marches derive from the objects in their home as well as, more broadly, how their aestheticization of others satisfies a spiritual yearning.

Margaret is trying to balance her social obligations with the compulsion she feels to help those less fortunate: “She had a repute for good works which was out of proportion to the works, as it always is, but she was really active in that way, under the vague obligation, which we now all feel, to be helpful” (246). Here, Howells suggests the sense of guilt that stalks the economically comfortable: this vague sense of obligation and the impossibility of fulfilling it is precisely Ellison’s definition of liberal guilt. This passage is notable for its use of the inclusive first person, which encompasses reader, author, and characters in one affective position. Miss Vance is, of all Howells’s characters, the most aware of the gap between sentiment and action; despite her continual work with the poor she declares that “[w]hen we think we have done something for others, by some great effort, we find it’s all for our own vanity” (471). Perhaps in an attempt to escape this vanity, Margaret, at the novel’s end, becomes a nun. While such a choice is not entirely socially unacceptable for a girl of her class, it is nonetheless, to the greatest degree possible, a renunciation of class position and privilege. Through Margaret, however, Howells suggests that the only way an upper-class individual might escape guilt about inequality is through extreme acts of self-denial.

The Marches, however, cannot perceive Margaret’s action as anything other than gesture, or a kind of psychological defect. After Miss Vance has visited the Marches in an attempt to learn more about Conrad’s last hours, Isabel pronounces her “a strange being; such a mixture of the society girl and the saint.” To which Basil replies, “She’s the potentiality of several kinds of fanatic. She’s very unhappy” (432). Once again, behavior outside the bounds of social normativity is perceived by the Marches as an unfortunate maladaptation bordering on madness. The sympathy which they believe themselves to possess is nowhere to be found during or after Margaret’s visit. Isabel, in particular, is simply happy they had extricated themselves from the

conversation without Basil saying “something awkward” (432); the most important thing, in this tragic situation, is to “get out of it” without disarranging the social facade in any embarrassing way. The strike, Lindau’s death, and Miss Vance joining the Sisterhood send Basil into a brief moral reverie, in which he remembers that “[i]f we love mankind, pity them, we even *wish* to suffer for them” (452); however, his subsequent conversation with his wife affirms that this wish, when acted out in the world, can never be more than a gesture. Isabel “was not sure but [Miss Vance] was something of a *poseuse*, and enjoyed the picturesqueness, as well as the pain” (452). Faced with the possibility of real sacrifice – a girl of wealth and beauty spending her life among the “poor and dying” – Isabel takes refuge in her belief that anything which interferes with the perpetuation of a conventional home is ultimately nothing more than an unfortunate aesthetic choice.

Isabel is the gatekeeper of her household’s respectability, and this role means that her social sympathies, like her support for Basil’s artistic ambitions, are undermined by her conventionality. As does her first response to the possibility of moving to New York, her response to Lindau exposes a breach between her ideals and her willingness to enact them. In an effort to act upon her sympathies she suggests that Lindau tutor the children, but finds herself unable to feel the way her idealized self-image would dictate:

The experiment of making March’s old friend free of his house had not given her all the pleasure that so kind a thing ought to have afforded so good a woman. She received Lindau at first with robust benevolence, and the high resolve not to let any of his little peculiarities alienate her from a sense of his claim upon her sympathy and gratitude, not only as a man who had been so generously fond of her husband in his youth, but a hero who had suffered for her country. (292)

This sympathy is, however, entirely abstract, and dissolves when met with the discomfort caused by Lindau's presence. Where she expects pleasure in her good feelings, she experiences instead a sense of umbrage. Her ambivalence about Lindau is first articulated as an inability to compassion him for his missing hand:

Her theory was that his mutilation must not be ignored, but must be kept in mind as a monument of his sacrifice, and she fortified Bella with this conception, so that the child bravely sat next his maimed arm at table and helped him to dishes he could not reach, and cut up his meat for him. As for Mrs. March herself, the thought of his mutilation made her a little faint; she was not without a bewildered resentment of its presence as a sort of oppression. (292)

Isabel's resentment suggests that when our brother is upon the rack, the sympathetic sensory response such an image provokes is not necessarily accompanied by the desire to relieve his suffering. Rather, the image of Lindau's suffering requires from Isabel an imaginative response; his mutilation becomes a monument, and as ever in Howells's work, monuments crumble before the work of signification they are meant to do.

The hard work of constructing this monument makes Isabel resentful, like Annie in the face of the grieving mother: someone is suffering in ways they have not, and the encounter with this pain provokes not compassion but a sense of being oppressed by its undeniable presence. Berlant observes that this is a common phenomenon:

scenes of vulnerability produce a desire to withhold compassionate attachment, to be irritated by the scene of suffering in some way. Repeatedly, we witness someone's desire to not connect, sympathize, or recognize an obligation to the sufferer; to refuse engagement with the scene or to minimize its effects; to

misread it conveniently; to snuff or drown it out with pedantically shaped phrases or carefully designed apartheid; not to rescue or help; to go on blithely without conscience; to feel bad for the sufferers, but only so that they will go away quickly. (*Compassion* 9)

Such irritation and consequent misreading is precisely Isabel's response, and it is one of many examples in this novel of the ways in which direct experience of another's suffering tears the cloak of liberal humanism the Marches wear to disguise their terrified obeisance to material and social success. Her revulsion at Lindau's missing arm dissolves the veneer of her compassion, which cannot withstand either his injury or his "sentiments concerning the whole political and social fabric" (*Hazard* 292):

She did not feel sure that he should be allowed to say such things before the children, who had been nurtured in the faith of Bunker Hill and Appomattox, as the beginning and the end of all possible progress in human rights ... it astounded, it alarmed her, to hear American democracy denounced as a shuffling evasion It shocked her to be told that the rich and poor were not equal before the law in a country where justice must be paid for at every step in fees and costs, or where a poor man must go to war in his own person, and a rich man might hire some one to go in his. Mrs. March felt that this rebellious mind in Lindau really somehow outlawed him from sympathy, and retroactively undid his past suffering for the country. (292)

The sympathy which Isabel believed herself to feel is revealed as impersonal and superficial pity, at best a dutiful sense of obligation or an abstract reverence. This duty is one she instills in her

children, evidenced by Bella's coached kindness to Lindau,²⁵⁷ but which has strict limits: Isabel is discomfited by Lindau's speech, not least because "she had been comforted by the thought that if there ever was another war, and Tom were drafted, his father could buy him a substitute" (293). Duty can be discharged in small acts of kindness which can be privately resented; sacrifice is an abstract concept to build monuments to, but not to be undertaken personally.

Isabel's reflections convey that she is, like Annie Kilburn, shocked by the concept that class disparity undercuts American democracy. For both women, the abolition of slavery has appeared the final proof of the nation's justice; Annie "used to think we had the millennium because slavery was abolished" – until Peck teaches her that, as she says, "people have more liberty, but they seem just as far off as ever from justice."²⁵⁸ That is what paralyses me and mocks me and laughs in my face when I remember how I used to dream of doing good" (*Novels* 819). Annie, however, has greater tolerance for feeling mocked by her own principles and by the ways they may contravene those of more conventional people. Mrs. March's principles are as statuary she has purchased for display in her home, simply a facet of her good taste and cultural distinction; she has neither the knowledge to defend them nor the moral capacity to change them. These ironic references to abolition as the final proof of America's commitment to human rights

²⁵⁷ Bella's actions are notably contrasted with the children who live in Lindau's tenement, who come to help him dress himself as a matter of course. "We haf to dake gare of one another in a blace like this," Lindau explains (192). Lindau's statement also highlights the sense of community and mutual care for which wealthier people envy the poor.

²⁵⁸ Lindau, discussing the war, asks Basil: "you think I knowingly gave my hand to save this oligarchy of traders and tricksters, this aristocracy of railroad wreckers and stock gamblers and mine-slave drivers and mill-serf owners? No; I gave it to the slave; the slave – ha! ha! ha! – whom I helped to unshackle to the common liberty of hunger and cold" (*Hazard* 193). It is significant that *Every Other Week* prints an article written by Colonel Woodburn in defence of slavery, but fires Lindau simply for his socialist views. As Basil explains, "we could print a dozen articles praising the slavery it's impossible to have back, and it wouldn't hurt us. But if we printed one paper against the slavery which Lindau claims still exists, some people would call us bad names, and the counting-room would begin to feel it" (357). That Lindau dies while Woodburn becomes more comfortable and entrenched in Northern society (his daughter marries Fulkerson, who becomes Basil's partner at the magazine) is another example of Howells's increasingly pessimistic view on American justice, and of his ironic commentary on the failure of liberal ideology to encompass critique of capitalist exploitation.

suggest that northern liberals experienced the fight against slavery as a moral struggle to which they duly lent their support because it cost them nothing to do so, and that the legacy of this struggle resides in moral sentiment, or right feeling, sufficing as political engagement.

Economic injustice, however, demands a recalibration of genteel people's positions within society and of what they are prepared to sacrifice. Annie learns to live with her guilt; Isabel refuses its moral claim, finding in the rhetoric of maternal duty a shield against arguments that bind her to unjust systems. She feels sorry for Lindau and counts the minutes until he goes away because he breaches the distance from the lower classes which allows them to be aesthetically pleasurable, threatening Isabel's concept of her country as the embodiment of justice, and of herself as a compassionate citizen.

The fault lines in the March domicile between ideals and actions become a chasm when Basil is faced with Dryfoos's order that Lindau be fired from *Every Other Week* because of his political ideology. The episode takes a peculiar course: March at first refuses to fire Lindau because he prefers "to suffer any consequence rather than submit to the dictation of a man like Dryfoos"; "[h]e realized, as every hireling must, no matter how skillfully or gracefully the tie is contrived for his wearing, that he belongs to another, whose will is his law" (*Hazard* 353). His initial reaction makes it clear that the primary issue is that Dryfoos's behavior has made Basil feel his subjugation to the wealthy – in particular, a newly wealthy man whose power far exceeds his cultural refinement. Isabel, predictably, initially sees the situation as being caused by their exposure to Lindau (354), and the ethical dimensions of the situation are utterly subsumed by the privations and hardships she anticipates for her family as a result of her husband's actions. March "had not dreamt of this merely domestic, this petty, this sordid view of their potential calamity" (355); that is, he had not conceived of the degree of resistance he would meet when his

principles threatened to interfere with the stability of his home life, but even he suffers at the thought that losing his job “will sweep from him most that most men find sweet and pleasant in life” (353). Basil declares himself ready to submit to Dryfoos’s demand, having been “sufficiently cowed” between his boss and his wife, but after some thought she decides she supports her husband’s actions, which have now become not a matter of standing up for himself, but for the principle of freedom of thought and expression. Basil observes first that Lindau “might have got most of [his opinions] out of Ruskin” (357), which places the German’s radicalism within an aristocratic British context that makes it less unpalatable and makes Dryfoos’s position appear the product of his lack of education. The fact that Lindau does not publish his opinions, merely translations of articles assigned him, makes Dryfoos’s demand unreasonable, but it is that Dryfoos would make Basil “an agent to punish [Lindau] for his opinions” which is “what [Basil] never will do” (357). This stance has developed over time: it coats Basil’s refusal to accept his position as “hireling” in the sheen of virtue, and in this light, Isabel applauds her husband’s decision. She claims to have not understood “how it was before. I thought you were just holding out against Dryfoos because he took a dictatorial tone with you, and because you wouldn’t recognize his authority” (357); this she claims she would have seen as foolish – another example of her lack of self-awareness since not long before, Basil declared that he “could truckle to the proprietary Dryfooses” when necessary and she demanded that he “must always be a man, especially with that horrid old Mr. Dryfoos” (277). Now, however, such manliness would be perceived as a worthless battle, but standing up for the principles of liberty Isabel determines is worthy of their sacrifice. In their imaginings of the life to come, Basil “became a free lance, and fought in whatever cause he thought just; he had no ties, no chains” (359); they fantasize living out their belief that their class has not taught them “to truckle and

trick” like everyone else (357). Unable or unwilling to view their situation as evidence of the contingency of their social class, they take refuge in the certainty of their virtuous ideals.

This fantasy, like all the others, dissolves in the light of the Marches’ commitment to their social position. Lindau appears to return the money he has earned from the magazine and in his outrage briefly chastises Basil for his willingness to work for a man who earns his money through speculation and the oppression of laborers; calming himself, Lindau declares that he understands Basil’s position: “you ton’t see these things as I see them; and you haf cot a family, and I am a free man” (363). Lindau’s position makes clear the fact that the Marches’ domestic life circumscribes their ability to act ethically: Lindau can “geep [his] handts glean”; the Marches cannot. Exposed to this view of himself as ineluctably part of an unjust system, even in the moment of his willingness to renounce his social position supposedly for his principles, March tries “to reason with Lindau,” but this ends with his “going away in a whirl of German that included Basil in the guilt of the man whom Lindau called his master.” This final act allows Isabel to call him “a crank” and declare themselves “well rid of him” (363). The crisis has been averted; although Dryfoos remains tyrannical, his reach no longer extends to Basil’s actions, and thus he can continue his work under the illusion that he has exercised his personal agency. Kaplan argues that “March’s protest signifies neither his political conversion nor the moral awakening that critics have applauded. Instead, it keeps him from acknowledging Lindau’s claim that March is as powerless as the urban working class” (*Social Construction* 77). Basil’s response to Dryfoos’s demand allows March to maintain his distance from the lower class, while upholding his belief in the idealized image of his family as people willing to “sacrifice themselves for others” (28). The others, however, are a convenient cover for his own shame at his subordinate social position. Crucially, the Marches’ ideal is not equality or economic justice,

but liberty. The “holy war” (361) the Marches find themselves engaged in is not in support of Lindau’s ideals or even, ultimately, of his right to hold them: it is a war to define the territory of the middle class and defend it against those above and below. Then as now, the concept of personal liberty as the ultimate American value is strategically employed by members of the imperiled middle class to fend off the ethical and economic claims of disadvantaged people, as well as any destabilizing recognition of their own vulnerability to market forces.

This episode depicts progressive ideals as principles which the bourgeoisie can rent but never own. The Marches, with a hereditary income that would barely sustain them within the middle class, are dependent upon the wealthy for the work that keeps them firmly within the cultured classes. Following the railroad strike in which Lindau loses his arm (and shortly thereafter his life), the Marches have a sustained conversation in which Howells articulates most clearly the inescapable violence of American democracy, in which “[s]omeone always has you by the throat, unless you have some one else in *your* grip” (436). In a long, uncharacteristically unironic diatribe, Basil gives voice to the political powerlessness of a class that has no solidarity with itself, and thus can have none with those below. Nothing could make clearer the bourgeoisie’s lack of agency to change structural oppression than March’s brief eruption of disgust with capitalist society and horror at the liberal humanist nightmare in which his class is perpetually trapped:

“what I object to is this economic chance-world in which we live, and which we men seem to have created. It ought to be law as inflexible in human affairs as the order of day and night in the physical world, that if a man will work he shall both rest and eat, and shall not be harassed with any question as to how his repose and his provision shall come. Nothing less ideal than this satisfies the reason. But in

our state of things no one is secure of this. No one is sure of finding work; no one is sure of not losing it. I may have my work taken away from me at any moment by the caprice, the mood, the indigestion of a man who has not the qualification for knowing whether I do it well or ill. [...]

[P]eople are greedy and foolish, and wish to have and to shine, because having and shining are held up to them by civilization as the chief good of life. We all know they are not the chief good, perhaps not good at all; but if someone ventures to say so, all the rest of us call him a fraud and a crank, and go moiling and toiling on to the palace or the poor-house. We can't help it. If one were less greedy, or less foolish, some one else would have, and would shine at his expense. We don't moil and toil to ourselves alone; the palace or the poor-house is not merely for our-selves but for our children, whom we've brought up in the superstition that having and shining is the chief good. We dare not teach them otherwise, for fear they may falter in the fight, when it comes their turn; and the children of others will crowd them out of the palace into the poor-house." (437)

This passage is worth quoting at such length because it constitutes Basil's only true moment of self-awareness, in which he admits to his part in the perpetuation of a system that values money and accomplishments more than it does human life. It explains why, when confronted with his son's sympathy for the poor, which he has imbibed from Lindau, Basil tells Tom that "the poor lived in dirty streets because they liked them, and were too lazy and worthless to have them cleaned" (300). Basil cannot risk allowing his son to cultivate ideals that will cause him to "falter," to slip out of the carefully ordered middle-class life created for him by his parents; he is relieved that his son is prepared only to agree that when "hard times come, it's the poor who

have to give up necessities where the rich give up luxuries,” but that he thinks “the crank comes in, in Mr. Lindau” when he asserts that “there’s no need of failures or frauds or hard times. It’s ridiculous. There always have been and there always will be” (300). Tom’s sense of regret at the unjust hardships of the poor ensures the perpetuation of the Marches’ sympathetic stance towards those less fortunate and thus of the bourgeois liberalism they represent, which equally requires Tom’s certainty that hard times are an inevitable part of life. This pragmatic view assures his father that Tom will be a respectable member of society, and not espouse the socialist ideals that would debar him both from good society and from prosperity. Harmon observes that “[t]he despair March feels upon recognizing the absurdity of his position is not extrinsic to his liberal project [...] on the contrary, his despair over the future is precisely what makes it possible for March to feel confident that his children will live lives that are not much different from his own” (192). Injustice is cause for sadness but not for action, because such action imperils the security of oneself and one’s family; March’s liberalism is a defining feature of his identity as a cultured member of the middle class, but since there is nothing his class can do for the poor, since, in fact, the middle class is trapped like the poor by an economic system that does not reward “honest work” with “honest food” (438), concern for those worst afflicted by this system can only be expressed in sentiment and aesthetic taste.

Ultimately, for the Marches, politics and aesthetics cannot be disentangled. Immediately following Basil’s outburst, in which he even observes – for the first and only time – that Isabel’s idealized self-concept is often belied by her actions, he conjures the man whom they saw eating from the gutter. He jokes that when he sees “how readily the sensibilities of the passing stranger can be worked in New York,” he thinks of taking up “that little game” himself. “*Basil!*” cried his wife. You don’t mean to say that man was an impostor! And I’ve gone about, ever since,

feeling that one such case in a million, the bare possibility of it, was enough to justify all that Lindau said about the rich and the poor!” (439). Once again, Howells ironically juxtaposes Isabel’s feelings – or what she believes she feels – with her actions; and Basil once again moves from the belief that the existence of such need reveals an inherent injustice in his nation to an ironic position that repels this insurrection of political awareness. This reversal is effected through an ironic commentary on the man’s symbolic value: “what do you think of a civilization that makes the opportunity of such a fraud? that gives us all such a bad conscience for the need which is, that we weaken to the need that isn’t? Suppose that poor fellow wasn’t personally founded on fact; nevertheless, he represented the truth; he was the ideal of the suffering which would be less effective if realistically treated. That man is a great comfort to me” (439). The bad conscience is an inescapable facet of their civilization and it makes them, in Emersonian terms, bad citizens, moved to charity against civic consciences which oppose it. Yet for the emergent American liberalism the Marches represent, one which accepts massive wealth disparity as an ineradicable fact, the bad conscience is also necessary to be a good citizen, one able to feel compassion for – or guilt about – suffering. Significantly, however, this suffering can only be experienced symbolically. As symbolic object, the man is an effective reminder of the poverty that afflicts their nation, but this suffering, if observed in excessive detail, loses its efficacy to inspire sympathy and becomes repugnant. As potentially picturesque object, the man is composed without the overwhelming details of the poverty he represents and can thus be a source of pleasure, even comfort. He is the rough object which, carefully framed by the viewer, inspires the sympathy necessary to unify a nation ever in danger of becoming a chaotically fragmented multitude. Yet this “ideal” manifestation also allows Basil the ironic distance that

transforms the man into something comic, ensuring that sympathy remains, ultimately, an aesthetic response.

Renouncing the Joys of the Elevated

When faced with the possibility of acting on his stated beliefs, Basil quite believably cowers before the possibility of personal loss. Yet what makes the Marches worthy of scorn is not simply their self-interest but also the ways in which their liberal ideals and the aesthetics that express them shield them from the discomfort of their hypocrisy, and thus ensure that their sentiments do not affect their behavior. In the most painful of several foils to this genteel separation of feeling from action, Howells gives us the terrible scene after Conrad Dryfoos's death in which his father divulges his need to make amends to Lindau. For four pages, Dryfoos expels a geyser of anguish and self-reproach: his feelings have caused him to chart a new course of action, plans he pours out as March repeatedly tries to interrupt him with the news that Lindau is dead. Howells's prolonged depiction of this "ghastly comedy" (448) makes Dryfoos, and by extension the possession of feelings so strong one would make radical changes to one's life, a pathetic and embarrassing display. Basil can meet this experience only with his sense of its irony, and later by an instant of moral mathematics through which he exonerates his former wish "to give this old man pain" with the thought that Lindau's utter refusal to "suffer any kindness" from Dryfoos makes him seem "the harder of the two" (449). Such a calculation suggests the endless mutability of Basil's morals, their contingency on ever-changing frames of reference. Harmon claims that, "[i]ronically cognizant of the distance between his selfish aesthetics and his generous politics, March is an early imagination of Rorty's liberal ironist" (190) – those who are "never quite able to take themselves seriously" because they are "always aware that the terms in

which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves” (Rorty 73-74). Basil cannot take either himself or anyone else seriously for too long; but if all moral vocabularies are in flux, economic contingency is an immutable fact and thus the final arbiter of action. Basil’s brief outburst against this fact, and other ironic commentaries throughout the novel on the uselessness of personal sacrifice,²⁵⁹ make it clear that for the bourgeois liberal, ironic self-awareness is the necessary armor for an ugly battle: irony allows them to aestheticize themselves, and thus to distance themselves from their own moral claims.

The Marches prosper, but the reader cannot rejoice with them in their success, for their moral trajectory has been towards greater distance from others, rather than into a more fulsome understanding of themselves and their world. Trachtenberg argues that “[f]or the sake of the moral order he assumed realism would disclose, it was essential that characters reap their just rewards [...] Too often Howells contrived devices – chance encounters, changes of heart, sacrificial acts – to ensure a relatively benign outcome, if not exactly a happy ending, then at least a morally pleasing one” (192). *Hazard* is only morally pleasing if the reader either thinks calls for social justice are on the whole a mean scam run on people trying to succeed, or if one openly admits the limitations of one’s ideals. Basil’s fate of “trembling before Dryfooses and living in gimcrackeries” is not a happy one, and the Marches, if more successful than formerly, have also been shown to be cowards and hypocrites, dependent upon a veil of illusory liberal

²⁵⁹ As Isabel chastises Basil, when his sympathies appear to be in danger of becoming too strong: “Oh, it’s very easy to have humane sentiments, and to satirize ourselves for wanting eight rooms and a bath in a good neighborhood, when we see how these wretched creatures live But if we shared all we have with them, and then settled down among them, what good would it do?” Basil lightly concedes it would do no good whatsoever: “It might help us for the moment, but it wouldn’t keep the wolf from their doors for a week” (*Hazard* 66).

idealism to preserve their self-respect. As in all of Howells's writing, it is possible to overlook these critiques and view the Marches solely as pragmatic actors in a complex world, having renounced a measure of sentimentality to ensure their survival. But this is a sad transaction, and read in the context of Howells's later work, one that should be understood as a comment upon the grim moral prospects of American society – and, following Trachtenberg's reasoning, of realist representation to amend its flaws.²⁶⁰ Indeed, the novel's final sentence seals the Marches within their own vision of the world and the aesthetic disposition it cultivates: having passed Margaret Vance in her nun costume and feeling that “the peace that passeth understanding had looked at them from her eyes,” they contemplate her fate and shrug a dismissive, “[w]ell, we must trust that look of hers” (496). Their understanding of her actions is limited to her “look,” that which they can fleetingly observe and judge, ratified only by their mutual perception and impermeable by other perspectives. The Marches are lonely figures, in the end; they remain as their Boston neighbours thought them, “very much wrapt up in themselves and their children” (26). Despite their successful self-creation as cosmopolitan citizens of the teeming and intensely alive city of New York, their community of feeling subjects is ultimately only themselves, in whom pictorial sight and its moral sterility are performed in a perpetual dialectic of self-loathing and self-acceptance – because what else, after all, is there to do?

In the context of the Marches' abject moral failures, the picturesque in this novel emerges as the structure by which readers can observe the transmutation of sympathy into sentimentality, and thus into ironic self-awareness. Gilpin's moody tints have become tropes self-reflexively applied, like Instagram “nostalgia” filters, and their artificial provenance and mass appeal

²⁶⁰ In “Who Are Our Brethren?” Howells writes that a “devil” is “one who *acts* upon the belief that every man must take care of himself” (935). The Marches, in their way, take care of each other and their children, but this kind of care still serves their own interests.

preclude experiencing the feeling it evokes as authentic. The Marches' taste for the picturesque is a piece of kitsch that signifies and neutralizes awareness of the brutal paradox they must live out as people who abhor cruelty but are implicated in its perpetuation. Howells's work shows class, sentiment, and personal agency as inextricably entwined: the aesthetic, in this novel, is the means by which bourgeois characters live with the guilt of possessing feelings they feel unable to enact, not only by aestheticizing poverty but by making the guilt itself part of the scene. The Marches' obsession with the aesthetics of rough people and places reveals the long history of this guilt and its relation to class disparity. In "A Short History of Liberal Guilt," Ellison claims that, "liberal guilt is about race, and it always was" (345). As Howells's references to abolition suggest, white northerners' guilt about slavery and their belief that the Civil War secured America's position as the world leader in social justice contributed to the development of a liberal position abstractly aligned with human rights but lacking the social or political will to work against structural oppression. Such liberal inefficacy is central to *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, in which the liberal conscience is wracked not by racial injustice but by poverty, the social problem which inherited and amplified the American tradition of sentimental responses to suffering. Howells's work suggests that affective and aesthetic responses to injustice have contributed to the liberal inefficacy that allows structural oppression to persist.

The picturesque appears in *Hazard* as the conventional and fundamentally unethical response to poverty by the bourgeoisie, and as the agent of stasis within capitalist society. The perception of Lindau by two different artists in *Hazard*, as well as by Basil, depict two approaches to artistic production, and the only one that is ethical is that which renounces the use of picturesque objects – in fact, it renounces the moral potential of art altogether. Howells's introduction to Lindau identifies his significance as aesthetic object: Basil studies him, "his bald

head shining like ivory under the gas-jet, and his fine patriarchal length of bearded mask taking picturesque lights and shadows” (93). Significantly, he next appears in a conversation between the emerging artist Alma Leighton and her mother (the women whom Isabel refuses to have “on [her] sympathies”), in which Howells explicitly undermines the moral aspects of art. Discussing Lindau’s work modeling biblical figures, Mrs. Leighton exclaims, “[i]t’s a good thing people don’t know how artists work, or some of the most sacred pictures would have no influence”; to which Alma replies, “[a]nd the influence is the last thing a painter thinks of” (108). Alma, literally figured as “art for art’s sake” (246), represents a nascent modernist aestheticism repelled both by didactic approaches to art and by the conventional bourgeois lifestyle such art often relies upon and upholds. Basil, the embodiment of this lifestyle, wishes similarly to eschew didactic approaches to his artistic production, but as both his reveries and his intended sketches reveal, he cannot uncouple moral from aesthetic value; of his picturesque sketches he tells Isabel, “of course, you know, if I went to work at those things with an ethical intention explicitly in mind, I should spoil them” (149). Yet, he “was a little ashamed . . . for having looked at the matter so entirely from the aesthetic point of view” (149) – a shame, significantly, which emerges when this view is exposed to Conrad Dryfoos. Basil wishes to make art explicitly about poverty but cannot bring himself to marry his moments of compassion to his aestheticized sight; torn between aesthetic and ethical perspectives, he proves as unable to find the right position from which to write as he is incapable of incorporating his sympathy into his behavior. Alma’s actions, by contrast, consistently uphold her repudiation of convention, which includes the use of rough objects for artistic inspiration: she flouts the demure behavior expected of her by her mother, refuses to marry, and declares that having an educated war hero for a model in her art class “makes [her] sick” (109). Alma’s character embodies Howells’s suspicions both that

bourgeois convention stifles creative production and, more importantly, that aesthetic sensibility and social consciousness are not mutually reinforcing.

If Alma is art for art's sake, then Beaton is art for social success's sake.²⁶¹ Beaton, who Basil says, "probably hasn't a moral fibre in his composition" (149), is productively read as the scabrous underside of Basil's artistic and social aspirations, and their connection is figured in their approaches both to Lindau and to the production of art as a means of expunging guilt about their class in relation to those struggling with poverty. March, "ashamed" of his failure to think of Lindau for the magazine's translations, finds refuge in his usual shelter from shame:

he fell into a remorseful reverie, in which he rehabilitated Lindau anew, and provided handsomely for his old age. He got him buried with military honours, and had a shaft raised over him, with a medallion likeness by Beaton and an epitaph by himself, by the time they reached Forty-second Street; there was no time to write Lindau's life, however briefly, before the train stopped. (150-151)

Basil's self-concept as a compassionate citizen appears in direct relation to his literary pursuits: along with his money and civic righteousness, Basil's epitaph will rehabilitate his unfortunate friend and Basil's own moral failure. That Beaton is implicated in this fantasy is significant: Basil dislikes and distrusts Beaton, but he functions here as part of Basil's aesthetic exculpation from class guilt. His appearance in this fantasy is appropriate because Beaton, like Basil, creates art as a response to his guilt around money. This guilt is crystallized into a generational relationship: Beaton's father is a tombstone-cutter, and Beaton has, through talent and charm,

²⁶¹ It is worth noting that Alma's painting instructor, whom Beaton has recommended, "does not think [Beaton is] very much of an artist," but is "an excellent critic" (109-110), which suggests that Beaton's art, like Basil's, suffers from his bourgeois aspirations.

made his way into the cultured circles of New York. He lives far beyond his means, and the most burdensome debt is the one to his father. A cheque enclosed in a letter “begging him with tender, almost deferential, urgency to come as lightly upon him as possible, for just now his expenses were very heavy,” brings “tears of shame into Beaton’s eyes” (120). His shame (engendered by the vision of himself in his father’s eyes) produces a brief moment of resolve to “go work cutting grave-stones in his father’s shop,” or to return his father’s money; while he “teemed with both of these good intentions,” Lindau arrives to model: “[Beaton] utilized the remorse with which he was tingling to give his Judas an expression which he found novel in the treatment of that character – a look of such touching, appealing self-abhorrence that Beaton’s artistic joy in it amounted to rapture” (120). Judas, symbol of betrayal, becomes the figure through which Beaton articulates his guilt for betraying his father and the class from which he came; as with Basil’s reveries about Lindau, self-reproach becomes self-expression, and in that form, aesthetically pleasing.

Beaton’s satisfaction in the art he culls from others’ suffering – here, Lindau’s financial and physical hardships and his father’s penury – is one aspect of Howells’s exploration of the clash between self-interest and aestheticized sight. Everett Carter and Kenneth Lynn both note the autobiographical basis of the Marches,²⁶² and the latter also observes that the cynical and status-driven Beaton “round[s] out Howells’s self-condemnation” (Lynn 8). The most prominent example of this condemnation appears when Beaton, “in an anguish of self-reproach” for his lavish lifestyle, buys himself a fur overcoat rather than sending money to his father (Howells, *Hazard* 382). This episode has its roots in Howells’s own life. In the letter to Henry James in which Howells declares that America must base itself “anew on a real equality,” and that

²⁶² See Carter, pp. 104-108; Lynn, pp. 3-13.

“civilization... is coming out all wrong,” he “blandly confesses ... to the hypocritical indulgence of wearing a fur-lined overcoat and living in all the luxury his money could buy” (Anesko 194). Beaton’s comically narcissistic torment, caused by and expressed through art, suggests the degree to which Howells was discouraged about the ethical potential of aesthetic endeavors. Where Basil’s sympathies are bounded by bourgeois self-interest, Beaton’s are channeled into his art, which serves no one but himself.

If *Hazard* depicts the failure of art to bring people into contact with the world, then *Impressions* considers the possibility that, for the bourgeoisie, art is the only point of contact with structurally distanced others. The self-directed irony subtly present in the novel is, in the sketches, explicit and constant: it is the leaky raft that keeps afloat “a self lost in the alienation of its melancholy” (De Man 217). The leak is the knowledge that the raft is insufficient, a fact made evident by moments of hopelessness, as in “An East-Side Ramble” when Howells suggests that the Jews of the Hebrew quarter would be better off if their mortality rate was higher (*Impressions* 105). In *Hazard*, “March ... comes to rely on an increasingly bitter irony as his only means of moral survival. Consequently, he fritters away his title to the moral high ground, and he is at a loss for words in the face of violence and tragedy” (Redding 95). If Basil’s irony proceeds from his growing understanding of the degree to which his agency is limited and of the consequent gap between his sentiments and his actions, Howells’s irony in *Impressions* registers the ways in which his realist project has simultaneously failed and succeeded. Aesthetic vision, aided by representations of suffering others, has made objects that would otherwise be reviled or ignored into objects of interest, but in so doing, the image has replaced the object. Indeed, it is only through an aestheticized relation to it that Howells can perceive the ghetto as cause for

sorrow; in “An East-Side Ramble” he observes that “I was so far from sentimentalizing it that I almost immediately reconciled myself to it, as far as its victims were concerned” (*Impressions* 106). In the presence of poverty, the bourgeois observer can see it only as a rather uninteresting fact, unless it is overlaid with the romanticized film of the picturesque. Worse, he admits that the aesthetic is necessary to engender the sympathy his ethics, which uphold equality and justice, require:

I do not wish to speak other than tenderly of the poor, but it is useless to pretend that they are other than offensive in aspect, and I have to take my sympathy in both hands when I try to bestow it upon them. Neither they nor the quarter they live in has any palliating quaintness; and the soul, starved of beauty, will seek in vain to feed itself with the husks of picturesqueness in their aspect. (*Impressions* 204-5)

The soul seeks in vain because the husks – the empty forms – of aesthetic vision cannot engender either right feeling or useful action, but rather traps it in an inauthentic relation to the world. De Man argues that “[t]he ironic language splits the subject into an empirical self that exists in a state of inauthenticity and a self that exists only in the form of a language that asserts the knowledge of this inauthenticity. This does not, however, make it into an authentic language, for to know inauthenticity is not the same as to be authentic” (214). The language of *Impressions and Experiences* records this split, and its bleakness derives from the knowledge it conveys that this language itself is inauthentic, a pose of distance and self-deprecating lightness that imperfectly conceals despair.

These sketches return to this quintessentially picturesque literary form to depict the ways in which aestheticized sight has become enmeshed with bourgeois perception. Howells thus

offers a series of sketches which compulsively return to the problems of class disparity and its representation. In "Police Report," he describes attending police court in Boston on a day when his writing is not going well: "perhaps I went ... because, in my revolt against unreality, I was in the humor to see life whose reality asserts itself every day in the newspapers with indisputable force. If this was so, I was fated to a measure of disappointment, for when the court opened this reality often appeared no more substantial than the fiction I had lost my patience with at home" (*Impressions* 35). This opening, while proceeding from the author's immersion in writing fiction, suggests the sense of unreality so often associated with genteel life and the corollary effort to find reality among the poor. Yet Howells immediately undermines the possibility that such sights will open a portal to the real: the police court "resolved itself into melodrama, or romantic tragedy, having a prevailing comic interest, with moments of intensity, and with effects so thrilling that I came away with a sense of the highest theatrical illusion" (35). Given the proliferation of slum writing throughout the 1890s, it is possible to take Howells at his word here, and read this passage and the sketch that follows as a depiction of the interest to be found in the sights of impoverished petty criminals receiving their punishment. Yet the piece moves from a depiction of the brief trials succeeding each other "as at a variety theatre" – so rapidly that, despite moments of pity, his "light mind was quickly distracted by the next piece" (42) – to a meditation on the nature of crime and punishment in America and the newspaper industry that makes it a spectacle. "I have tried to treat my material lightly and entertainingly, as a true reporter should, but I would not have my reader suppose that I did not feel the essential cruelty of an exhibition that tore its poor rags from all that squalid shame ... or did not suspect how it must harden and deprave those whom it daily entertained" (61). Howells's repeated references to the lightness with which he is receiving and representing this material is rendered ironic by the

profoundly dark conclusions he draws from the scene. His sense that the “monotonous endeavor and failure of society to repress the monotonous evolution of the criminal in conditions that render his evolution inevitable” culminates in the possibility that convicts should, rather than facing prison, simply be “driven out to some wide, open space where the explosion could do no harm to the vicinity” (69) and destroyed. His belief that only prevention can decrease crime and vice, but that such efforts are always met with “difficulty, obscurity, and uncertainty” (68), reveals Howells’s despair about the American democratic project, including his previous belief that representation of life as it is would help to perfect it.

The expeditions Howells depicts in this collection place a version of Bunner’s picturesque traveler in direct confrontation with both poverty and the aesthetic frame through which he apprehends it. Where Bunner exposes this frame and the relations it creates between viewer and viewed but does not discuss its social or political ramifications, Howells’s sketches offer explicit critiques of aestheticized seeing and ultimately reject the picturesque altogether. The elevated trains in which the Marches delight, while “always picturesque” (*Impressions* 193) are also violent machines that crush bodies together and, occasionally, to death; the “fleeting intimacy” Basil finds with the working-class people he views from the passing train is replaced with an impersonal and unpleasant proximity: in “New York Streets” the trains contain a “struggling mass” of individuals entirely careless of one another, united only by their “dread of civic collectivism of any kind” (*Impressions* 194). Writing about *Impressions and Experiences*, Bramen observes that “Basil March’s comment that ethical concerns would spoil the picturesque seems prophetic, for it is when Howells is most determined to explore the ethical dimensions of poverty that he finds it most difficult to aestheticize the urban experience” (“Failure” 97). The problem is that for Howells, as for so many members of the liberal bourgeoisie, the moral

response to poverty – the feeling that it is systemically produced, and unjust – produces no correspondent ethical action. Howells is both an ironist and a historian when he writes that “inequality is as dear to the American heart as liberty itself” (*Impressions* 202), and if this statement articulates the problem, the van of exploded prisoners constitutes Howells’s only solution. Thus, while the whole collection is a pronouncement upon the failure of pictorial sight to engender ethical relations between classes, it is also a consideration of aesthetics as that which mediates these relations. His “commitment to radicalizing the aesthetic” (Bramen, “Failure” 99) emerges not only through this repudiation of the picturesque as an ethical means of representing poverty but in his insistence upon reckoning with the class dynamics embedded in the aestheticized sight that is inseparable from the American bourgeoisie.

Howells accomplishes this critique in part through his authorial tone, which vacillates between that of an ironically distanced *flâneur* and a despairing reformer. The following passage from “New York Streets” contains a representative example of these two positions:

When I come home from these walks of mine, I have a vision of the wretched quarters through which I have passed, as blotches of disease upon the civic body, as loathsome sores, destined to eat deeper and deeper into it; and I am haunted by this sense of them.... But when I am actually in these leprous spots, I become hardened, for the moment, to the deeply underlying fact of human discomfort. I feel their picturesqueness, with a callous indifference to that ruin, or that defect, which must so largely constitute the charm of the picturesque. A street of tenement-houses is always more picturesque than a street of brownstone residences.... (*Impressions* 185)

This sketch, which Gandal calls “basically a travel piece in which the poor make up one of the sights” (164), sets out explicitly to investigate the aesthetic tradition through which members of the gentility view poverty, not simply by marking the perimeters of the picturesque view but by describing its emotional effect. The undeniable charm of the picturesque makes callous a viewer who, in contemplation of the conditions which create the picturesque, is horrified by them – not only because they are repulsive but also because they are destined to destroy society itself. The taste for irregularity which Shaftesbury presaged as contributing to the disintegration of social harmony is here figured doing just that. Far from creating a community of feeling subjects, the picturesque that Howells finds at work in urban America walls off the perceiving subject from the objects of his perception, and aesthetic taste becomes not simply a marker of class distinction but an instrument of systemic oppression in which the genteel viewer is implicated.

The implication of genteel citizens in perpetuating poverty, and the impossibility of extricating oneself from this position, pervades the collection. Like Bunner, Howells foregrounds the picturesque traveler’s class position, but rather than politely stopping at the thresholds of impoverished people’s lives, Howells crosses them to depict both the ethical quandaries such cross-class encounters present as well as the problematic intervention aesthetic responses offer. In “An East-Side Ramble” – a title which hearkens to the perennially popular slumming narrative of the day – Howells begins by depicting himself as a member of the gentility whose social lives revolve around formally informal visits that leave visitors with “a general sense of amiable emptiness and bewildered kindness” (*Impressions* 95). In contrast to this familiar depiction of genteel loneliness and constraint, Howells depicts some visits he made to New York’s tenement districts.²⁶³ His insistence that those who live there share a greater

²⁶³ “The sort of calls I made were rather fashionable some years ago, but are so no longer. It was a fad to make them, and the fad, like all really nice fads, came from England, and perhaps it has died out here because it has died

sense of community than do his genteel acquaintances reiterates the conventional genteel longing that animates so much picturesque literature, but these observations gain new potency from the conclusions he draws after his visits have concluded. Echoing Riis,²⁶⁴ Howells digresses on the “noble institution” (100) that is the Board of Health, which the poor love and even the press decline to denigrate, “though it embodies in the most distinctive form the principle that, in a civilized community, the collective interest is supreme” (102). He goes on to imagine that, unlikely as it is, perhaps the Board of Health could one day “command the abatement of poverty when the diseases that flow from poverty cannot be otherwise abated.” Without much hope in its ultimate triumph, Howells puts his faith in “the necessity that knows no law, not even the law of demand and supply – the demand of Moloch and the supply of Misery” (102). The necessity above all law is a spiritual one, and Howells here counterpoises it to market capitalism, figured as the deity to whom parents must sacrifice their own children. Howells’s rhapsody on the Board of Health indicates his desire that “the collective interest” should govern national policy and articulates the aching desire for a communitarian existence which his aesthetic taste simultaneously expresses and debars.

The conflict between spiritual and national allegiances is most evident in Howells’s meditations on whether to give money to the poor. The narrator in *Impressions* consistently describes such charity as “wrong” (98), both because he “wish[es] to be a good citizen as well as a good Christian” (111) and because giving money begins to seem, as he says in “An East-Side Ramble,” “as if it were an indignity added to the hardship of their lot, and to feel that unless I

out there” (*Impressions* 95). The statement places Howells on the same plane as *flâneurs* engaging in picturesque tourism, while also differentiating him by depicting him as continuing such visits despite their having fallen out of fashion.

²⁶⁴ Howells similarly follows Riis in his ultimate rejection of the picturesque in America: “Our inequality is without picturesqueness and without distinction” (Howells, *Impressions* 174).

gave all my worldly wealth to them I was in a manner mocking their misery” (107). Howells’s most thorough examination of this problem occurs in “Tribulations of a Cheerful Giver,” in which he depicts an encounter with a fingerless beggar. Howells concludes that

[c]harity is a very simple thing when you look at it from the stand-point of the good Christian, but it is very complex when you look at it from the stand-point of the good citizen; and there seems to be an instinctive effort on our part to reconcile two duties by a certain proportion which we observe in giving. Whether we say so to ourselves or not, we behave as if it would be the wildest folly to give at all in the measure Christ bade; and by an apt psychological juggle we adjust our succor to the various degrees of need that present themselves. (*Impressions* 115)

The problem Howells depicts is not only how much money to give but how to assess and respond to suffering. The infernal juggle makes its first appearance here, as the perpetual calculations liberals must perform to determine with whom to sympathize, how much, and how best to show it. While the language of Christian duty has fallen away for most contemporary liberals, the essential question will be familiar to anyone who has ever been inundated with charity pamphlets and felt insufficient to meet the enormity of the need they present. Howells depicts his travels among the poor as a perpetual lesson in his own cruelty, one which is tempered by a compassion which may keep him from wickedness but makes him pathetic and absurd. The self-directed irony that pervades *Impressions and Experiences* is what remains after aestheticized sight has failed; it is the only gesture he can perform to signal his guilt, since he cannot “uncover [his] head and ask [the poor’s] forgiveness” (“New York Streets” 203).

A Community of Anxieties

Howells's work of the 1890s depicts the genteel reliance on aestheticized sight as well as its powerlessness to unify a fragmented society. Having rejected "the husks of picturesqueness" that transmute the "foulness" of poverty into a species of beauty (*Impressions* 204-205), Howells searches for succor in an aesthetics that transcends the individual. In "Glimpses of Central Park," Howells offers a vision of a society connected not through individual aesthetic experiences of others but through the experience of a constructed natural landscape which is "the domain of all" (*Impressions* 166). It is the "well connected landscape" (Daniels and Watkins 15) advanced by picturesque landscapers, but rather than protecting landowners from class unrest, the Park symbolizes the virtue, the universal wholeness enshrined in classical notions of beauty. Howells depicts Central Park as a kind of picturesque commons, a space where art and nature, high society and low are reconciled. With its "pools and ponds lurking among rude masses of rock, and gleaming between leafy knolls and grassy levels" (*Impressions* 168), the Park is a vision of Price's and Knight's landscaping made available to all, in which the careful shaping of nature accomplishes not merely the obfuscation of power and privilege but their eradication: it is a place in which "ownership excludes the ownership of no other" (*Impressions* 167). Like Shaftesbury's enthusiast, Howells roams the park enchanted by its untrammelled natural beauty, which conjures a vision of a "primeval" America, not yet shackled by tyranny (169). When, in "New York Streets," Howells "plung[es] deep into the Park, [to] wash [his] consciousness clean of it all for a while" (186), he is not, as Bramen claims, "achieving separation from the 'other half' [...] enabl[ing] the voyeur to return to the condensed spaces of the city with a proper appreciation of his difference" ("Failure" 93). He is looking for "a hint of a growing sense in Americans that what is common is the personal charge of every one in the community"

(*Impressions* 166). Moreover, the beauty of the Park is that it momentarily unites ‘the other half’ and the wealthy, who have equal entitlement to the space. Howells does not seek the refuge of the Park to evade the poverty that dogs him through the city – indeed, the sorrow of seeing tramps and people out of work persists even within the park (172-173) – but rather to revitalize his sense of a “civic spirit” (168) that can harmonize the factions of society which urban space makes so brutally evident.

The beauty of the common which genteel American writers sought as a means of democratizing literature and social relations persisted in the works of Hutchins Hapgood and the bohemian writers who followed him into New York’s vibrant downtown streets. To do this, however, they had to distance themselves from bourgeois values and lifestyles and align themselves with the lower classes, a type of personal reinvention which Howells’s work militates against. Unable to transcend his class position, or to advocate doing so, Howells instead records the failure of American society to create justice from the fluid class relations upon which it prides itself. Because he could not find a means of representing poverty, he is still read as trying to negate its reality and to create “an ‘aesthetic of the common’” (Kaplan *Social Construction* 21) that would unify the nation:

A pivotal term in his critical vocabulary, “the common” refers at different times to distinct and often contradictory entities: to the lower classes – “common men and laborers”; to a shared human identity – “our common humanity”; and to ordinary life – “the commonplace.” To resolve the tensions between these meanings, realism works to ensure that social difference can be ultimately effaced by a vision of a common humanity, which mirrors the readers’ own commonplace, or everyday life. (Kaplan, *Social Construction* 21)

Yet his later work makes clear that this vision of common humanity is ultimately inaccessible through realist literary constructions. His work is crowded with observers witnessing people they cannot understand and who cannot understand them, each individual bound to the rest only by the potential violence each can perpetrate on the other. In Howells's America, "individual liberty" is "barbarous tyranny, which puts an end instantly to beauty, and extinguishes the common and the personal rights of every one" (*Impressions* 207). The common is a utopian dream for Howells, one which appears with fleeting clarity in the commons of Central Park. Even here, however, the community it briefly contains is "nothing more than ... a community of anxieties" whose common experience is only the blindly vicious "rule of chance" (*Impressions* 174). Howells's fear that inequality would undermine American democracy today feels prescient, as does his sense that aestheticizing the common contains more dangers than benefits. Indeed, the aesthetic of the common arguably has become the dominant cultural force in American society, a nation in which a plutocrat can become President in the guise of "the common man."²⁶⁵

²⁶⁵ Alexander Burns, "Donald Trump Rode to Power in the Role of the Common Man."

Conclusion

The View from Here: 21st Century Picturesque Aesthetics and What to Do with Them

Over the past twenty years, picturesque aesthetics have mutated and evolved, and their influence is now evident in almost every aspect of culture, from fashion to tourism to real estate to politics.²⁶⁶ The influence of the Bowery b'hoys on the middle-class imagination lives on in the plaid-shirt-and-beard uniform of the "Creative Class"²⁶⁷ male, for whom a working-class-inspired costume functions as a projection of masculine individualism and repudiation of middle-class blandness.²⁶⁸ The picturesque ghetto market has been sanitized into upscale open-air markets like the Camden Market in London and Toronto's Kensington Market, where irregular architecture and artisanal goods provide spaces in which conspicuous consumption also marks a distaste for mass-market commodities; such spaces offer insurrections against chain-store

²⁶⁶ Future studies on this topic might delve into subclasses within the contemporary middle class to determine more precisely who is drawn to this aesthetic and who rejects or is not susceptible to it. It would also be fascinating to look at countries such as India and China, to see if picturesque aesthetic principles are operating within their burgeoning middle classes and modernizing economies.

²⁶⁷ I am using Richard Florida's now-notorious term for the young people who work in creative and tech industries, cluster in lower-rent urban neighborhoods (or did in 2002, when Florida wrote *The Rise of the Creative Class* and such neighborhoods existed in major cities), and whom Florida thus hailed as harbingers of urban renewal – or gentrification, as his critics perceive it. Oliver Wainwright interviews Florida for an October 2017 article in *The Guardian* about the response to Florida's latest book *The New Urban Crisis*, "which has been widely interpreted as a mea culpa for opening up the great can of gentrifying worms. After years of proselytizing loft-living and shabby-chic cafes, Florida's eyes have been opened to the downsides of the back-to-the-city movement" (Wainwright).

²⁶⁸ Catherine LeClair, in an article on the surging popularity of blue-collar work-clothes among middle-class urbanites, argues that "workwear allows us the opportunity to eschew the wealth we have," and suggests that the "guilt" of excess wealth drives wealthier consumers to clothe themselves in the garb of the working class (*Racked*). In "Lumbersexuality and its Discontents," Willa Brown connects the contemporary appropriation of working-class attire by white-collar men – and specifically the beard, flannel shirt and work boots whose wearers have been dubbed Lumbersexuals – to the lumberjack figure that attained enormous popularity in America at the end of the nineteenth century. Brown situates such trends within the "scholarship on American masculinity [that] focuses on men in crisis. White men are often portrayed as continuously jittery, always teetering on the edge of losing their birthright" (*The Atlantic*). Then, as now, Brown suggests, middle-class white men project their ideals of authenticity, connectedness to one's labor, and physical prowess onto working-class men.

homogeneity, a monotony that recalls the over-processed and featureless landscapes Uvedale Price desired to replace with the natural and unpredictable picturesque. The cosmetics company Urban Decay offers a rewards program called “Beauty Junkies,” that lets consumers “get more out of [their] addiction”;²⁶⁹ the website for Kibera Slum Tours invites prospective visitors to “[b]ecome inspired by [the residents’] resilience and friendliness” (*Kibera*); a condominium under construction in mid-town Toronto features a poster on its scaffolding of an alleyway covered in graffiti. The connection between roughness and authenticity has shaped contemporary values and the options for self-creation which consumer culture provides.

If you have ever felt uneasy at a farmer’s market or local coffee shop with expensive fair-trade coffee and mismatched vintage furniture, then you have experienced the problem which I hope to elucidate in this conclusion, and which directs my future work on the picturesque and liberal values. That problem is a pervasive feeling that many of the aesthetic tropes of contemporary middle-class urban life sublimate our discomfort about social injustice, and that we take recourse to irony in order to create distance from both our values and the aesthetics that express them. That aesthetic choice can so successfully serve as acting on conscience and that irony can distance us from this fact are pernicious problems. The ever-expanding options through which we proclaim our values aesthetically – through choices about what we wear, where we shop, the media we consume and present ourselves as consuming – erode involvement

²⁶⁹ *Urban Decay*. The cultural cachet of drug use is an enormous topic, which I cannot explore here, but bears mentioning as a significant manifestation of the aestheticization of roughness. As I mention below, drug use is one of many aspects of Poverty Chic, which aestheticizes/satirizes/appropriates many aspects of life associated with material deprivation. In the same way that Hapgood’s “good wine” in the Bohemian restaurant brought him closer to “real” life, generations of youth have associated substance use with liberatory experience. Rihanna’s song “We Found Love,” with its refrain “We found love in a hopeless place,” its images of drug use and passion in dirty urban streets and what appears to be a British social housing complex is a particularly stylish example of the way popular culture disseminates an image of drugs as part of an edgy and intense existence. The colloquial and ubiquitous use of edgy itself seems to have its roots in this idea that poverty or marginality makes experiences more intense because always close to the edge of existence, or to the margins of social acceptability.

in institutional efforts at change by funneling concerns into consumer behavior and self-curation, and the fact that we acknowledge this erosion with ironic commentary upon our behavior dissipates the discomfort with it which might induce change. Every time we buy the “ethical” product, frequent the coffee shop with tables made from salvaged wood, seek out images of derelict inner cities, or compassion the ragged child on the charity pamphlet, we signal to ourselves or others our discomfort with the consolidated power of global capitalism and our desire to live beyond its mass-produced blandness, or affirm our sympathies with those trammled by its inequalities.²⁷⁰ At the same time, we – the reasonably comfortable – know perfectly well that we profit by these systems, and that the aesthetics that signal our discomfort are merely toothless bites at the hand that feeds us. The self-directed irony of which Howells is an early adopter is of course the default position for such a divided self, and the socio-political uselessness of this position for the left is evident in many ways, but perhaps most clearly in the fact that an aesthetic of ironic distance is also vital within the far right culture fueling racist nationalism.²⁷¹ The project into which this present one leads will therefore examine the contemporary intersections of picturesque aesthetics which have fused concerned citizenship with spectatorship and made it possible to express our values through self-curation, with an ironic disposition towards both personal image and concern about social injustice.

²⁷⁰ A brief opinion piece in *The New York Times* – “It’s Chic. Not Morally Superior.” – observes that “buying handmade has come to connote moral virtue, signifying an interest in sustainability and a commitment to social justice” and argues that “[w]hile buying homemade gifts is a lovely thing to do, thinking of it as a social good is problematic” (Matchar 8). The author also argues that “what is needed is systemic change” (Matchar 8).

²⁷¹ See for instance “4chan: The Skeleton Key to the Rise of Trump,” which looks at the growth of the website 4chan.org, now seen by many commentators as a significant factor in the rise of the contemporary far right, and on which “everything had to be done with at least a twinkle of winking irony” (Beran). In his article “Birth of a Supremacist,” Andrew Marantz writes that “[b]igots these days often claim that the bigoted things they say are ironic, or quasi ironic. Part of what makes this feint so disorienting is that it is sometimes true” (30). If for the left irony signals awareness of the discrepancy between one’s values and actions, then for the far right it functions explicitly to jam the signals by which outsiders read the correlation of acts and beliefs. Perhaps more troublingly, expressions of hate are ironic until, by some form of consensus, they become unironic.

The influence of picturesque aesthetics now exceeds those aesthetic choices which implicate dereliction, roughness, the natural or artisanal: picturesque aesthetics affect the way that we perceive ourselves and our participation in social and political life. Ann Bermingham, in her article “The Picturesque and Ready-to-Wear Femininity,” exposes the vast implications of the picturesque for modern subjects:

The Picturesque’s most important and abiding effect was that it encouraged the middle classes to aestheticise their lives. For in teaching people how to look at nature as if it were a picture the Picturesque accustomed its practitioners to exercising a connoisseur’s gaze, one that could be trained not only on landscapes and paintings but on a whole variety of familiar scenes and objects: cityscapes; architecture; gardens; animals; furniture; pottery; fabrics; interior decoration; and dress. Just as Gilpin had conceived of the landscape as a surface to be decorated, so the consumer of picturesque scenery could easily transpose Picturesque ideas onto the actual domestic sphere. The specific elements of picturesque taste, in particular its attention to variety, ornamentation, and detail, were perfectly suited to the kinds of domestic objects easily afforded by the middle-class consumer and supplied in increasing volume by a whole host of domestic manufacturers.

As a result the Picturesque became more than an aesthetic, it became a life style. That is to say, it became not simply a mode of viewing and judging art but a conscious choice to extend aestheticism to encompass one’s way of life. The Picturesque was capable of embracing not only landscapes, paintings, and manufactured objects, but people and personalities as well. (87-88)

Bermingham focuses her study on the rapidly growing women's fashion market and the intersections of colonial expansion, domestic mercantilism, and constructions of femininity in Britain at the end of the eighteenth century, but her work points to the revolutionizing force of picturesque aesthetics on social and economic life. If aestheticism extends to every aspect of our lives, then it has infiltrated *how we see*; the aesthetic has become a facet of perception, of how we perceive objects and their relation to who and what we are. This mode of seeing, moreover, developed contemporaneously with the emergence of consumer capitalism: Bermingham points out that the picturesque is "an aesthetic uniquely constituted to serve the nascent mass-marketing needs of a developing commercial culture"; one in which "appearances are construed as essence and commodities were sold under the sign of art and nature" ("Ready-to-Wear" 81). The acquisition and display of objects thus becomes not only a projection of class or personal taste but also fundamental to the construction of one's essential character.²⁷² If the British picturesque made it possible to construct one's own identity aesthetically, then the American picturesque

²⁷² A future study on this topic would consider Thorstein Veblen's concept of conspicuous consumption in relation to the picturesque, which essentially makes all consumption conspicuous and de-linked from the pecuniary value of an object. Another promising line of inquiry is the picturesque as it relates to our use of the Internet. Bermingham observes that "instead of soothing the eye and awakening protective feelings of affection in the viewer, as did the Beautiful, the Picturesque stimulated, excited and irritated the eye and provoked feelings of curiosity, interest and amusement" ("Ready-to-Wear" 89). The Internet has made available previously unknown possibilities for curiosity and amusement and for a scopophilic relation to the world predicated on the enjoyment of "the minutia of trifling circumstances" (Bermingham, "Ready-to-Wear" 83). The environments with which we daily interact are now virtual as well as material, and this new realm arguably draws on skills initially introduced through picturesque tourism. "What others might view as mere landscape details, of trees, rocks, and *staffage* – Gainsborough's 'a little business for the eye' – became for Gilpin the essential 'ornaments' from which the landscape is composed.... [Gilpin] ordere[ed] and categorized into increasingly minute sub-categories" the landscape's details, and then wrote guide-books which taught readers how to see them (Bermingham, "Ready-to-Wear" 83). The ability to perceive landscape details as pleasurable through ordering and categorizing them is one required of the successful *flâneur*, who gains mastery over an initially overwhelming urban landscape by orienting his perception towards the details he encounters and establishing their aesthetic value. Such skill is also valuable to the *flâneur* through the boundless territory of the worldwide web, which presents an unordered landscape largely comprised of odd or whimsical trifles meant to excite amusement. As travelers through the ether we have learned to view the world from the carriage-window of our computers: "whilst the world is a spectacle, something in [ourselves] is stable" (Emerson 33-4). The picturesque could also provide a valuable frame through which to examine the cultural significance of sites like *Instagram* and *Facebook*, image-based media through which individuals curate their identities for public consumption.

made roughness and an authenticity associated with roughness desirable qualities for middle-class people not simply to apprehend as aesthetically pleasurable but also to possess; filtered through transcendentalism, the American picturesque made pictorial sight the mode by which we can absorb these qualities and express moral sentiments. This iteration of the picturesque continues to exert the most profound influence on taste and consumption today, through a consumer economy driven by appeals to find and express our authentic individuality, including our moral values.

Bermingham's study makes clear that the picturesque as it developed in Britain contributed to the development of the middle class not only by allowing more people to aestheticize their lives – to proclaim belonging within the bourgeoisie by exercising aesthetic sight – but also by making self-creation *as a particular type* of person available to anyone with the necessary aesthetic judgment. Once appearance becomes an expression of character – once a particular arrangement of fabric and color can signify disposition – it can also become an expression of moral sentiments or social values. The sense that we exercise political agency or social values through economic – and hence aesthetic – choices extends beyond those products which promote their environmental or social sustainability to encompass potentially any choice we make about how to present ourselves. This conjunction began in nineteenth-century America, when the connoisseur's gaze Bermingham describes became not only a sign of class position or even of "character and temperament" ("Ready-to-Wear" 89) but also of moral capacity. To read the right books, to attend the right lectures, to tour the ghetto and perceive its vibrancy amidst its hard conditions, was to become a connoisseur of a particular type of culture that was coalescing around a specific set of values – the nascent liberalism based in a horror of suffering. Yet this connection was never otherwise than fraught: by the time Matthews and Bunner were writing of

their picturesque tourism, their projects documented not merely the sights they witnessed but also the problematic ethics of being genteel people engaging aesthetically with poverty. Their work, alongside Hapgood's and Howells's, is laced with irony directed at themselves and their class, suggesting that anxiety about the emptiness of liberal values has always been a central component of American liberalism. The duration of this anxious awareness indicates that it cannot intervene in the oppressive structures liberalism helps to uphold. My hope, however, is that it might be possible for such anxiety to lead to social or political engagement that is not primarily about self-expression, and that aesthetics can once again serve as opportunities for moral reflection rather than remaining ineffectual forms of moral action.

In its interest with roughness and dereliction and its usefulness to colonial projects, the picturesque is inherently a morally ambivalent aesthetic. This ambivalence is evident in its very entry to American culture: at the same time as Hawthorne was using the picturesque to question the probity of associating appearance with essence, Emerson was developing a philosophy for which essence is irrelevant to or irretrievable by the observer, and which emphasizes instead the moral significance of the act of observation itself. The mystical picturesque made the ability to apprehend any object as beautiful a moral quality, and made perception an act of union with the observed object. Whitman would extend this work to urban environments and to working-class cultures, assisting in making them inseparable from American notions of democracy and self-determination. While the transcendental possibilities of perception remain embedded in our behavior as consumers of objects and media, Hawthorne's skepticism about the ability to transcend the boundaries of our own subjectivities through observation or depiction returns as the ironic distance we project from the identities we expend such care in creating. Just as Basil March both believed in his aesthetic taste as sign of his identity as compassionate bourgeois

citizen and mocked the insubstantial nature of his belief, liberal-minded people today avidly consume products that project our values while cultivating an ironic attitude towards this behavior; and we do so to signal our understanding that the very modes through which we express our sympathies are the products of systems our aesthetics disavow.

Just as Hapgood's self-directed irony about his enervated gentility does not prevent him from unironically desiring comradeship with Bowery toughs, so contemporary irony about one's aesthetic choices does not actually militate against the use of one's body (or incorporeal body as created on social media) as a sign of social values. The ironic hipster beard or mustache is one paradigmatic example, and one with direct connections to Hapgood. The term "hipster" was appropriated for the white middle class from jazz slang by Norman Mailer in "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster" (1957), and the fundamental component of hipster culture that pertains to this discussion is its equation of authenticity with a rejection of bourgeois convention as expressed through a personal style derived from subaltern populations.²⁷³ As someone who describes himself as "a hipster with ironic facial hair *in Portland*" explains on *Reddit* (itself a website beloved by hipsters): "The hipsters who currently have ironic mustaches do so in the hopes that someone will interpret their mustache literally, thereby giving them 'blue collar cred,' even though they went to a \$20,000/year art college and work part time as a barista, which is pretty much the opposite of a truck driver. It's like a little joke."²⁷⁴ This little joke

²⁷³ A longer discussion of this topic would include the ways in which a hipster lifestyle is embodied, rather than expressed verbally or through written language, and would connect this imagistic self-expression to the picturesque and to the derivation of hipster values from subaltern populations. The "Negro" whom Mailer claims lives in "the enormous present" ("Armies") is not different from the urban poor who, Isabel March claims, "forget death" (Howells, *Hazard* 61): it is a perpetual, intense moment derived from the omnipresence of suffering and from the sufferer's exclusion from the security of middle-class domestic life.

²⁷⁴ [reddit.com/r/explainlikeimfive/comments/14fhrb/how_can_facial_hair_be_ironic](https://www.reddit.com/r/explainlikeimfive/comments/14fhrb/how_can_facial_hair_be_ironic) (emphasis in original). That the beard or mustache is ironic can be signaled in several ways: it can be paired with "preppy" clothes such as buttoned-up shirts and loafers; it can be exceedingly disheveled or flamboyant (e.g., a handlebar mustache); or it can simply exist as one of a panoply of cultural objects, such as vinyl records and gearless bicycles, meant to project an

functions in two ways: the wearer of the hipster beard sees it as a joke on unsuspecting viewers, who might attribute to him masculine working-class qualities of vitality and self-reliance; and the hipster wears this beard to deprecate his own creative-class comfort – *while understanding that the beard does not in fact have a political or moral function*. The hipster’s ironic distance from the values he displays on his face is his public admission of ineluctable economic complicity with oppressive systems and of political inaction. (No middle-class person working for social justice alongside working-class people would wear ironic facial hair, any more than white allies of black activists would wear blackface.) Worse, the hipster believes that *his admission* that aesthetics have displaced action is an act of resistance to this complicit state, when in fact it is another aspect of his surrender to it.

To wear ironically the garb of a dwindling working class is to participate in processes of identification and representation, both of which are unethical in structural constitution and corrosive in practice, as Howells and Levinas understood in their different contexts. Levinas describes representation as an act of usurpation: the elements that represent an object “do not serve as symbols, and in the absence of the object they do not forge its presence, but by their presence insist on its absence. They occupy its place fully to mark its removal, as though the represented object died, were degraded, were disincarnated in its own reflection” (“Reality” 7). In donning the garb of blue-collar workers, ironic hipster males reify not the object of their supposed idolatry but rather this figure’s defeat at the hands of neoliberal capitalism. The urban culture worker (or “yuccie”) has culturally and economically displaced the blue-collar worker whose aesthetics he ironically appropriates; the beard is a trophy of a victory with which,

anti-corporate persona via the consumption of nostalgic articles. In this last case, the irony is almost certain to be self-directed, and to signal the essentially paradoxical nature of holding liberal values within neoliberal capitalist society.

however, the liberal culture worker is uncomfortable, a discomfort which ironic distance both symbolizes and soothes. De Man's spiral structure of irony is helpful for understanding the political consequences of this aesthetic. The hipster believes that his irony about his aesthetic taste extricates him from the paradox between his beliefs and his actions: style becomes "a language that asserts the knowledge of [the subject's] inauthenticity" (De Man 214) – in this case the inauthenticity of the beard-wearer's politics, which are not expressed as political acts but rather through choices about style. The hipster's ironic relation to this style, therefore, expresses the knowledge that he is not in fact in sympathy with classed others, and in this way functions as an expression of moral sentiment by admitting his own culpability. Irony thus becomes essential to the aestheticized sight which upholds right moral feeling: the admission of an ironic relation to the image now signifies the sympathy liberals formerly attributed to the act of bearing witness to injustice. Thus, not only specific actions to ameliorate injustice but even specific knowledge about the unjust thing one opposes become unnecessary to the construction of an ethical self, which now requires only that a person signify awareness of his ineluctable complicity.

Crucial to this understanding of the picturesque's role in the creation and expression of moral sentiments is the sense of agency and participation within society proffered by aesthetic judgement. Bermingham observes that writers at the time often perceived women's expanding fashion choices as "a 'liberation' for women" ("Ready-to-Wear" 102). "While perhaps not capable of producing political change, or of resisting the commodification of the subject under capital, wearing clothes and making clothes might be seen as acts of psychological and economic empowerment" (Bermingham, "Ready-to-Wear" 105). We can apply this formulation not only to women disenfranchised by patriarchal systems but also to all individuals within contemporary capitalism. In his discussion of Emerson's contribution to the effacement of agency within

liberalism, Newfield argues that “in our still-transcendentalist America, individuals compete in unending labors of self-differentiation while their social relations are managed from somewhere else” (86). The “somewhere else” is a “free-market” system that generates the very possibilities for self-expression which we perceive as agency, and the self-differentiation is effected through the curation of our identities through sartorial (and other aesthetic) choices.²⁷⁵ Bermingham observes that “expertise, scopophilia, and objectification ... are embedded in the Picturesque aesthetic” (“Ready-to-Wear” 91). These qualities are also embedded in commercial capitalism, which thrives on consumers’ desires to self-define through the knowledge and selection of objects, and on the aestheticization of ever-new objects which can thus be commodified.

In a discussion of contemporary hipsters, a writer on the website *Popmatters* argues that “hipsterism forces on us a sense of the burden of identity, of constantly having to curate it,” and thus that “[l]ate capitalism makes us all fear becoming hipsters and thus makes us all into one, to some degree” (Horning). This statement suggests the cultural impact caused by the co-identification of identity with aesthetics, a process initiated by the picturesque. The American contribution to this process is twofold: first, the mystical picturesque made moral sentiment an aspect of identity, and made aesthetic sight the vehicle by which to create one’s ethical persona; second, the identification of authenticity with roughness and virtue with poverty made it possible for members of the bourgeoisie to signal their moral sentiments through an aesthetic alignment with the poor or working class. While the implications of picturesque self-creation for political agency apply to both genders, my choice of hipster facial hair was not arbitrary; it points to the

²⁷⁵ This argument owes a clear debt to Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*, in particular his concern with the ways that “social relationship[s]” are “mediated by images” (Thesis 4). A longer work on this subject would apply Bermingham’s study of eighteenth-century fashion to contemporary consumer culture and examine the ways in which the picturesque operates within society based on the conscious construction of the self for consumption by others. How, in short, do aesthetics function as the axis that connects individuals to society?

particular significance of these class dynamics for men and to the fact that, in its fascination with the vitality of poorer people, the American picturesque has had specific implications for constructions of masculine identity, especially with the decline of blue-collar work.²⁷⁶ We can draw a direct line from the enervated man of the Gilded Age who lusts after the “real” life of the ghetto to the culture worker of today who wears an ironic trucker hat or “redneck” beard. The central difference is that now, rather than the style itself projecting sympathy with classed others, the wearer’s ironic distance from his sartorial choice signals his moral position.

Given the cultural saturation achieved by the picturesque, in these final pages I use four contemporary manifestations of this aesthetic to provide an introductory analysis of the values and moral sentiments that remain attached to it. The first is a youth subculture which illustrates the fact that, as an aesthetic that makes it possible to construct the natural and which fetishizes freedom from constraint, the picturesque is an obvious ally of cultural products aimed at young people. Most directly derived from picturesque aesthetics are, of course, those youth cultures that value the rough, the derelict, or the outlaw, which also projects the rebellion against authority long associated with adolescence. This year, biker jackets are a top selling item at every fast fashion boutique,²⁷⁷ making a tough attitude available to anyone with access to a mall.

²⁷⁶ The gendered value system embedded in the American picturesque opens yet another line of future inquiry. This project has mostly avoided discussions of gender in order to focus on class, however, as Brown’s examination of the Lumbersexual suggests, constructions of masculinity and their classed associations have impacted the ways in which picturesque values have filtered through contemporary culture.

²⁷⁷ Google search for “biker jacket Zara” in December 2017 and a page will open upon a gaunt woman with unkempt hair and baseball hat in oversized leathers. The biker jacket is a good marker of the changes wrought by a half-century in which rough objects became incorporated into popular subculture, and then simply into mainstream culture. The filmmaker and activist Danny Lyon in 1968 published *The Bikeriders*, in which he documents his time in the Chicago Outlaw Motorcycle Club. The images in the book serve to “humanize a group that would have been feared by many at the time, assumed criminal by their appearance alone, not to mention their defiance toward middle-class proprieties” (Hackett and Shedden 106).

It does not require one of Rorty's liberal ironists to perceive that the sheen of authenticity offered by an H&M biker jacket is rather dull, and any inhabitant of Liberaldom obliged to shop there can understand the paradox embodied in mass-produced fashions derived from subcultural affiliations. Were he alive, so would Hutchins Hapgood understand it, he who so proudly displayed his friendship with toughs because he could never manage to find a suit cheap enough to conceal his genteel origins. Hapgood's chronicles of rebellion against his bourgeois background read now as sibylline texts, prognosticating a youth culture predicated on the performed rejection of convention and desire to know "the streets," a desire which now underwrites much of youth culture, and is often especially associated with hip-hop. Twenty years ago, Keith Gandal observed:

the steady rise of a middle-class youth culture that still takes its aesthetic cues from the slums, most blatantly in rap (and gansta rap), even if its rebellion is largely imaginary and its toughness largely ersatz [F]or these youths the move to the slums is made mostly imaginatively and their imaginative leap is made almost exclusively through consumption. (133)

The same dynamic of rebellion through consumption, and of roughness as aesthetic cue for toughness and authenticity, persists today.²⁷⁸ To avoid a simplistic – and racialized – reading of the influence of roughness on popular culture, I want to point out three things: first, many of the artists who work in the hip-hop genre do not primarily depict "the streets" (including two of today's most popular hip-hop artists, Kendrick Lamar and Drake, whose lyrics are predominantly political and party-oriented, respectively); second, the aesthetic of roughness and rebellion can be found across genres (for instance, the white indie rocker Kurt Vile uses graffitied alleyways

²⁷⁸ In 2017, rap music for the first time became the most popular musical genre, according to Nielsen Music (McIntyre).

and abandoned buildings in his videos and album cover art); and third, the association Gandal makes between ersatz toughness and consumption has existed since well before the invention of hip-hop, dating at least to the 1960s. Gandal's point is worth noting, however, because it indicates the sustained fascination that roughness has for young people, and the ways consumer culture has profited from this fascination and helped to shape youth culture around images of rebelliousness. Gandal makes Crane and to a lesser extent Riis the progenitors of this youth culture; however, these writers did not advocate or depict their own rejection of bourgeois values in the way that Hapgood does. His construction of the urban bohemian, and this figure's roots in the mystical picturesque tradition in which the absorption of roughness enables the expansion of the self, are forgotten but integral aspects of today's widespread cultural fascination with roughness and with subcultures that embrace subversive behavior.²⁷⁹

One such subculture, built around "SoundCloud rap," was recently profiled in *The New York Times* – a fact which itself speaks to the cultural centrality of subcultural movements: "in the last year [it] has become the most vital and disruptive new movement in hip-hop thanks to rebellious music, volcanic energy and occasional acts of malevolence"; its audiences "skew young, male, and white" (Caramanica 14), although its performers remain predominantly black. Like most subcultures since the 1960s, this one derives from marginalized communities and valorizes qualities associated with "the streets": toughness, rebelliousness, and a unique, culture-

²⁷⁹ If the aestheticized roughness that pervades youth culture has the least overtly political ramifications of the contemporary trends this conclusion examines, then I will nonetheless suggest that the general rebelliousness and anti-sociality associated with many of the fashions consumed by this demographic are not a separate phenomenon from young people's lack of engagement in institutional politics. Youth under thirty have had, for instance, the lowest voter turnout of any demographic, at least since the 1980s. While it is impossible without further research to indicate direct links between this fact and the taste for roughness that pervades the music and imagery consumed by younger people, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that the many opportunities to express dissatisfaction with society through personal choices could absorb feelings that might otherwise find an outlet in community activism or institutional politics.

specific vernacular. A *Pitchfork* article makes explicit the connection between the increasing popularity of this music and the criminal activity of its musicians:

Newspapers helped build up the 19th-century outlaw Jesse James as no common thief but a romantic antihero, an avatar of pure style. The motif of the chic gangster remains a staple in cinema, TV, and popular music: a renewable resource of street slang, drug lore, and general rebelliousness that speaks to urges also latent in law-abiding homes throughout the land. (Hogan)

The transition from romanticized outlaws on the American frontier to those in American urban ghettos began with romanticized representations of Bowery toughs such as those in Hagood's work, and while the racial dynamics of such romanticized rebellion have changed, the class dynamics have remained stable. The *Pitchfork* article goes on to reference the fact that fans of one SoundCloud rap artist associate his criminality with desirable qualities: "Rather than view the allegations against Onfroy as cause for empathy or professional counseling, some fans online have cheered the charges as evidence of his gritty authenticity" (Hogan). Such responses testify to the fact that the roughness associated with marginalized populations has retained its fascination for many Americans; the terminology of toughness and authenticity first attributed to American ghettos in picturesque narratives is still being used today. The *OED* traces to mid-nineteenth-century America the use of "gritty" to indicate "having firmness of character or courage; full of determination or pluck." The use of "gritty" as a modifier for "realism" is also telling in the context of the picturesque: what is real is what is tough or hard – hence the need to visit ghettos to experience "real life."

While such subcultures indicate that young people are compelled by the toughness and defiance attributed to lower-class people, and seek un-ironically to project these qualities

themselves, a broader trend indicates that the ironic appropriation of poverty has become a potent aspect of middle-class culture. The phenomenon sometimes known as “poverty chic” or “poor chic” is the most obvious – and perhaps the most pernicious – contemporary trend derived from picturesque aesthetics. From the tiny house movement to, far more problematically, the fad for entertainment venues mimicking trailers and pawn shops, the romanticization of working-class life by middle-class people displays an uneasy convergence of concern about class precarity and desire for class distinction. The term “Poor Chic” was coined in a 2002 article by the sociologist Karen Bettez Halnon, which she defines as “an array of fads and fashions in popular culture that make recreational or stylish – and often expensive – ‘fun’ of poverty, or of traditional symbols of working class and underclass statuses” (501).²⁸⁰ Ironic facial hair is but one relatively innocuous instance of Poor Chic. Recent articles in *The Guardian* and *Salon* which chronicle the proliferation of Poor Chic bars and nightclubs attest to the perpetuation and expansion of this trend: for instance, in Manchester, there are bars called the Laundrette, which mimics a coin laundry, and Boilermaker, “a secret bar that hides among grimy shop fronts and thrift stores”; meanwhile, “[w]orking men’s clubs up and down the country have undergone conversions into trendy clubs and arts spaces” (Lately).²⁸¹ In this trend we can see the influence of the American picturesque, which made urban poverty captivating in a way that the British

²⁸⁰ “Poor Chic was conceptualized by collecting and analyzing multiple symbols traditionally associated with working class and underclass life – or those in our common ‘stock of knowledge’ (Schutz and Luckmann, 1989) that represent lower class status – among numerous fads and fashions since the 1980s. Poor Chic symbols include (so far): mental illness, homelessness, starvation, drug addiction, bowling, pink plastic flamingos, trailer park and ‘white trash’ status, tattooing, pumping iron, pimping, motorcycling, wrestling, polyester clothes, belt-less prisoner baggy pants, work boots, gas station jackets, thrift store and flea market purchases, secondhand clothes, slum and gang lifestyle, and more abstractly yet importantly, a ‘code of the street’ (Anderson, 1999) turned ‘code of consumption’ marked by anger, alienation, and delinquency” (Halnon 504).

²⁸¹ See also Cammie M. Sublette and Jennifer Martin, “Let Them Eat Cake, Caviar, Organic, and Whole Foods: American Elitism, White Trash Dinner Parties, and Diet.”

version did not, and which opened to middle-class people the possibility to absorb classed others through aestheticized sight – that is, through the apprehension of objects associated with poverty as being beautiful, interesting, or cool.

However, if liberals in the era of Hutchins Hapgood or even Norman Mailer could believe that lifestyle choices held the possibility of actual escape – even if partial or temporary – from bourgeois convention, this possibility has long since been undermined, not least by the fact that the repudiation of this convention has entered the convention itself, with no correspondent revolution in political or economic life. Thus, the irony that characterizes liberal identity, for which human rights do and do not matter, has come to engulf many modes of expression and now occupies what is arguably an appropriately prominent position in contemporary life. Where the Marches were isolated within their self-deprecatory self-awareness about their competing moral and personal ideals, contemporary liberals have a catchphrase for it: “First-world problems.” This phrase ironically counterpoises the suffering of poor people against the inconveniences wealthier people face in part predicated by disavowals made both within and across racialized categories. To say it is both to express awareness about one’s privilege and to exercise it, by encapsulating others’ unknown lived experiences as a tidy reference point against which to define oneself.²⁸² Such pre-emptive self-accusation is a definitive feature of liberal guilt: “One is sorry in advance for the social consequences of one’s acts” (Ellison, *Cato’s Tears* 175). Ellison observes that liberal guilt turns action to gesture, a symbol of concern about suffering rather than an intervention in it. I offer that liberal guilt is not limited to any specific

²⁸² A cursory internet search for “first world problems meme” calls up results oriented to a greater or lesser degree towards actual suffering others; for instance, a photograph of a white woman’s tearful face and the caption “My arm is tired from holding my i-pad,” to an image of a black man outside a dilapidated hut and the words “I hate it when my house is so big, I need two wireless routers.” The latter in particular indicates how this meme appropriates abject others’ bodies in a way that simultaneously stimulates and forecloses feeling towards them.

actions, but rather that it permeates daily life: one is not sorry *in advance* so much as one is sorry *perpetually*. Hence, the existence of a photograph of a black child holding a semiautomatic rifle with the caption, “Go ahead and tell me all your first world problems.” We no longer require the actual presence of suffering others to feel guilty; this guilt is pervasive and built in to our daily lives. Enter any Starbucks, and the signs will inform you that their coffee is ethically sourced, reminding you that others around the world suffer and require our help.²⁸³ The irony that pervades liberal culture today is the counterweight to its paradoxes, the tool which makes it possible to hold comfortably the pleasure of one’s ethically-sourced latte. One of the many clear dangers of this irony is that it deflates even the sentimental responses to injustice that have traditionally been the purview of liberal culture.²⁸⁴ In her article on *Salon*, “The ‘struggle’ is not real: From tiny houses to my own lunch, poverty chic commodifies working class life,” Brook Bolen considers poverty chic trends and their linguistic corollaries, such as “first-world problems” or the use of the ironic phrase “the struggle is real” to describe a minor problem. A writer raised in a working-class family in the rural south, Bolen states the problem plainly: the commodification of working-class objects, and particularly “the linguistic appropriation and fetishization of the ‘struggle’ and its hashtag” are behaviors which are “hurtful and offensive to those people whose lives are defined by real struggle; [these behaviors] also function to neuter the word and divorce it from its power” (Bolen). Like the ironic mustache, ironic self-

²⁸³ As Žižek observes in Sophie Fiennes’s film *The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology*, “when we buy a cappuccino from Starbucks, we also buy quite a bit of ideology.... What Starbucks enables you is to be a consumerist without any bad conscience because the price for the countermeasure for fighting consumerism is already included into the price of a commodity, like, you pay a little bit more and you are not just a consumerist but you do also your duty towards [the] environment, the poor starving people in Africa and so on and so on.”

²⁸⁴ And, Žižek argues, mitigates the guilt which traditionally drove liberal interventions into injustice such as giving to charity (*Pervert’s Guide*).

deprecation about privilege sublimates moral sentiment into aesthetics, making even one's own political impotence mere fodder for ironic commentary.

Increasing wealth disparity and the precarity of middle-class jobs and lifestyles help to explain this widespread aestheticization of poverty in the current moment.²⁸⁵ An October 2017 article in *The Guardian* reports that “[t]he world’s super-rich hold the greatest concentration of wealth since the US Gilded Age at the turn of the twentieth century” (Neate). Halnon observes that, “[t]oward controlling against the fear of downward mobility in the context of an increasing and extreme economically polarized consumer society, the Poor Chic tourist demonstrates social worth through wasteful or ‘conspicuous’ consumption, or by vacationing in poverty” (513). Halnon uses the figure of the tourist metaphorically: by purchasing objects or frequenting locations associated with poverty, the Poor Chic tourist observes and absorbs the positive qualities that bourgeois culture projects onto this state. One of the first functions of the picturesque, then – the delineation of class boundaries through the consumption or aesthetic appreciation of common or rough objects – remains a vital part of contemporary class dynamics. Like the original picturesque tourists, Poor Chic tourists of today can bolster their sense of class position by consuming ragged or derelict sights, which may even have been constructed specifically for their enjoyment. And like the picturesque travelers among urban ghettos charmed by the quaintness and communality of their inhabitants, the tastes of contemporary Poor Chic tourists reveal both fears about class precarity and the desire for qualities perceived as lacking within bourgeois life. While Halnon describes Poor Chic as making fun of poverty, she also acknowledges that “[i]n Poor Chic, control involves becoming what elicits fear, what

²⁸⁵ It is perhaps due both to the scale of wealth inequality globally and to the middle-class’s profoundly ambivalent relationship with the virtues of extreme wealth that picturesque aesthetics are currently playing such a prominent role in high fashion as well: a “Destroyed Sweater” – a wool sweater with holes in it – by Kanye West’s clothing line retails for around three thousand dollars.

haunts” (508). The fear Halnon references is the prospect of poverty, perhaps of the poor themselves and of the feelings they evoke. American bourgeois liberalism as it emerged in the late nineteenth century was in part a response to these fears; works from this era that engage picturesque aesthetics reveal an effort to work through the experience of being haunted by inequality – both the suffering it entails and what it means for the project of American democracy.

The history of the picturesque in America suggests that the current aestheticization of poverty both there and in Britain is less an expression of mockery or disgust than it is a way to express through lifestyle choices an unease that has dogged the middle class since its inception, both about its own class position and about its relation to poverty. As in *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, this collision of self-interest and self-doubt – the desperate attempt to preserve a middle-class lifestyle which appears both morally flawed and personally unsatisfying – becomes a feeling of guilt. Ellison observes that, “liberal guilt arises precisely when people are convinced that utopian projects are failing” (“Liberal” 347), and this failure appears to be informing current Poor Chic trends as well. A sociologist quoted in the *Guardian* article on Poor Chic observes that “[t]here’s a clear sense that the ‘old ways’ are being re-appropriated symbolically by the middle classes, right at the moment that the middle-class project has stopped expanding and has started to shrink” (Lately). The Marches’ ironic sentimentalism expresses both yearning for what their middle-class life denies and self-awareness about their essential inefficacy and hypocrisy; Poor Chic today is a kitschy way to signify the same yearnings and the same self-reflexivity about class position. “Middle-class people thrive anywhere, but do not feel they ‘belong,’ like the lower orders, and they want some of that warm, sexy, gritty, authentic and real world for themselves” (Lately). This string of adjectives compellingly suggests that the positive qualities

which nineteenth-century picturesque narratives attributed to lower-class people and places continue to shape middle-class people's perceptions of their class and of the possibilities for a more authentic existence beyond its perimeters.

The desire to “belong” contributes to what is one of the most thoroughly studied contemporary trends derived from the picturesque: the occupation of working-class neighborhoods by wealthier people. In a study of gentrification in Canadian cities, Tom Slater writes that this process is part of “a deliberate middle-class rejection of the oppressive conformity of suburbia, modernist planning, and mass market principles” (41). The rejection of conformity is not only physical but also psychological: many middle-class people who purchase homes in working-class areas report feeling a sense of liberation or independence as a result of their choice (Butler 1-3). They have escaped the “‘living death’ of the suburbs” (Butler 158). The breach of middle-class convention constituted by living in a working-class neighborhood is itself desirable – a statement of social and political values. Middle-class people who purchase homes in working-class areas are predominantly socially liberal and express the desire to identify with the working-class residents (Butler 153). It is notable that “districts where condominium development was the dominant form of embourgeoisement were more likely to endorse conservative politicians,” whereas areas in which new residents preserved old structures tend to vote more progressively (Ley 70). By moving to working-class areas, middle-class people attempt to imbue their lives with the “individuality” that the picturesque has long associated with poorer people, to elude the homogenizing cultural constraint endemic to middle-class life, and to enact their concern with wealth inequality. At the same time, the appropriation of economically disadvantaged areas remains an expression of the aesthetic disposition: middle-class individuals can reify their class identity by designating rough objects as aesthetically valuable.

Today, the process of gentrification involves not only middle-class families purchasing homes in traditionally working-class neighborhoods, but also the cooptation of derelict industrial buildings and houses in cities afflicted by urban blight, particularly in Rust Belt America.²⁸⁶ A 2015 *New York Times* article entitled “Last Stop on the L Train: Detroit,” reveals the crowded intersection of picturesque aesthetics and real estate, a space first forged by middle-class compulsion towards roughness and now built up by rising class inequality.²⁸⁷ In response to unaffordable rent in New York City, young people in creative industries are flocking to the abandoned buildings of Detroit. As the article makes clear, these individuals are drawn not only by the cheap rent but also by the aesthetic pleasure of roughness and decay which Detroit offers in such abundance, and by the belief that moving there is a form of socio-political engagement. One man interviewed for the article, who creates “site-specific installations and sculptures, made from rotten boards, rusty stairwells and peeling paint, or as he said, ‘the decadence of abandonment’” exemplifies this trend. Now the owner of two previously abandoned warehouses, Mr. Wolf explains that, “I came here thinking I might help save Detroit, and instead it has saved me” (Conlin 9). The idea that wealthier, predominantly white people can bring investment and infrastructure to a troubled city echoes the ideals of “improvement” first

²⁸⁶ This trend is also evident in the repurposing of non-residential buildings in expensive cities like Toronto and New York. Another *New York Times* article, “Buildings with a Past,” discusses the “curb appeal” of old “power plants and parking garages, schools and cinemas, warehouses and banks” turned into condominiums: “People are more comfortable,” one developer says, “with something that feels authentic” (Hughes 8). These consumers pay a premium for properties that retain traces of their past, perpetuating the bourgeois nostalgia that has always helped to drive interest in picturesque aesthetics. Such living spaces also tend to include odd or irregular features – old beams, oddly-shaped rooms – that make them distinct from new-built condominiums and provide distinction to their owners: history as article of consumption.

²⁸⁷ In a beautiful confluence, the article frames a massive Louis Vuitton advertisement featuring a model posed in front of a mottled grey-white concrete wall, roughened in patches where age has decayed the material to large pebbles and exposed the rusted metal struts.

advanced with theories of the picturesque, and contains the same troubling class dynamics.²⁸⁸ Wealthy landowners have been replaced by middle-class culture workers with good access to credit, whose vision of a more harmoniously integrated society involves the careful stewardship of derelict properties; the transformation of such structures is economically beneficial to the owners and displays their conscientious concern for the wellbeing of those poorer than themselves. The economies of suffering and liberation implicated in bourgeois consumption of picturesque objects are evident in Mr. Wolf's statement that Detroit "saved" him: the hardship of native Detroiters offers aesthetic, economic, and experiential benefit to citizens less affected by structural inequality. The flight of middle-class urbanites to Detroit also testifies, however, to the middle classes' subjection to market forces. The gentrification of Brooklyn initiated by artists and students has been so effective that new generations of would-be gentrifiers have been priced out of the market and must turn to new frontiers of ever-greater dereliction to house their bourgeois aspirations.

The trend towards repurposing working-class areas is not only, however, a response to impossible rental markets, as a recent project in Sheffield, England makes clear. In the mid- to late-2000s, a developer called Urban Splash redeveloped an apartment complex, Park Hill, that was formerly social housing. The estate is not itself picturesque, comprised of several mid-century apartment towers with exterior corridors, but the company's advertising tactics nonetheless implicate values popularized by the picturesque. The ads featured a piece of graffiti – "I love you will u marry me" – scrawled on a bridge between buildings, using a moment in the

²⁸⁸ In Detroit, class dynamics are inextricable from racial ones: as Dream Hampton, an artist, activist, and native Detroiter says, "[i]f you find yourself in an all white space, you should know you are having a racially curated experience." She points out that "Sure, gentrification brings slow-drip coffee, pedigree pork and almond milk, but it also brings hyper-policing" (Conlin 9). Such policing is, of course, perceived by new, non-marginalized inhabitants as being beneficial, and will have disproportionately negative effects on a neighborhood's racialized residents.

lives of Park Hill's former residents to convey the attractive edginess of this renovated ghetto to prospective middle-class buyers. The graffiti "I Love You" on a crumbling bridge suggests lives lived out in the open, with emotions unconcealed, the same qualities the urban picturesque has always invested in the working class. It is an ephemeral moment captured in paint, and then preserved to symbolize not one individual's sentiments but a way of life that Urban Splash believes potential consumers will find appealing. As symbol, the graffiti is a bit of realism that fixes and erases the lives of the former ghetto; the name attached to the proposal was left to fade, while the rest of the message has been written over in neon. The elements that the developers deemed attractive – and as *The Guardian* documents, Urban Splash was canny in their marketing²⁸⁹ – do not symbolize the (in fact tragic) lives of those associated with the words; rather, once again and in the most explicit way, they "occupy [their] place fully to mark [their] removal," as Levinas argues of all aesthetic representation ("Reality" 7). The neon lights overwrite and project the uneven, unpunctuated message; captivating in its raggedness, the sign is a lure that obscures Park Hill's history and its relation to inequality and generational, institutionalized suffering.

The final case study I present of the contemporary picturesque also concerns the appeal of rough objects as it contributes to neighborhood revitalization. The work of conceptual artist and urban planner Theaster Gates makes explicit the economies of guilt and redemption implicated in picturesque aesthetics. His work is singular in the openness with which it participates in this economy, because it recirculates derelict objects as art worth thousands of dollars; Gates then uses the money to renew abandoned buildings in marginalized communities.

²⁸⁹ "They replicate Jason's [marriage] proposal on sales posters for the flats and on the sales office's glass doors. It has been embroidered on the show flat cushions. Businesses borrow it, too. People drank I Love You Will U Marry Me strawberry beer made by Thornbridge, a local brewery, at this year's fund-raiser for the onsite S1 art space, and buyers of new flats were given a bottle of beer in their welcome pack" (Byrnes).

For instance, to revitalize the Stony Island Bank in Chicago, Gates made “bonds” out of the derelict building’s marble (they read “In Art we Trust”), and the sale of these “bonds” helped to finance the Bank’s transformation into an archive of black Americana. Moreover, Gates’s installations and performance art offer attendees the opportunity to participate in the economy by which his art gains value and to experience a sense of participation in projects of urban renewal. His work, like that of Jacob Riis, aestheticizes derelict and rough objects in impoverished neighborhoods to draw attention to social injustice, and like Riis, his aesthetic projects intersect with political advocacy around urban housing and underprivileged communities. Part of what makes Gates unique, however, is that by creating picturesque spaces and curating picturesque objects within marginalized urban communities, Gates makes available to their inhabitants the aestheticized vision of dereliction and roughness which has until now been solely the purview of the materially comfortable.²⁹⁰ At the same time, Gates is explicitly interested in how objects accrue value, a word that returns again and again in his interviews and which raises questions about who his work primarily appeals to and why. The work he does which benefits poorer people and areas is funded by people who are drawn to his work because it combines philanthropy with patronage of the arts.²⁹¹ His art and his urban renewal projects thus present an unusual and important example of the appeal of rough objects to wealthier people concerned with inequality, and have the potential to open new paths towards the sustainable redevelopment of underprivileged neighborhoods and new modes of engaging wealthy liberals in this process.

²⁹⁰ To know whether long-time residents of South Side Chicago see Gates’s work as beautiful, or socially beneficial, would add greatly to our understanding of the socio-political effects of picturesque aesthetics.

²⁹¹ The owner of Gates’s gallery in Chicago, Kavi Gupta, describes promoting Gates’s work to “the city’s collectors and philanthropists – who were the same people. ‘All of the affluent philanthropists in Chicago collect art.... I remember taking, one by one, every affluent philanthropist in Chicago down to Dorchester, and the minute they saw Theaster they were, like, ‘How can we help?’” (Colapinto 29).

Another distinctive and powerful aspect of Gates's picturesque aesthetic is the personal connection he has to the materials he uses, and the fact that his aestheticization of these materials is a response to oppressive forces that shaped his life. He grew up in a working-class neighborhood that suffered badly during the drug wars. In a long 2014 *New Yorker* profile, Gates says that the Stony Island bank is "a symbol of everything [he] couldn't control" (Colapinto 30) – every historic building that he saw fall into decay or bulldozed by the city as he was growing up. His father was a roofer, and in the *TED* talk, "How to Revive a Neighborhood: With imagination, beauty and art," Gates talks about inheriting his father's tar spreader, asking whether tar could be thought about as an artistic material, and relating this question to his framed fire hoses from 1960s Alabama. He moves from the aestheticization of objects notoriously associated with violent oppression to the use of abandoned buildings as art, linking the historical suffering of black Americans with contemporary urban poverty. Gates sees the fire hoses, which he coiled behind glass and titled "In Event of Race Riot 2" as a way "to talk about the complexities of a moment of civil rights"; his regenerated buildings are likewise artefacts of suffering made into art that opens dialogue about injustice and activism.

Because of Gates's history growing up in a blighted urban area, his picturesque art functions differently than other versions within the dynamic of dominance and oppression inherent in the aestheticization of poverty. Where the traditional picturesque – and most contemporary ruin art – exists as framed by a wealthier viewer's perception, in this iteration it is Gates's frame that creates his own environment as picturesque. The fact that Gates's art makes his viewers recipients rather than creators of picturesque art is radical in that it wrests aesthetic control from the privileged. The frame that makes his derelict objects into art is not an outside viewer's perspective, but an insider's explicitly political one which directs how viewers relate to

these objects. However, the presentation of rough objects as art by someone from within the environment or historical circumstance being aestheticized also potentially undermines an ethical function the picturesque can serve – namely, the awareness it can generate in the viewer of the privileged position which enables her to perceive dereliction as art. It is the *awareness* of this way of seeing which, in other iterations of the picturesque, opens possibilities for greater conscientiousness about class disparity and about the limitations of sympathy to bridge this social gap. Because Gates’s art draws on and explicitly deals with his own experiences of economic hardship, his work can be received and consumed by wealthier people as authentic representations of those conditions – as though they are unmediated by the lens of privilege that usually frames such cross-class viewing.²⁹² Those who view his work can therefore shift the responsibility for aestheticizing these conditions onto the artist, who presents himself as having a historical claim to make such art; viewers can, therefore, potentially feel the virtue of caring about these issues with less discomfort than might otherwise accompany the aestheticization of poverty and suffering.

In his performance art, Gates makes himself the medium through which histories of suffering are communicated to his audiences; Colapinto, in the *New Yorker* profile, asserts that Gates “invites his audiences to see him as an icon of suffering” (28). For example, in a 2012 show in Los Angeles, Gates “walked out into the gallery, took hold of one of his heavy shoe-shine sculptures, and dragged it across the floor on his back” (Colapinto 28). The shoe-shine sculptures, made from salvaged wooden pallets from a Wrigley’s plant that had left Chicago for China, are picturesque both in material and subject, the shoe-shine boy being the archetype of American pluck and ingenuity in the face of economic, and often racialized, hardship. Ruskin

²⁹² The ways in which Gates’s class privilege as a successful artist and professor at the University of Chicago relates to his work is something viewers may wish to consider, and which could merit further inquiry.

identifies the way that picturesque aesthetics ennoble suffering, exalting it as a sign of moral purity. Gates dragging an object associated with oppression and resilience in the figure of Christ bearing his cross brings the concept of sanctified poverty vividly to life. By embodying the suffering his art signifies, and condensing manifold experiences of oppression into a single, carefully constructed symbol, Gates focuses the catharsis offered by the picturesque onto his performance. These shoe-shine structures developed out of his first major exhibit in Chicago, part of which involved taking visitors to a West Side shoe-shine stand, shining shoes and encouraging patrons to do so as well. As an art installation, this guided tour of a poorer, racialized community could be experienced not as a slum tour but rather as an aesthetic experience, potentially one with socio-political significance. Because Gates is transforming his own childhood neighborhood into performance art, his patrons can therefore perceive this space, and the business which serves as emblem of its hardship and resilience, as being objects of aesthetic pleasure and edification without considering the ethical implications of doing so.

It is arguably the case that Gates's work would not be as successful were he not perceived by patrons as having the moral authority to put on display objects associated with black suffering. For his exhibit, "Accumulated Affects of Migration," Gates created an "installation of debris from the demolition of one of the Dorchester Projects houses: pieces of kitchen countertops, sections of wall lath, and strips of hardwood flooring, framed and mounted on the walls" (Colapinto 27). In 2012, he shipped the works to Germany for an art exhibition, "using them to restore an abandoned building.... Afterward, Gates made 'objects' combining bits of debris from the two houses, and the gallery sold them for as much as a hundred and twenty thousand dollars apiece" (Colapinto 27). Gates then uses this money towards revitalization projects which are intended to uplift troubled communities. Gates curates the dereliction caused

by urban blight, selecting the most aesthetically appealing rough objects; framed this way, they function as symbol for all the hardship these social conditions create. By offering patrons of art symbols of suffering rather than its raw materials, by framing himself as someone whose history gives him the right to symbolize this particular pain, and by explicitly connecting the value of these objects with the revaluing of derelict neighborhoods, Gates mitigates for his patrons the potential guilt of aestheticizing the suffering of others. The apprehension of rough and common objects as art once again becomes an expression of moral sentiments by viewers and can even confer a sense of their having behaved ethically by appreciating Gates's work – and certainly by investing in it.

In his public speaking engagements, Gates cannily plays with the liberal guilt that draws interest in his work. For instance, at a 2010 exhibition called “To Speculate Darkly,” Gates emulated a slave-era potter and poet known as Dave, about whom Gates had read in a book written by a descendent of the family that had owned Dave. At his opening-night lecture, Gates ironically commented on the absurdity of the author's speculations, and his own better position to speculate about an enslaved potter. Colapinto reports that, “[t]he audience gave an uneasy chuckle, a common reaction at Gates's performances and lectures, where he plays with the awkward dynamic between him and his audiences – confronting them with references to historical racism and also flattering them by implying that attending his exhibition exempts them from criticism” (28). Picturesque aesthetics are precisely a confrontation with difficult – and othered – stories, and in almost every instance, the lover of the picturesque flatters himself that his interest is proof of his liberal humanism. Playing with this dynamic is one aspect of what makes Gates's work interesting as picturesque art: he explicitly connects rough and salvaged

objects to histories of suffering, requiring that his audiences acknowledge these stories even as they enjoy their aestheticization. Their investment in his art is quite literally compensation.

I delight that Gates is profiting – and helping communities in need to profit – from (white) liberal guilt; but this process is also the monetization of suffering. The valuation process is being still being arbitrated by the wealthy and powerful, just as in any claim for compensation by a state. The sale of Gates’s work thus reconstitutes the dynamic by which a society legally recognizes harm for which it is responsible and evaluates appropriate recompense; however, this process takes place not in the courts but in a gallery, and the compensation is determined not by a state’s legal frameworks but on the open market. This is an honest, if somewhat discomfiting, way to address structural inequality, and one concern is the possibility that under such a system, only that suffering which can be made visible – and not merely visible but compelling to observe – would be eligible for reparations. Put another way, Gates’s work raises questions about the degree to which such an approach operates by fetishizing suffering. The fact that this suffering is framed by someone who has experienced the wrongs being compensated is part of his work’s appeal. Gates’s activism alongside his positioning of his work as artefacts of suffering both past and present contribute to what his patrons perceive as its “authenticity,” and adds to its value. Gates exploits the fact that “people [get] so *wet*” over “a piece of fire hose or an old piece of wood or the roof of a building” (Colapinto 24); this desire, and the guilt it induces, lubricates the pocketbooks of philanthropists and art collectors, and causes even major galleries to waive their commissions on his work so that the entire proceeds can go to furthering his projects (Colapinto 30). The realness of the suffering exists for buyers because of the effectiveness of the art and the perceived connection of the artist to his subject, and it is this “realness” which determines its worth to wealthy buyers.

While Gates's approach presents many intriguing and hopeful possibilities, its dangers are suggested in the words of Chicago's mayor, Rahm Emmanuel, who sold the long-abandoned Stony Island State Savings Bank to Gates for one dollar days before it was to be demolished. Emmanuel explained that Gates "had a vision for the South Side. And since we, as a city and as a country, have tried almost every other form of redevelopment, I said, 'Why don't we try the one that's most obvious – the arts?'" (Colapinto 24). It is rather chilling that the mayor of a major urban center is claiming that art installations and isolated sites of community activism funded by wealthy investors offer the ultimate solution to the inequality that results in urban blight. Just as the investments by the Rockefellers or the Carnegies of the early twentieth century in libraries or schools benefitted poorer people but did not alter the socio-economic structures that generate inequality, wealthy patrons' investing in Gates's projects may positively impact certain individuals or even neighborhoods, but their purchases and the projects they help to fund are hardly the answer to the poverty and racism that usually underlie an area's need for "redevelopment." Emmanuel's contention points to the failure in contemporary American liberalism to name the causes behind inequality or to address them structurally. Aesthetics have been implicated in American responses to poverty since the nineteenth century, but they have never yet provided a solution.

The crisis of American poverty may contribute to Gates's rapid rise to prominence within the art world; certainly, it is notable that his work is gaining currency at a moment when inequality is rising and older forms of liberalism are under attack from both the left and right. Perhaps the effort to find new ways to approach inequality is implicated in the fact that Gates was the *Wall Street Journal's* Innovator of the Year in 2012 and was ranked fortieth out of the

one hundred most important artists of 2013 by *ArtReview*.²⁹³ As Jeffrey Deitch, the former director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, told Colapinto for the *New Yorker* profile: “His special fusion of art and community activism has made him the kind of artist that people are looking for today.... The success of his work is measured by its actual impact on the community” (24). What this impact actually is, we will not be able say for some years to come. Gates’s regeneration projects and the events he hosts in them have helped him to create a not-for-profit organization, the Rebuild Foundation, which administers many cultural and architectural projects on the South Side; according to the foundation’s website, community members are active participants in creating and implementing new plans for the neighborhood. Rebuild’s Welcome page states that the Foundation endeavors, “to rebuild the cultural foundations of underinvested neighborhoods and incite movements of community revitalization that are culture based, artist led, and neighborhood driven” (*Rebuild Foundation*).²⁹⁴ Gates’s determination to involve members of these communities appears to be central to both his artistic and political practice; his Dorchester Art + Housing Collaborative, for instance, is comprised of 32 rehabilitated public housing townhomes which are now evenly distributed between “artist, public, affordable rate, and market rate housing” (*Rebuild Foundation*), and it hosts regular gatherings of neighborhood residents to discuss strategies for improving the area. The Dorchester buildings combine clean modern lines with the roughness of salvaged metal and

²⁹³ See Kelly Crow, “The Artist Next Door”; *ArtReview* describes Gates as “The artist who does more outside the gallery than within.”

²⁹⁴ Gates has taken this approach to other American cities, such as Omaha, in which he helped black artists who had found local arts organizations inaccessible to regenerate a building for use as an arts space. The way he synthesizes artistic practice with his background as an urban planner is evident in his description of how he approached this project: “What I care about is that black people in North Omaha know that they can approach the department of planning, they can approach the mayor, they can develop a plan, and they can activate abandoned space in their neighborhood. That’s the important part. I think we focus too much on the effect – the finished work – and not enough on the methodology or practice” (Becker et al. 12).

wood; his archives offer a form of picturesque rooted in the recontextualization of images and objects associated with American racism and resistance to it. Gates's iteration of the picturesque presents the first instance of which I am aware of such an aesthetic being created purposefully within a rough area for use by its original inhabitants.

Whether or not this is the population who will benefit most from Gates's projects is the pressing question. Emmanuel's contention that "the arts" can rehabilitate blighted urban areas may not be entirely false, but this rehabilitation may be of more benefit to new residents than to those already living there. A housing project which used to have 32 units of subsidized housing now has eight, with eight more at an "affordable rate." It is notable that the Dorchester Projects are only fifteen miles from the University of Chicago, and that regeneration of the Grand Crossing neighborhood would benefit people in that institution. In the interview after one of his TED Talks, Gates was asked how to ensure that his projects actually serve disadvantaged people, and not just "the vegetarian indie-movie crowd that might move in" (Gates). He suggests, "housing trusts, land trusts, or mission based development, ... entities that are not just interested in the development piece but that are interested in the stabilization piece" (Gates). Collaborations between private developers, municipalities, and foundations like Rebuild can perhaps work together to offer the kinds of safeguards against unethical development necessary to foster urban renewal rather than gentrification. But Gates himself, in a 2011 interview with *Art in America*, said of Grand Crossing: "I believe in the place, and I'm invested in it. But it's fine for my neighborhood to change around me. It would even be fine if in five years, maybe because of me, the whole thing is lily-white" (Wei). Pressed to explain, Gates replied: "Well if it's the politics of staying then you invite people back. You force what's new to deal with what's old. There are lots of devices. It's all tricksterism" (Wei). It is possible – and I certainly hope – that his

statement about the racial and class dynamics in Grand Crossing is part of the goading, tricksterish persona Colapinto observes in his profile. The aestheticization of poverty should create unease, and I will read Gates's statement optimistically as a posture intended to keep those interested in his work from becoming too comfortable being his patrons. But his words, and the project itself, raise concerns that reverberate within the long history of bourgeois desire for authenticity and middle-class people's appropriation of rough objects for their own pleasure and to satisfy a sense of social responsibility.

These concerns lead me to some final thoughts about the implications for contemporary liberal societies of their wealthier citizens' aesthetic engagement with poverty, roughness, and dereliction. Arguably, the best way to ensure that Gates's projects, or others like them, do not simply displace a neighborhood's more disenfranchised residents is for wealthier people mostly to stay out of them. Like Dr. Morrell's pronouncement in *Annie Kilburn* that the town's wealthier residents should admit that they have nothing in common with the shop-hands, my suggestion may sound divisive – it certainly sounds improbable, given that many people are drawn to poorer neighborhoods because the cost of living in major urban centers is so high. Given this improbability (nay, impossibility), my hope is that some combination of liberal self-disgust and the growing activism of disenfranchised people (such as the Black Lives Matter movement) gains such force that these sentiments drown out, at least for some moments, the ironic discourse that burbles through every discussion of social injustice. As a native Detroiter tells the protagonist of Benjamin Markovits's 2015 novel *You Don't Have to Live Like This*, which chronicles the class and racial dynamics of a Detroit neighborhood that a wealthy white investor attempts to turn into a planned community: “you're trying to help and you haven't got a

clue. In a place like Detroit that makes you one of the bad guys” (33).²⁹⁵ Privileged people can begin to address inequality by admitting we do not have a clue about the lives of structurally distanced others, and that no aesthetic engagement with them will provide one – including inhabiting their real estate. We can know the pull roughness and dereliction exert on the middle class and assess our actions in light of the values our aesthetic appreciation makes manifest to us. And if people want to assist in regeneration efforts – to be an “ally,” in the parlance of our time – we could begin by joining local organizations whose mandate is to address the issues that affect poorer areas or to lobby for policy changes that will aid them.²⁹⁶

Thus, my suggestion for members of the liberal bourgeoisie – not least for myself, who has spent the past seven years working on this project and having minimal community or political involvement beyond attendance at protests – is to eschew all forms of aestheticized politics and participate in collectively-organized approaches to social change.²⁹⁷ The effects of aesthetic engagement with social problems goes far beyond the issue of gentrification or of ethical products; it has infiltrated every facet of what now constitutes socio-political engagement. A July 2017 article in *The Guardian* exposes the futility of trying to prevent climate change through individual actions, such as purchasing eco-friendly appliances or local vegetables. Such acts, I am arguing, are essentially aesthetic: they are symbols of social goodwill that *represent but do not promote or achieve* the remediation of a problem. Taken collectively such acts create

²⁹⁵ Markovits exposes, too, the aesthetic appeal of the derelict neighborhood for bourgeois people, including what they perceive as the chance to become tougher and more self-reliant.

²⁹⁶ The concept of being an “ally” to people in marginalized communities is the term of the moment in liberal media. See for instance Tamara Winfrey Harris, “The Real Work of Being an Ally”; Hallie Sebastian, “How to tell if you’re being a good ally”; TVO’s Panel discussion “What does being an ally really mean?”

²⁹⁷ If such endeavors cannot be de-aestheticized (for this is arguably impossible), then perhaps it is possible that in organizations working towards specific goals, with specific (unromantic) tasks required to achieve them, the drive for personal expression is satisfied not through any particular action but by the way in which this action relates to other people’s actions in pursuit of a common objective.

a new form of *sensus communis*, a community of subjects united through perceptions of and feelings about social issues. With specific demands and structures for making them, such a community becomes a political entity. Martin Lukacs in *The Guardian* makes a compelling case for the possibility that we can combat climate change if we “stop obsessing with how personally green we live – and start collectively taking on corporate power.” This is not to say that small actions – turning off the lights in empty rooms, composting – are not important; the collective impact of such acts may not counterbalance destructive behaviors by large corporations, but small improvements are better than none. Their principal efficacy, however, at least potentially, is that they make us feel empowered rather than hopeless or overwhelmed, and studies argue for the importance that a sense of political efficacy can have on our ability to join social movements.²⁹⁸ Aesthetic orientations towards socio-political problems are thus not wholly negative; our affective responses to aesthetic objects – be they artisanal goods or representations of derelict buildings – remain potent opportunities for moral reflection. Once we have articulated to ourselves our values, we can begin to enact them – not just symbolically but practically.

Nathan Heller, in an August 2017 issue of *The New Yorker*, makes a similar argument to Lukacs’s in his discussion of several new books about protest politics. He retains the belief – as do I – that protests, such as Occupy Wall Street or the recent Women’s Marches that took place around the world, are powerful expressions of solidarity that can show both those in power and everyone else that “the public – not just the appalled *me* but the conjoined *us* whom the elected serve – is watching and aware” (77). But his article is also a call to an older, largely abandoned form of institutional engagement, and to meeting with new skepticism the acts of “self-

²⁹⁸ Darren E. Sherkat and T. Jean Blocker define political efficacy as “a subjective state that orients actors *as if* they were members of a privileged group” (824).

expressive protest” that have become “entrenched ... in political identity” (Heller 77). The equation the picturesque makes between appearance and essence laid the foundation for such self-expressive politics, because its aesthetic presents the possibility of living our values in symbolic acts of resistance or compassion rather than through sustained, organized work that is often tedious and unrewarding.

The appeal of the picturesque can thus function as a type of warning for those who wish to combat social injustice. We must resist the pleasure that engaging with rough objects provides – either the pleasure of feeling virtuous or of feeling guilty. The former tricks us into thinking that caring about something helps; the latter either saps the energy we might put into useful actions or becomes an ironic relation to the problem. Leslie Jamison, in *The Empathy Exams*, writes of going on a tour of South Central Los Angeles guided by former gang members from the area who have “turned their experiences into stories for travelers” (84). Like Chuck Connors guiding visitors through the Bowery for their edification or entertainment, Jamison’s tour guides profit from wealthier people’s interest in roughness and suffering. Jamison’s book is an investigation of the social value of empathy, and in the section about LA she contemplates how to understand her privilege and the interest in this blighted urban landscape which her privilege makes possible. “You feel uncomfortable,” she writes. “Your discomfort is the point The truth of this place is infinite and irreducible, and self-reflexive anguish might feel like the only thing you can offer in return. It might be hard to hear anything above the clattering machinery of your guilt. Try to listen anyway” (90). I appreciate Jamison’s recourse to an ethics of discomfort, her contention that we should court it and stay with it, as well as her observation that guilt has the dangerous potential to override other responses. But what do we do with the discomfort? The perpetual discomfort of liberalism has only produced ever more numerous

ways to soothe it, and listening, observing, and documenting have always been at the forefront of these strategies. I am suggesting that discomfort can no longer be the point, and that knowledge of others' suffering is a necessity and not a virtue. Paradox may be unavoidable, but our refusal to fetishize the hole between *ought* and *will* can make less fertile the places where irony takes root. Liberalism, and its far more politically powerful offshoot neoliberalism, is the ideology of individualism; the aesthetics of roughness have contributed to this ideology by making it possible to feel that individual perception is a form of social and political engagement. But our relation to these aesthetics can change. We can learn to feel pictorial sight not as a means of connection but as a facet of our isolation, and rather than finding communion through symbolic acts that signal our moral sentiments, find it in collective actions fueled by a collective sense of moral obligation.

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