

Twisting the economic tale: what literature can do that political economy can't

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This paper will address the problem of how we might gain economic understanding from literature. It will look at the aesthetic form of literature as being an efficient vehicle for economic thinking. Economics as a discipline and a practice can learn from the serial novel's refusal of totalizing systems and its allowance of *deterritorialization*¹ or the free play of multiple influences and playful diversion and even breakdown. The anarchic and eclectic novel is flexible, creative and manifests an on-going desire to reinvent its paradigms as opposed to the closure inherent in any *doxa* or system – particularly within nineteenth-century political economy which was called the 'dismal science' by Thomas Carlyle. The aesthetic form of the novel encourages an ideology which supports Ruskin's assertion in *Unto this Last* (1860) that 'There is no wealth but life'.

To understand this play of literature we will first consider political economy's treatment of inequality by looking at two important areas of focus: the labourer and the commodity. The labouring crowd tramps past the outward manifestations of capital – its superb public buildings, the beauty of objects in the bourgeois home or those displayed in the palaces of consumption – but has no access to them. We will concentrate on Gaskell's *North and South* (1855) yet the salons of Balzac's *Le père Goriot*, the grands magasins of Zola's *Au Bonheur des dames*, and the workshops of Gissing's *The Netherworld* would all be equally telling.

Like Marx, Victorian literature practices a demystification of capital by revealing the small histories of production behind the grand narrative of the commodity but also (and this time against the grain of Marx's *Capital*) the small histories of consumption behind the grand Marxist narrative of production. It practices – at its best – an eloquent aesthetics rather than dogmatic teaching. It maintains an open dynamic dialectic

¹ See this term as used by Deleuze and Guattari Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 1972 Univ Of Minnesota Press; Reprint edition, 1983.

between essence and appearance, far from the more totalizing Hegelian dialectics in which dissension, differences, and conflicts are neutralized.

I would like us to think of literature as a system like any other with its own internal functioning, a system of knowledge absorbing art, politics, economics, science, and social manners. It has its own economy of meaning but is also embedded in a real economic system, generates profit and loss, creates communities. It is arguably more contradictory, supple and playful than the discipline of economics. It espouses causes and then twists them around, gets divorced, breaking with old readerships and creating new ones. Jacques Rancière has spoken of nineteenth-century print culture as a mute speech, a wild ink trail of literature which goes off democratically and erratically to speak to whomsoever it pleases.²

The novel in its very form and distribution networks challenges inequality because it tries to reach everyone. It is a living, changing complication of economic theory – played out before our very eyes and shown to be more twisting and complex than the often binary tale of consumption and production, base and superstructure. How does literature put forth economic theory not through doctrine or argument but through metaphor, cameo scenes and descriptive detail? What can economists learn from Victorian literature about the impact on the self (body and mind) of manufacture, labour, the status and effect of the commodity as expressed by Marx and Engels in the mid-nineteenth century.³ Let us first consider one of the ways in which Marx and Engels represented inequality in the contrast between capital and labour and between essence and appearance.

1. Capital and Labour

² Jacques Rancière, *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory, and Politics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011, and *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Gabriel Rockhill trans., London: Bloomsbury, 2006 .

³ Marc Shell says in *Money, language and thought: literary and philosophic economies from the medieval to the modern era* : “My argument is not that money is talked about in particular works of literature and philosophy (...) but that money talks in and through discourse in general”. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press; New Ed edition (1 Sept. 1993). It is perhaps possible to take this a step further and move from a study of discourse to looking at specific aspects of the play of economic pressures (the impact on bodies and minds of exchange value, the fetishism of commodities, the movement of capital and surplus value) as they appear and are expressed aesthetically in the nineteenth-century in the novel but also in the illustrations and popular imagery associated with literature.

Engels in *The Condition of the Working Classes in 1844* visualizes injustice while travelling into London on a ship and giving his first impressions of London from the Thames. He describes the splendour of the wharves and public buildings visible on the banks of the Thames:

This colossal centralisation, this heaping together of two and a half millions of human beings at one point, has multiplied the power of this two and a half millions a hundredfold; has raised London to the commercial capital of the world, created the giant docks and assembled the thousand vessels that continually cover the Thames. I know nothing more imposing than the view which the Thames offers during the ascent from the sea to London Bridge. The masses of buildings, the wharves on both sides, especially from Woolwich upwards, the countless ships along both shores, crowding ever closer and closer together, until, at last, only a narrow passage remains in the middle of the river, a passage through which hundreds of steamers shoot by one another; all this is so vast, so impressive, that a man cannot collect himself, but is lost in the marvel of England's greatness before he sets foot upon English soil.

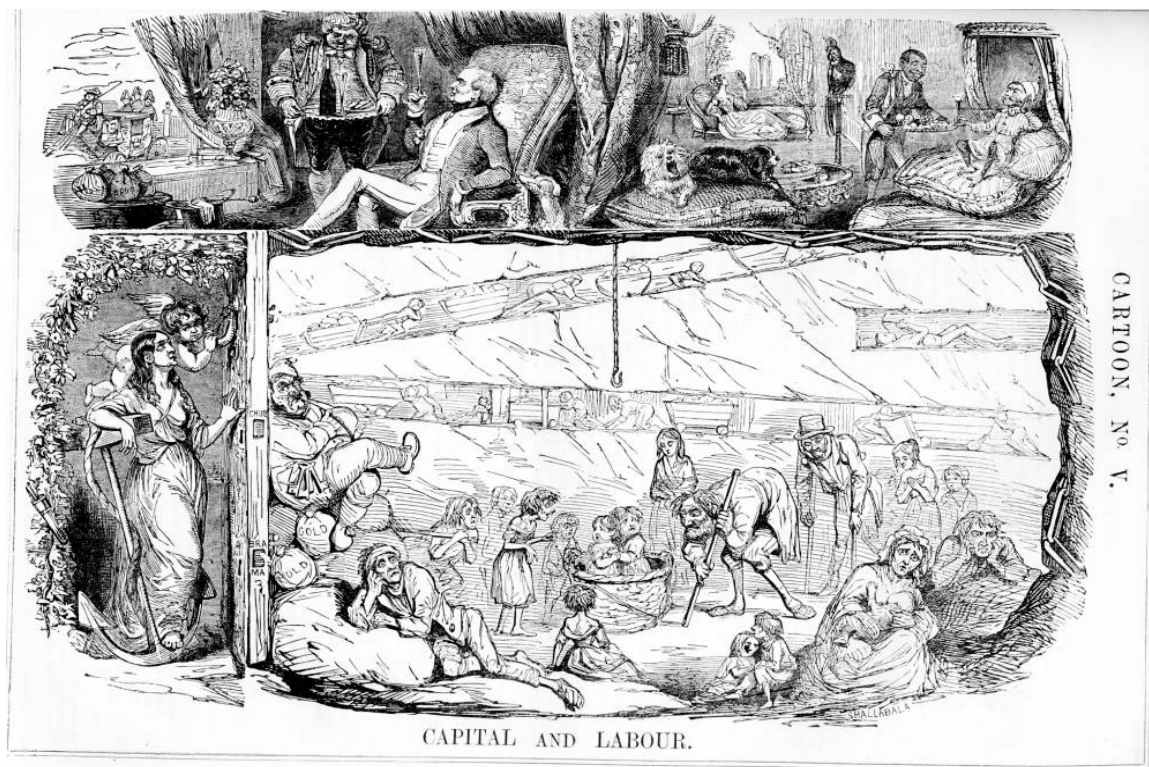
He then takes the reader into the swarming streets hidden behind:

After roaming the streets of the capital a day or two, making headway with difficulty through the human turmoil and the endless lines of vehicles, after visiting the slums of the metropolis, one realises for the first time that these Londoners have been forced to sacrifice the best qualities of their human nature, to bring to pass all the marvels of civilisation which crowd their city; that a hundred powers which slumbered within them have remained inactive, have been suppressed in order that a few might be developed more fully and multiply through union with those of others. The very turmoil of the streets has something repulsive, something against which human nature rebels. The hundreds of thousands of all classes and ranks crowding past each other, are they not all human beings with the same qualities and powers, and with the same interest in being happy? And have they not, in the end, to seek happiness in the same way, by the same means? And still they crowd by one another as though they had nothing in common, nothing to do with one another, and their only agreement is the tacit one, that each keep to his own side of the pavement, so as not to delay the opposing streams of the crowd, while it occurs to no man to honour another with so much as a glance.⁴

Engels poeticizes injustice and inequality with a visual metaphor in which the beauty and readability of the facades of public buildings seen panoramically and from afar hide the unreadable labyrinth of the meaner streets where production takes place. He performs a zooming-in on imperfection from the perfection of distance and shows how

⁴ Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844* [1892], THE GREAT TOWNS, London: Penguin classics, 2009, 68.

politics is a matter of closeness and intimacy with the crowd. He provides us with a three-dimensional moving graphic of the functioning or rather dysfunction of capitalism but also, ironically, a hymn to capital, an expression of euphoria and awe in response to the magnificence of industry's work. This tension between admiration and critique is also present in the novel as well as an ironic detachment from political economy. In 'Capital and Labour' (*Punch*, vol V, 1843)⁵ we see a caricature of the upper visible world of capital which is quite cut off from the area of production below. The discourse contained in the caption beneath shows an ironic rejection of this hermetic separation between the upper and nether spheres:



⁵ Capital and Labour. — Drawn by John Leech. (12 August 1843), Vol. 5: 48-49. *Punch*; or, The London Charivari 17.7 cm high by 24.3 cm wide. Scanned image and text Phillip V. Allingham. <http://www.victorianweb.org/art/illustration/leech/102.html> 'See Horne as a subcommissioner for England with the Astley Commission produced two reports on child labour. The First Report on Children in Mines (May 1842) led to Parliament's legislating against the employment underground of all females and of boys under ten years of age. The Second Report, which considered the conditions of children employed in trades and manufacturing, was based on some 1,500 interviews of child workers. Shedding light upon the extremely dangerous working conditions in the factories (where children would customarily crawl under the machinery while it was running in order to clear away cotton threads), it directly led to the 1844 Factory Act. It is noteworthy that the cartoon features children working in coal seams, another extremely dangerous rather than merely an uncomfortable form of child labour, and that the children in Leech's celebrated *Ignorance and Want* in *A Christmas Carol* (1843) are standing in front of what appears to be a factory.'

This popular image from *Punch* is a sign that a wide reading and writing public at the time was exploring the complexity of the relations between production and consumption in the press and through the serial novel. In the cartoon, the upper world of consumption is quite cut off from the invisible world of labour and we see no two-way linking. In reality the connections and exchanges shown by print culture were numerous and complex and novels took their plots from the stories arising from the interface of the two spheres.⁶

Literature can be seen to do the work of the unveiling of injustice, demystifying splendour, showing the labour which underlies all seeming and seamless perfection and making visible the palm print of the labouring baker on the loaf (to use one of Marx's metaphors). It revealed the ghosts in the machines – human ghosts with their 'dead' or 'congealed labour'⁷, the flesh of society beneath the commodity and the human price of surplus value, but calling them different names and creating narrative to allow them to stand forth.

I will focus on two particular tropes often found in the Victorian novel and which rewrite to a certain extent the fundamentals of political economy: the first is the flux and flow of the labouring crowd and the second is the stillness of the commodity in 'still life' descriptions of objects, the *natures mortes* which the novel offers the reader in such abundance. I will take the tensions set up by Marx and Engels between production and consumption and show how the novel reflects but also reinvents these oppositions.

2. The Labouring Crowd: flow and stillness/life and death

How does the Victorian novel offer us the crowd and how does it resonate with or differ from Engels' vision of the faceless and mechanistic crowd, downtrodden but grimly

⁶ Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853) is of course structured on the hidden links between upper and lower spheres often in the form of blood ties as is *Oliver Twist* (1837) and *Great Expectations* (1861). For more visual interpretations of political economy and especially of capital and labour see 'Cheap Clothing' by John Leech, *Punch Almanack for 1845*, March, 1845, The Great Exhibition of commodities rather than labour in 'Specimens from Mr. Punch's Industrial Exhibition of 1850 (To be improved in 1851)' *Punch*, 1850. Jan-June, vol 18 : p.145 and even in much later visuals such as Hugo Gellert's *Karl Marx's 'Capital' in Lithographs*, Ray Long & Richard R. Smith: New York, 1934.

⁷ Marx K, Mandel E and Fowkes B, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy: V. 1*, Harmondsworth : Penguin Books in association with New Left Review 1990, p. 30.

determined with its faceless individuals cut off from each other. Engels continues his discourse on crowds in 'The Great Towns' in this way :

The brutal indifference, the unfeeling isolation of each in his private interest becomes the more repellent and offensive, the more these individuals are crowded together, within a limited space. And, however much one may be aware that this isolation of the individual, this narrow self-seeking is the fundamental principle of our society everywhere, it is nowhere so shamelessly barefaced, so self-conscious as just here in the crowding of the great city. The dissolution of mankind into monads, of which each one has a separate principle, the world of atoms, is here carried out to its utmost extreme.⁸

Engels describes both movement and stasis here in which stream and flow and 'crowding' are offset by a grim deathliness and stasis in which men are robbed of their humanity and become no more human than the steamers passing each other on the Thames described by Engels in the preceding paragraph. The movement is linked to the dynamic of capital. Like the plot of Balzac's *Eugénie Grandet*⁹, the miser keeps everything static whereas accumulation is 'achieved by the more acute capitalist by means of throwing his money again and again into circulation'¹⁰. Yet this seemingly dynamic living mass hides a deathly aspect: 'Human labour-power in its fluid state (...) creates value but is not itself value. It becomes value only in its coagulated state, in objective form. The value of the linen as a congealed mass of human labour can be expressed only as an objectivity' and this objectivity is 'abstract human labour'¹¹ which standardizes and homogenises human effort so taking the life-blood out of the labouring crowd. That life-blood (uncongealed) comes back in the revolutionary crowd whose 'labour' cannot be made abstract and assigned a value in the system of production.¹²

The flow of the crowds thus shows this dynamic element of capital (always on the move, thrown into circulation) but also leads to its essentially negative aspect (impotent, bound on a negative enterprise of alienated labour) as it 'congeals' in the

⁸ Engels, 68.

⁹ See David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's Capital*. London: Verso, 2010, 90, and his reading of Balzac on this point.

¹⁰ *Capital*, 254.

¹¹ *Capital*, 142.

¹² 'The raw materials also contain a certain amount of past values, as do the machines (...) brought into a new production process in the form of dead labour that living labour reanimates. So the labourer in effect preserves the values already congealed in raw materials (...) and does so by using them up (in productive consumption). Marx is going to make a great deal of the fact that the labourer does this favour for the capitalist gratis (Harvey, 128).

commodities it produces to become 'dead labour'.¹³ The deadly flow of vampires imagined in London in Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) who will 'amongst its teeming millions (...) create a new and ever-widening circle of semi-demons to batten on the helpless' is a powerful reminder of the French expression 'classes laborieuses, classes dangereuses' as well as the predatory nature of the consuming masses.¹⁴ The same flow of humanity is on its way home in Poe's 'The Man of the Crowd' (1840), going to the mills in *Mary Barton* (1848), striking in Gaskell's *North and South* (1854), amassing compound interest – as atomized and separate as Engels crowd cited above – in the first page of *Bleak House* (1853), present in the hungry crowds of Paris in *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859). The labouring flux of humanity at La Chapelle, La Goutte d'Or and Barbès-Rochechouart in Zola's *L'Assommoir* (1876) matches in their grim acceptance of their lot the English crowds as they produce the "whited sepulchre" of London described by Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* (1899) or create the upper world of bourgeois consumption in Gissing's *The Nether World* (1889). These crowds seem both to express the dynamic nature of capital and the drive for surplus value as well as their own defeat and destruction.¹⁵

The novel provides descriptions which suggest a dual or multiple nature in the crowd speaking of dead labour and a downtrodden proletariat but also, simultaneously, a reaction and rebellion. The two can co-habit. And a third term can be added: the working crowd can allow a revolutionary crowd to appear which is metamorphosing

¹³ Ernest Mandel gives the following description of surplus value: 'As said before, Marx's theory of classes is based on the recognition that in each class society, part of society (the ruling class) appropriates the social surplus product. But that surplus product can take three essentially different forms (or a combination of them). It can take the form of straightforward unpaid surplus labour, as in the slave mode of production, early feudalism or some sectors of the Asiatic mode of production (unpaid *corvée* labour for the Empire). It can take the form of goods appropriated by the ruling class in the form of use-values pure and simple (the products of surplus labour), as under feudalism when feudal rent is paid in a certain amount of produce (produce rent) or in its more modern remnants, such as sharecropping. And it can take a money form, like money-rent in the final phases of feudalism, and capitalist profits. Surplus-value is essentially just that: the *money form of the social surplus product* or, what amounts to the same, the money product of surplus labour. It has therefore a common root with all other forms of surplus product: unpaid labour.' Ernest Mandel, *Karl Marx*, VII. Marx's Theory of Surplus Value <https://www.marxists.org/archive/mandel/19xx/marx/> Originally published in John Eatwell, Murray Milgate & Peter Newman (eds.), *Marxian economics*, London 1990, 1-38.

¹⁴ Bram Stoker, *Dracula* [1897], Harmondworth : Penguin, 2003, 40.

¹⁵ In the visual arts the crowd offers the same compelling automation and resignation in the paintings of William Logsdail, in engravings by Gustave Doré depicting crowds over Westminster or Vauxhall bridge and later in early twentieth-century films of city life in literature such as Scheeler and Strand's *Manhatta*, or *Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt* by Walther Ruttmann. These crowds seem to mime the play of capital itself, of 'value in motion'.

into the beginnings of the docile crowd of consumerism.¹⁶ If political economy can suggest future rebellion or consumption as a possibility or inevitability, literature can make it happen before our eyes in a sort of palimpsest of images superimposed one on another. Mark Seem's introduction to Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* suggest a state of constant 'becoming' and potential and which is described as one of the properties of literature: 'What Nietzsche teaches, as a complement to Marx's theory of alienation, is how the history of mankind is the history of *becoming-reactive*'. This becoming or *devenir* unleashes 'forces that escape coding, scramble the codes, and flee in all directions' to make 'nomads (no habits, no territories)'.¹⁷ Victorian literature offers us visions of crowds animated by what Elias Canetti called the 'discharge' in a crowd when differences of all kinds disappear to leave an ignited, cohered and acting crowd seizing its opportunity to escape its bonds and effect change. Such is the case with *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) and *Barnaby Rudge* (1841). But we find it also in the form of a multitude and multiplicity of beings existing outside the circuits of institutional power be it religious or financial. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in *Empire* (2000) are influenced by Deleuze and Guattari in their creation of this 'multitude' of people.¹⁸

Literature offers us what Marx can only imagine as the future outcome of his theory and analysis: the uprising and revolution as ultimate forms of collectivity. The latter is also as an escape from the tyranny of the isolated bourgeois individual which has been discussed by many post-marxist thinkers:

Once we forget about our egos a non-neurotic form of politics becomes possible, where singularity and collectivity are no longer at odds with each other, and where collective expressions of desire are possible. Such a politics does not seek to regiment individuals according to a totalitarian

¹⁶ The revolutionary crowd in *A Tale of Two Cities* is imagined by Sydney Carton as part of a bright future of Haussmanian consumption. See Thornton, 'Paris and London superimposed : urban seeing and new political space in Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Etudes anglaises*, juillet-septembre 2012, 65/3, 313.

¹⁷ Introduction by Mark Seem to Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, xvii and xxi.

¹⁸ Labour still flows in our cities in the form of bodies but flow is now also virtual traffic a cyber space of labour sold across the globe. Raw materials are also virtual – and labour can mean the reconfiguration of information redistributed. The commodities we now prize – our smartphones, designer clothes, applications, video games – are still congealed labour and hide the physical effort of manufacture (the tide of workers who made them) even more expertly than in the nineteenth-century.

system of norms, but to de-normalize and de-individualize through a multiplicity of new, collective arrangements against power.¹⁹

Mark Seem is quoting R.D. Laing who in *The Politics of Experience*, examines the panic felt by certain individuals at the loss of self in the collective: 'Ego loss is the experience of all mankind, of the primal man, of Adam and perhaps even [a journey] further into the beings of animals, vegetables and minerals'.²⁰ A collective subjectivity is hinted to produce in fact many more connections: 'The life that's in him will manifest itself in growth, and growth is an endless, eternal process. The process is everything'.²¹ Literature offers the reader this vision and unfolding of a process.²²

In *North and South* the workers refuse to continue turning the factory machines and reject the excuse given to them for their reduced wages: 'the state of trade' – 'their cue to beat us down, to swell their fortunes' (Gaskell 135).²³ The crowd becomes just like in *A Tale of Two Cities* a force of water, a sea or wave : 'a stream of human beings' (Gaskell 171), '[an] unusual heaving among the mass of people', 'low distant roar', 'roll of the tempest (...) slow surging wave (...) threatening crest' (Gaskell 172). The flow of docile bodies as Foucault called them, walking to their work is interrupted by a new noise, a new human voice in the face of the silent machines which translates a new form of engagement or disengagement: 'There was no near sound, - no steam-engine at work with beat and pant, - no click of machinery, or mingling and clashing of sharp voices; but far away, the ominous gathering roar, deep-clamouring' (Gaskell 173). We are reminded of Marx's distant murmur of the revolution in his *Communist Manifesto*. As the crowd of workers no longer drilled by servitude to the machines but inventing their own rhythm approaches the house of the factory owners the description focuses momentarily on the goods displayed in the salon of the house, covered in dust sheets like cadavers. The dead or congealed labour in these manufactured objects is

¹⁹ Seem, xxi.

²⁰ R. D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience*, New York : Ballantine Books, 1971, 96.

²¹ Seem, xxii.

²² Victorian literature offers us the crowd at the service of industry and consumption but also the crowd which as a collective reading subjectivity was being formed by the new print culture and mass reading and shared encyclopaedias of images and text from advertising and the popular press. This was an imagined community and a virtual crowd acting as a multitude which reads and consumes but also writes back and produces. A reading crowd which 'ignites' and acts constantly enlarging its borders a sort of new acting collectivity imagined by Agamben as 'the coming community'. If Marx imagined communism and new arrangements of economic collectivity then readers and writers staged a new collective on the walls of towns and in the pages of newspapers.

²³ Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, Oxford : World's Classics, 1982.

suddenly and alarmingly given voice and life in the form of the forces of production now unleashed in the form of an angry living crowd. : 'blinds covered the glass (...) a gray grim light (...) threw all the shadows wrong, and combined with the green-tinged upper light to make even Margaret's own face, as she caught it in the mirrors, look ghastly and wan' (Gaskell 173). Deathliness is transferred onto objects and consumers (the middle-class Margaret) in the face of the 'demoniac desire of some terrible wild beast for the food that is withheld from its ravening' (Gaskell 176). Like *Tale of Two Cities* and *Barnaby Rudge*, *North and South* the flows of labour escape their boundaries and transfer themselves – working flows become the flow of blood from Margaret's cheek. Yet the soldiers 'wakened them up from their trance of passion' (Gaskell 179) and cut short their violent outpouring: 'in order that property should be protected, and that the will of the proprietor might cut to his end, clean and sharp as a sword' (Gaskell 188). The crowd in all its states is shown here, unfolding and changing as it collides with the rules of capital and the state.

3. The novel's lesson on the commodity

From the flow of the crowd we might now return to the seeming stillness of commodities that for Marx are always ambiguous. Goods are also 'congealed labour' so utterly still and deathly, displayed in a mausoleum way in home or as public display. In Marx's section on 'The Fetichism of Commodities' they are also strangely animated, maverick and transcendent with a 'brain' albeit wooden and capable of standing 'on [their] head'.²⁴ Commodities are part of the riskier forms of capital. Thomas Piketty underlines the difference between 'quiet capital or risky investments'²⁵ the quiet rents on land possessed by the leisured classes enabling the purchase of commodities that we see in Austen or Balzac and on the contrary or high risk investments in new schemes which ruin Balzac's César Birotteau or cause suicide in Dickens's *Little Dorrit* often linked to factories, mills and a labour force. 'Capital is never quiet: it is risk-oriented and entrepreneurial, at least at its inception, yet it always tends to transform itself into rents as it accumulates in large enough amounts – that is its vocation, its logical destination'.

²⁴ Marx, *Capital*, 163-164.

²⁵ Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, Cambridge Mass. and London, England : The Bellknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014, 115.

Piketty asks if ‘modern capital [has] become more “dynamic” and less “rent-seeking”?’ but concludes that there is still a strong drive towards safe capital²⁶

Alive and magical as well as dead and the product of labour, Victorian novelists quickly illustrate that these ‘still’ objects are full of life and animated by their past histories, their inception and their production. Possessions become commodities-with-histories under the pen of the novelist and are made to speak of their creation and the different forms of consumption they have undergone. The eighteenth-century ‘Tales told by objects’ allowed commodities to speak of their different owners and the way they were bought and sold. Mrs. Thornton in Gaskell’s *North and South* displays in her drawing room commodities which speak out brassily and brashly of the English labour they are supposed to suppress while Margaret’s home is full of gifts from the British Empire – with their more erased foreign labour – or labour made unreadable due to their unfamiliar exotic aesthetics²⁷. Gaskell quickly probes beneath this shiny surface of the object, as Marx does, to find out what has been sacrificed by the worker to allow the commodity to exist. We find in Gaskell’s interiors the sacrificed ‘ease, liberty, happiness’ of the worker as described by Adam Smith.²⁸ Gissing goes one step further in the 1880’s and shows objects being made by workers in the hidden space of production as Marx called it – ‘the Nether World’ in Gissing’s universe – where the chemicals and instruments needed for commodity production mark and maim the bodies of the sweated workers. Each commodity made by the hands of the working class labourers is seen to maim and cut. If the hand of the worker leaves no print on the commodity, traces of manufacture are left clearly on the bodies of Gissing’s workers. Some ironic truths or paradoxes are thus powerfully revealed within the Victorian novel: objects which seem ‘still’ as if preserved from change – perfect in their iconic detachment from the human body – are in fact in a process of constant transformation and flux.

In *The Political Unconscious* Fredric Jameson uses the term ‘ideologeme’ to describe the way literature contains ideological knots carrying political and economic

²⁶ Piketty, 116.

²⁷ Lenin insists on the great European empire and the consuming processes of imperialism as forming the last stage of capitalism. See Lenin, Vladimir Il’ich, *Imperialism, the last stage of Capitalism*, London: Communist Party of Great Britain, 1926. He calls the division of the world by the capitalists ‘the struggle for economic territory’ (78).

²⁸ See Marx quoting Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*.

values.²⁹ We find many such knots in Gaskell's *North and South* which sets the production of the North against the consumption of the South. It is only thanks to a particular perception from the consuming South (in the form of Margaret Hale) that we can 'see' the production of the North. In a perverse twist we find that the commodities of the South are suddenly visible to us thanks to the new perception Margaret Hale gains as she spends time in the North and begins to understand it. Margaret Hale's gaze is formed by the pretty things which her family has always possessed and which she did not of course herself manufacture. Objects are not sweat and blood to her but signs and codes in a system of representation and social hierarchy. The North, on the other hand, offers brute matter to be transformed into commodities which then transcend their environment and transcend the workers who made them to enter the magical world of exchange value and the 'fantastic form of a relation between things'. Marx says that it is 'the ultimate money-form of the world of commodities that actually conceals, instead of disclosing, the social character of private labour, and the social relations between the individual producers' but also says that as soon as we descend into the history of their production their true nature is revealed:

The whole mystery of commodities, all the magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labours long as they take the form of commodities, vanishes therefore, as soon as we come to other forms of production.³⁰

More than the love affair between Margaret Hale and John Thornton, the cotton mill owner, it is the friendship between Thornton's worker Higgins and Margaret which most clearly brings North and South into confrontation and sets up a consideration of the status of goods. Higgins says to Margaret: 'North and South has both met and made kind o' friends in this big smoky place' (Gaskell 73).

When Margaret arrives in the North she is struck by the palpable difference in appearance of the place: 'To use a Scotch word, every thing looked more "purposelike"' (Gaskell 58). Austerity marks descriptions of the North and distinguishes it from the profusion and opulence of the South and use-value is set against decorative considerations and exchange-value. Less wood and leather and more iron in the

²⁹ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982. Print.

³⁰ Marx K, Mandel E and Fowkes B, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy: V. 1*, Harmondsworth : Penguin Books in association with New Left Review 1990, 163-4.

harnesses for horses and any 'luxury of pensiveness' (Gaskell 59) will soon have to be given up for a future more 'stern and iron' (ibid.). Workers houses have few objects and Higgins explains that going to the 'public house' is not only for drinking but to fight the monotony of life with its empty rooms and repetitive work. The worker gets to see things he sees nowhere else: 'to make their blood flow quicker, and more lively, and see things they never see at no other time – pictures, and looking-glass, and such like' (Gaskell 136). To gain access to the world of manufactured goods they never can see otherwise and from which they are barred. The worker sees himself in another world through the looking glass, so to speak, sees represented self or landscapes and enters a symbolic universe to escape the harsh brutish matter and to be part of a world of the signification of things. When Margaret describes her own salon we see a striking difference:

(...) a warm, sober breadth of colouring, well relieved by the dear old Helstone chintz-curtains and chair covers. An open davenport stood in the window opposite the door; in the other there was a stand, with a tall white china vase, from which drooped wreaths of English ivy, pale-green birch, and copper-coloured beech leaves. Pretty baskets of work stood about in different places: and books, not cared for on account of their binding solely, lay on one table, as if recently put down. Behind the door was another table, decked out for tea, with a white table-cloth, on which flourished the cocoa-nut cakes, and a basket piled with oranges and ruddy American apples, heaped on leaves. (Gaskell 79)

The human body is everywhere present in this description as is nature and organic presence as if the objects grew here naturally: 'drooped', 'stood about', 'piled', 'heaped'. The writing places the objects within bourgeois ritual ('dear old'). We are in a fantasy of the English countryside but also within the Empire where many of the goods hail from. We are invited into this display in which the words 'warm' and 'breadth' speak of the body and 'warm breath' an open motherly space which beckons the reader into its ideological net and is indeed a trap which John Thornton describes as typical of the South:

I would rather be a man toiling, suffering – nay, failing and successful – here, than lead a dull, prosperous life in the old worn grooves of what you call more aristocratic society down in the South, with their slow days of careless ease. One may be clogged with honey and unable to rise and fly. (Gaskell 81).

In the light of such a reading the same description of Margaret's salon, read again, becomes suffocating and cloying like a still life with too many objects and 'clogged' by an

aesthetic excess which veils the economic truths behind the scene. Mrs. Thornton's salon, by contrast, does the opposite and speaks of the labour involved in the objects displayed:

It seemed as though no one had been in it since the day when the furniture was bagged up with as much care as if the house was to be overwhelmed with lava, and discovered a thousand years hence. The walls were pink and gold; the pattern on the carpet represented bunches of flowers on a light ground, but it was carefully covered up in the centre by a linen drugget, glazed and colourless. The window-curtains were lace; each chair and sofa had its own particular veil of netting, or knitting. Great alabaster groups occupied every flat surface, safe from dust under their glass shades. (...) a large circular table, with smartly bound books arranged at regular intervals round the circumference of its polished surface, like gaily-coloured spokes of a wheel. Everything reflected light, nothing absorbed it. The whole room had a painfully spotted, spangled, speckled look about it, which impressed Margaret so unpleasantly that she was hardly conscious of the peculiar cleanliness required to keep everything so white and pure in such an atmosphere, or of the trouble that must be willingly expended to secure that effect of icy, snowy discomfort. Wherever she looked there was evidence of care and labour, but not care and labour to procure ease, to help on habits of tranquil home employment; solely to ornament, and then to preserve ornament from dirt and destruction. (Gaskell 112)

If Margaret's salon erases the workers and their toil, the above description clearly expresses the importance of work and the idea of merchandise rather than decoration. In Margaret's description of her own living space exchange-value is erased and in its place is a fantasy of pastoral use-value and a pre-industrial world. Here, however, objects are used to symbolise capital – and the surplus value directly coming from the mill a few hundred yards away. Mrs. Thornton does not seek to veil the link between work and commodity, on the contrary. The harsh, shiny impersonal matter means that these objects are exchangeable and that value is not hidden. They are not family heirlooms but recently acquired goods thanks to recent profits from recent hard work.

Every cover was taken off, and the apartment blazed forth in yellow silk damask and a brilliantly-flowered carpet. Every corner seemed filled up with ornament, until it became a weariness to the eye, and presented a strange contrast to the bald ugliness of the look-out into the great mill-yard, where wide folding gates were thrown open for the admission of carriages. The mill loomed high on the left-hand side of the windows, casting a shadow from its many stories, which darkened the summer evening before its time. (Gaskell 160)

Mrs. Thornton likes the sound of the mill and considers it a healthy normal sound: '(...) as for the continual murmur of the work people, it disturbs me no more than the humming of a hive of bees » (161). Her son John Thornton and his fellow mill owners exults in the triumph over the natural world:

(...) exultation in the sense of power which seemed to defy the old limits of possibility, in a kind of fine intoxication (...) forgetfulness of themselves in the present, in their anticipated triumphs over all inanimate matter at some future time. (Gaskell 69)

Mrs. Thornton criticises the messy homeliness of Margaret's salon: 'The room altogether was full of knick-knacks, which must take a long time to dust; and time to people of limited income' (Gaskell 96). She hates embroidery 'flimsy, useless work' and prefers the Promethean power of the steam hammer and its power of expansion and compression.

If these descriptions offer the reader differing perceptions of the commodity in the bourgeois home and different reflections of political economy, the home of the workers express the inequalities of possession and the utter alienation of the worker from the fruits of his or her labour. Peter Weiss's political novel *The Aesthetics of Resistance* (1975) constantly compares the bourgeois home with the sparse accommodation of workers:

Here in the apartment in Warnsdorf, the difference became insistently clear between our life and bourgeois existence, which had a lavish atmospheric coloring, which had solid and heavily traditional relationships to furnishings and ornaments, to suites of rooms and gardens, while we found ourselves in a waiting room here, a transitional room, which could easily and quickly be forsaken and forgotten (Weiss 115).³¹

Commodities constantly elude the grasp of workers' hands and can only be captured in writing by those who are in the habit of possessing them:

Since from *Wilhelm Meister* to *Buddenbrooks* the world that set the tone in literature was seen through the eyes of those who owned it, the household could be captured with such love for details, as could the personality in the richness of all stages of development. Ownership moulded the attitude that was taken toward things, while for us, to whom the living room never

³¹ Peter Weiss, *The Aesthetics of Resistance*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel, introduction Fredric Jameson et glossaire de Robert Cohen, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005. Original title *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands* (1975).

belonged and for whom the place of residence was a matter of chance, the only elements that carried weight were absence, deficiency, lack of property. (...) our life story consisted more of figuring out how to get through the next few days and weeks, how to pay the rent, than of registering objects among which we were barely tolerated. (Weiss 116)

The notion of objects which barely tolerate the presence of humans is interesting for the Victorian novel and its representation of political economy. Space and things always belong to other people. The objects are on loan, deficient and fleeting and the walls offer little protection from the world outside since they too are on a precarious loan. The outside world violates the interior world bringing noise, dust and cold with no thick curtains or solid stone to soften the effect of the intrusion. Margaret says that it is in the houses of the poor workers she visits that she 'hears' the world for the first time and understands it for the threatening and invasive place it is if you have no cushion of money to protect you.

Over exposure to sound is in fact a form of 'sensory privation' since nothing is chosen and brings with it an 'enforced lack of knowledge'. Fredric Jameson expresses this idea in the following way:

Yet in such a situation the signals from the outside become magnified, and their receivers undergo an unusual training in the decipherment of signs along with the apprehension of dangers. This is the perceptual world of *The Aesthetics of Resistance*; and we will have to see to what degree this simultaneous impoverishment and heightened sensibility figures in the larger picture of *Bildung* and proletarian cultural formation the novel means to propose.³²

The workers and the poor in the novels of Dickens, Gaskell, Gissing, Zola, Balzac often have to guess at the world they cannot share, the sensible world which is not given to them and remains indecipherable. They must perform a blind mapping to guess the contours of the world and things they are deprived of.

North and South directly addresses this discontinuity and the unpredictable vicissitudes of the market: the manufacture of one piece of merchandise implies the suppression of another, one worker taken on is another laid off. Thornton expresses this vicious and relentless causality in the following way:

(...) the Americans are getting their yarns so into the general market, that our only chance is producing them at a lower rate. If we can't, we may shut up shop at once, and hands and masters go alike on tramp (...) (Gaskell 144).

³² Jameson's introduction to Weiss, xxx.

The worker is thus pushed aside by the new product on the market and objects and raw goods rule the market rather than human concerns. The conflict between the objects in Margaret's drawing room, carefully suppressed in polite society, are here made manifest and as readers we are asked to reconsider the seemingly bucolic still life of her pleasantly jumbled possessions to see that the American apples were in fact vying with the Spanish oranges and the chintz doing battle with Indian silks. This war of goods on the market is more immediately manifest in Mrs. Thornton's salon where prices and matter are known and not hidden by their mistress. Similarly, if John Thornton reacts to the realities of the market with a soldier's strategy understanding the direct physical consequences of the price of raw goods, Margaret has recourse to metaphysics and religion:

What a vain show Life seemed! How insubstantial, and flickering, and flitting! It was as if from some aerial belfry, high up above the stir and jar of the earth, there was a bell continually, tolling, "All are shadows! – all are passing! (...)" (Gaskell 170).

Such an experience of transience, while surprising to Margaret, is the common lot of the cotton workers; the objects in Margaret's salon suggest the continuity traditionally associated with the bourgeoisie while discontinuity is the lot of Higgins – strikes, nomadic displacement, lack of landmarks and stable possessions. Fredric Jameson suggests that the suffering of the worker would gain impact if imagined under the sign of continuity rather than discontinuity:

(...) we do not often see the history of the oppressed classes as a continuity: continuities are always on the side of "culture", that is to say, on the side of the modes of living of the dominant classes. To invert these ideological priorities is thus not necessarily to revive an idealist conception of history, so much as to administer a materialist shock to just such categories and stereotypes (Jameson in Weiss, xlv).

Benjamin too suggests this discursive resolution 'For the materialist dialectician discontinuity must be the regulative idea concerning the tradition of the ruling classes (the bourgeoisie), continuity that of the oppressed classes (the proletariat)'.³³

³³ Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Frankfurt : Suhrkamp, 1982, 459-60. My translation.

Conclusion

Literature therefore attempts to redress the balance in society and play around with alternatives which might suggest solutions to inequality. If there is inequality there is also great energy and dynamism expressed in the novel about capital and foreign markets and which mirrors in many ways Engels' admiration of the drive, excitement and splendour of London. What Ernest Mandel calls 'the ruthless and irresistible impulse to growth'³⁴ and which is at the heart of Marxist critiques of the commodity and its resultant accumulation of capital – is also a dynamic force in the realist novel. Nineteenth-century fiction is profoundly in tune with the acceleration and ignition provided by capital, its overseas markets and its capacity to move individuals on, beyond, away from the local and the particular. The novel speaks not only of geographical movement beyond the village or small town – Lucien de Rubempré in Balzac's *Illusions perdues* (1843) Julien Sorel in Stendahl's *Le Rouge et le Noir* (1831) or Pip in *Great Expectations* (1861) – but creates fantasies and hallucinations of freedom which galvanize thought processes and suggest possible imaginative outlets and innovative escape from class ties. Although we read of errant homelessness (movement without pleasure or purpose as seen in Dickens, Gissing, Zola or Hardy) the reader is also asked to engage with a moving beyond the self and bodily material constraints often combined with a movement outside of the machine of production.

Gaskell's *North and South* (1855) contains several moments of such exhilaration (notably a dream sequence containing an experience of weightlessness and timelessness expressing pure liberty and potential). We might also consider the opening pages of Dickens's *Edwin Drood* (1870)– an acceleration in time and space, double vision, an out-of-body experience, an extrapolation from daily life offered by opium – a commodity brought in from the outside (from India through China and back to Britain). These Deleuzian 'lines of flight' are 'bolts of pent-up energy that break through the cracks in a system of control and shoot off on the diagonal'. They show up the spaces that exist beyond what is socially known and acceptable, the 'limits of what exists'.³⁵

³⁴ Mandel in Marx, 11.

³⁵ Philosophy for change - Ideas that make a difference, 'Lines of flight: Deleuze and nomadic creativity' <https://philosophyforchange.wordpress.com/2013/06/18/lines-of-flight-deleuze-and-nomadic-creativity/>

This remaking of the world through creative new trajectories is perhaps what the novel can do most to combat inequality and to address Ruskin's notion of 'illth' which he coined to oppose the notion of wealth.³⁶ The novel proposes an aesthetic alternative to political economy's structures, a form of poetic transcendence over the machine of production and consumption. Love of beauty and the realm of the possible are the creative alternatives to 'illth'; an ongoing renewal and artistic transformation of the world which Ruskin so cherished.

³⁶ See *Unto this Last* [1860], London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1921, 97.