Literature and the Economics of Liberty

SPONTANEOUS ORDER IN CULTURE

Edited by
PAUL A. CANTOR and STEPHEN COX

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LUDWIG VON MISES

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mises.org

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Preface

This book explores the possibility that forms of economic thinking sympathetic to capitalism may be able to illuminate our understanding of literature in new ways. For example, the idea that free competition spurs creativity and progress in commerce and industry is well-established and well-documented. Might it be possible that competition is a healthy force in the cultural realm as well? In the introductory essay, Paul Cantor argues that in the case of serialized novels, the highly competitive nature of the publishing industry in nineteenth-century Britain in some ways actually improved the quality of the literature produced. This notion would seem obvious to most economists, but some literary critics may find it difficult to accept. Ever since the Romantics, commerce and culture have been viewed as antithetical, and many authors and critics have hoped to shield literature from the supposedly harmful effects of a competitive marketplace. Marxist literary theory has only deepened what was originally an aristocratic contempt for and distrust of market principles and practices. And in the field of literature and economics, Marxism and its offshoots, such as cultural materialism and the new historicism, have achieved a virtual monopoly in the contemporary academy.

Like any monopoly, this Marxist domination needs to be challenged. In the academy, just as in the economy, people who face no competition grow complacent, failing to question their assumptions or to adapt to new developments. There have of course been many attacks over the years on Marxist approaches to literature, but they have generally come from critics who simply

reject economic discussions of literature in any form, and support a purely aesthetic approach that disdains any consideration of the marketplace. To our knowledge, this is the first collection of essays that accepts the idea that economics is relevant to the study of literature, but offers free market principles, rather than Marxist, as the means of relating the two fields. As the introductory essay explains, we have turned specifically (though not exclusively) to what is known as the Austrian School of economics, represented chiefly by the writings of its most important theorists, Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek. We argue that this brand of economics, which focuses on the freedom of the individual actor and the subjectivity of values, is more suited to the study of literature and artistic creativity than a materialist, determinist, and collectivist doctrine such as Marxism. The Austrian School is the most humane form of economics we know, and the most philosophically informed—hence we regard it as the most relevant to humanistic studies. Still, most of the principles we draw upon—the advantages of private property and free competition, the disadvantages of central planning and collectivism, the value of sound money and the dangers of inflation—are not unique to the Austrian School but are embraced by a wide range of economists today.

Marxists themselves have increasingly been struggling with their Marxism, and trying to moderate its economic determinism. This is especially true in the field of Cultural Studies, where in recent decades scholars who basically associate themselves with Marxism have nevertheless begun to develop an understanding of the virtues of the marketplace. They have broken with the old Frankfurt School model of consumers as the passive dupes of an all-powerful capitalist marketing system. In spite of their anti-capitalist leanings, some scholars have found that they cannot appreciate and celebrate popular culture without to some extent appreciating and celebrating the commercial world that produces it. We applaud these efforts, but suggest that these scholars could make more progress if they finally broke with Marx. His materialistic, deterministic, and mechanistic view of reality stamps him as very much a man of the mid-nineteenth century. A great deal has been discovered in the sciences since Marx's day, including the science of economics, and our model of

reality is no longer a steam engine. The more we have come to understand the nature of complex systems and what is called their non-linearity, the more unpredictable they appear to be, and that is above all true of social systems. Marx's laws of inevitable economic development now look like relics of the age of Newtonian physics, Hegelian historicism, and Comtean positivism. Modern discoveries in fields such as physics, biology, neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and chaos theory have stressed the importance of contingency in nature and thus opened up a space for indeterminacy and human freedom, especially in the realm of culture. Austrian economics, with its emphasis on chance, uncertainty, and unpredictability in human life, is far more in tune than Marxism with these trends in modern science.

How might thinking in terms of free market principles give us fresh insights into the relation of literature and economics? To begin with, the free market itself provides a valuable model—it at first appears chaotic but upon closer inspection it turns out to have an underlying order, a self-organizing order that never achieves a static perfection, but is always working out imperfections over time. The idea of the market as a self-correcting feedback mechanism helps explain how commercial publishing could actually nurture the development of literature. Moreover, several of the essays in this book use the model of what Hayek calls "'spontaneous order" to rethink the issue of literary form. The evolution of language and the growth of cities are good examples of what Hayek means by "spontaneous order"—human activities and developments that are not centrally planned and commanded but rather involve the free and uncoordinated interaction of individuals who may be aiming at their own limited goals but nevertheless end up producing a larger social good that only appears to have been designed in advance. Languages, for example, are profoundly ordered, but not because anyone planned them out in advance. A language develops its rich vocabulary and complex syntax over time in an evolutionary process to which all the speakers of the language contribute, usually without even knowing that they are doing so. The precise determination of the meanings of words and the rules of grammar is a late cultural development, and involves *ex*

post facto reasoning. Lexicographers and grammarians discover and articulate the logic that a language develops on its own and without their help.

Language, in fact, often looks messy to lexicographers and grammarians, but their attempts to clean it up and regularize it usually fail as popular usage overwhelms academic attempts to dictate linguistic order. Efforts to design a more logical language from the ground up, such as Esperanto, have even less success when their inventors try to get people actually to use the artificial language in their daily lives. Academicians want language to achieve a static perfection, but fortunately real languages continue to evolve and develop new possibilities. As the history of Latin shows, only a dead language can truly please academicians. A living language never settles into an equilibrium, a fixed form that follows the grammarian's paradigms perfectly. The irregular verb is the lifeblood of language. Language is a tribute to the creativity of human beings and their ability to cooperate in productive ways without advance planning or supervision by so-called experts in the field.

The way languages resist attempts by central authorities such as national academies to regulate them illustrates what Hayek means by "spontaneous order."[1] In his *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, he discusses the evolution of British common law in similar terms. He argues that common law judges do not make the law; rather they discover and articulate the principles and rules of conduct that human beings develop gradually over the years on their own in the course of their social interaction. The economic marketplace itself is Hayek's primary example of spontaneous order, involving unregulated and apparently chaotic activity that nevertheless results in a deeper and more complex order than any individual or set of individuals would be able to plan in advance. Drawing upon this idea of a deeper order beneath an

[1]For an excellent discussion of language as a form of spontaneous order, and a Hayekian critique of "artificial languages," see Richard Adelstein, "Language Orders," *Constitutional Political Economy* 7 (1996): 221–38. For a popular account of linguistics that stresses the "spontaneous" character of language, see John McWhorter, *The Power of Babel* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003).

apparent disorder, several of our essays argue for the possibility of a more open-ended and looser conception of literary form than the one championed by the New Criticism, with its ideal of the perfectly integrated work of literature. Cantor's essay on Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*, for example, and Thomas Peyser's essay on Whitman's *Song of Myself* suggest that the chaotic appearance of these works mirrors the paradoxically ordered disorder of the commercial societies they portray.

In our effort to secure a place for freedom in the understanding of culture, "spontaneous order" is in many ways the central concept of this book.[2] We show that works of literature often have the "look" of a spontaneous order, that they can be generated in a process of spontaneous order, and that they sometimes celebrate the spontaneous order of society, especially in its economic form, the marketplace. Indeed, if one believes in the value of economic freedom, one will look for authors who share this attitude, and not dismiss them, as Marxist critics tend to do, as mere captives of capitalist ideology. Several of our essays explore the ways in which authors have celebrated the vitality, flexibility,

[2]The phenomenon Hayek labels "spontaneous order" is being investigated in a wide range of fields today, from biology to cosmology to cybernetics, and under a variety of names, including "emergence," "complex adaptive systems," "self-organization," and "collective intelligence." For a concise and elegant statement of the idea of spontaneous order under the rubric "organized complexity," see Warren Weaver, "Science and Complexity," *American Scientist* 36 (1948): 536. For a sampling of books exploring what Hayek calls "spontaneous order" in such fields as urban history, software development, and biological evolution, see Manuel De Landa, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (New York: Zone, 1997), Pierre Lévy, *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace*, Robert Bononno, trans. (Cambridge, Mass.: Perseus, 1999), Steven Johnson, *Emergence: The Connected Lives of Ants, Brains, Cities, and Software* (New York: Scribner, 2007), Michael Shermer, *The Mind of the Market: Compassionate Apes, Competitive Humans, and Other Tales from Evolutionary Economics* (New York: Henry Holt, 2008), especially chaps. 1-4, and Cass R. Sunstein, *Infotopia: How Many Minds Produce Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). Some of these books refer to Hayek; some of them do not; but they all in one way or another deal with questions of self-organization and what Hayek calls the dispersed nature of knowledge in complex societies.

and productivity of free markets. We have found such celebrations in unexpected places. Darío Fernández-Morera's essay on *Don Quijote* reveals Cervantes portraying the advantages of economic freedom as early as the beginning of the seventeenth century—long before Adam Smith is supposed to have "discovered" the free market. Stephen Cox's essay on Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* shows why a woman had special reasons for supporting economic freedom. Contrary to the common idea that women should view capitalism as oppressive, Cox demonstrates that Cather found it liberating—both for her characters and herself as an author. Chandran Kukathas's essay on Ben Okri shows that a favorable treatment of market activity can be found, not only in classic works of the Western canon, but also in works of non-Western literature. Beginning with Cervantes and Jonson at the fountainhead of European literature, this book fittingly ends with a contemporary Nigerian author. It thus reminds us that economic freedom is not the exclusive discovery or preserve of Western nations, but potentially the common heritage of human beings everywhere.

Marxist critics often practice what is known as the hermeneutics of suspicion—that is, they question the motives of authors and seek to explain why some would ever choose to support capitalism. If one believes that socialism is the best economic system and that capitalism oppresses humanity, one would of course not accept a favorable portrayal of capitalism at face value. But once one adopts a free market perspective, the positions are reversed and one begins to wonder why so many authors have supported socialism. One might then turn the tables on Marxism and apply its technique of ideology critique to socialist authors, questioning whether they may have dubious motives for attacking capitalism. Several of the essays in this volume explore the issue of what Mises calls the anti-capitalistic mentality. Cox in his essay on Conrad's *The Secret Agent* and Cantor in his essay on Wells's *The Invisible Man* pose the question of whether anti-capitalistic intellectuals have their own kind of parochial class interest. Both essays argue that these intellectuals believe that they are not sufficiently respected and rewarded under capitalism and thus turn to socialism as the only way to give the cultural elite they think

they belong to its "rightful" place in society—namely, ruling over the ignorant masses.

The free market perspective also leads to reinterpreting economic history, and hence literary history as well, insofar as it reflects or even seeks to portray economic history. In the standard view of economic history, especially in Marxist versions, capitalism is blamed for much of the suffering of humanity. But Austrians and many other economists would counter that capitalism has vastly improved the human condition and that many of the evils laid at its doorstep are really the result of government interference with the normal functioning of the market. The essays on Cervantes and Shelley show how these authors directed their criticism against the war, tax, and monopoly policies of their governments; the Shelley and Mann essays look at how these authors trace the economic suffering of their day to governmental tampering with the money supply and the inevitable—and corrosive—inflation that results. Cantor's revisionist essay on Shelley, for example, shows that the Romantic poet blamed the misery of his day, not on the Industrial Revolution as is commonly supposed, but on the mercantilist and antimarket policies of the British government.

These are just some of the ways in which a free market perspective might shed new light on literature and literary history. In relating literature and economics, everything depends on the form of economics one uses, and, contrary to what most literary scholars seem to believe, alternatives to Marxist concepts are available. Our essays demonstrate how fruitful and liberating concepts of economic freedom can be in the understanding of culture. Some of these essays have been published in preliminary versions, but even they have been extensively revised and rewritten for this volume. As the work of a group of individualists, this book was not centrally planned, and the topics of the essays emerged independently over the years. Thus we do not claim to offer a systematic and comprehensive treatment of our subject. We have neglected many interesting points at which literature and economics intersect, including some of the most frequently discussed texts in this field, such as Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Goethe's *Faust*. Nevertheless we hope that we have spontaneously produced a book that offers a well-balanced coverage of

its subject. Most of the essays deal with fiction, but one deals with drama and another with poetry—demonstrating that our approach works across the boundaries of genre. The historical range of the essays is broad, beginning with the early seventeenth century and extending almost to the present day. The geographic scope of the essays is also wide ranging; they deal with authors from six different countries and three different continents.

We hasten to point out that what we are offering in this book is only one approach to literature. Although our subject is large and important, this book is in a sense narrowly targeted—we are developing an alternative to Marxist and quasi-Marxist analyses of the relation of literature and economics. We are not monomaniacally claiming that in Austrian economics we have found the master key to all literature. We readily acknowledge that there are many other valid ways of discussing literature, including purely aesthetic approaches that have nothing to say about economic matters. As we will show, one of the differences between Austrian economics and Marxism is that it does not present itself as a master science, with an underlying explanation for all phenomena. Thus our reliance on Austrian economics allows us to avoid the reductionist tendencies of readings of literature that are rooted in Marxist assumptions. The emphasis on freedom and individualism in the Austrian School means that when we analyze authors in an economic context, we do not treat them as representatives of a particular ideology, class consciousness, or historical moment. We look at each author as an individual and seek for his or her distinctive ideas. If we find specific economic ideas in the authors we discuss, we believe that the ideas are genuinely those of the authors and worthy of being taken seriously and treated with respect.

Some may accuse us of being just as ideologically motivated and biased as Marxist critics—simply trying to impose a free-market perspective on authors where Marxists have been imposing socialist ideas. However, our analyses are based on detailed, careful readings of individual texts treated in their integrity—in sharp contrast to the Marxist tendency to disregard authorial intention and, in the style of Fredric Jameson, to seek to ferret out the "political unconscious" in literary works. Our readings are

not Marxist-style interpretations with a free market twist. Although our claims about the relevance of Austrian economics to literary criticism are novel, our mode of interpretation is actually quite traditional, with a respect for conventional canons of literary evidence and procedures that could generally be described as close reading. Our Austrian perspective helps make our readings concrete and practical, rather than abstract and theoretical, and it keeps us focused on what the authors have to say as individuals and not in Marxist fashion on how they reflect a class position (the closest we come to a Marxist-style reading is Cantor's essay on Wells, which turns Marxist ideology critique back on itself).

In one respect we have set ourselves an especially difficult task in this book. The majority of our readers, particularly those coming from a literary background, are unlikely to be familiar with Austrian economics. Unlike Marxist critics, who can assume at least a passing acquaintance with Marxism among their readers, we have had to spend more time than is usual in a book of literary criticism expounding some of the principles of Austrian economics. In addition, to be fair to the schools of criticism we are challenging, we have had to demonstrate our familiarity with their work and also with Marxist economics itself. As a result, the scholarly apparatus of some of these essays may at times seem excessive. To the targets of our critique, however, it may appear insufficient. We have tried to strike a balance—to document our claims adequately, while not overburdening our readers with scholarship. We have used the notes to point our readers to the literature of Austrian economics, especially the writings of Mises and Hayek, where they can find the full articulation of the principles we refer to and rely on. Books of Marxist or quasi-Marxist literary criticism do not contain a full exposition of Marxist economics. Similarly, this book is not a treatise on economics. It is fundamentally a book of literary criticism, and we cannot replay the whole dispute between Marxism and Austrian economics. Nevertheless, we are trying to contribute to this all-important debate by opening up a new, cultural front in the ongoing conflict.

In the end, we do not fool ourselves that Marxist critics will be persuaded by our arguments, although we hope that they

will give us a fair hearing. But this book is principally directed to anyone who is interested in the relation of literature and economics, but is not committed to a Marxist approach and may in fact be searching for an alternative to it. Literary scholars should appreciate our pointing them in the direction of a more humane form of economics and sketching out some of its basic principles. They may be surprised to see how different literature looks when viewed from the perspective of an economic school that presents the marketplace as a site of freedom and creativity. And they might gain a new appreciation of the free market when they realize that it operates on the same principle—spontaneous order—that is at work in language and culture. By the same token, economists should appreciate our demonstrating that literary scholarship does not have to be Marxist and that free market principles can be profitably applied in the humanities. Economists will be interested to see that principles they are familiar with from the spontaneous order of the market, such as the division of labor, can be observed operating in the realm of literature as well.

We ask only that people from all fields read our essays with open minds. Much that we argue may initially sound strange, but that is just one more sign of how dominant the Marxist paradigm has become in the humanities in recent decades and how it has limited the horizons of what passes for legitimate scholarly discourse on literature and economics. Once one suspends the misleading assumptions about human action that Marxism has promulgated, the principles of Austrian economics begin to sound a lot like common sense—human beings are free and make their choices as individuals. What the Austrian School can offer literary criticism is a way of thinking that is fully grounded in economic reality and still supports the principles of freedom and individualism. And, as we show throughout this book, the principles of freedom and individualism are vital to understanding literature and artistic creativity.

1

The Poetics of Spontaneous Order: Austrian Economics and Literary Criticism

PAUL A. CANTOR

To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now.

—Samuel Beckett

The task of art today is to bring chaos into order.

—Theodor Adorno

I.

In the contemporary academy, to say that one is taking an economic approach to literature seems tantamount to saying that one is taking a Marxist approach. Despite the fact that there are many flourishing schools of economic thought (Keynesian, neoclassical, monetarist, supply side, public choice, to name but a few)—some of them quite antithetical to Marxism—only one seems to be employed in the study of culture, and indeed the whole field of what is called Cultural Studies is Marxist in its foundations.[1] One can of course find a good deal of variation

[1]In the introduction to his influential and widely used anthology, *The Cultural Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1999), Simon During actually builds a left-wing orientation into his definition of Cultural Studies:

among literary critics interested in economics, but it is almost always variation among different Marxist paradigms. One critic may use Marx himself, another may draw upon a twentieth-century Marxist revisionist such as Lukács or Adorno, still another may rely on even more sophisticated interpreters of Marx, such as Gramsci or Althusser. Consider, for example, this characterization of the development of the Birmingham school of Cultural Studies, which is supposed to give us an idea of its wide-ranging intellectual roots:

> [Stuart] Hall sketches the achievements of the Birmingham Centre as a series of theoretical illuminations from abroad, beginning with a progressively radical or quasi-Marxist (but not clearly Marxist enough) tripartite Raymond Williams, through the importation of French structuralism (Barthes, Lévi-Strauss) and an older German Marxist tradition (Benjamin, Brecht), to an also tripartite but much more satisfactorily Marxist and vanguard Louis Althusser.[2]

This passage comes close to summing up the standard recipe for economic criticism of literature—mix quasi-Marxism with vanguard Marxism, and add just a soupçon of fashionable French thought (structuralist or poststructuralist) to give it flavor.

One could easily be impressed by the dazzling array of theoretical positions in contemporary criticism—and the endless debates among them—and conclude that critics interested in economics embrace a genuine variety of schools in the field. But to cut through this deceptive complexity, one might ask a simple question: how many literary critics are sympathetic to socialism

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> As a field, it accepts that studying culture is rarely value-free, and so, embracing clearly articulated, left-wing values, it seeks to extend and critique the relatively narrow range of norms, methods, and practices embedded in the traditional, past-fixated, canon-forming humanities. (p. 27)

Evidently for During, by definition, a centrist or a right-wing Cultural Studies could not exist.

[2]Patrick Brantlinger, *Crusoe's Footprints: Cultural Studies in Britain and America* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 63.

and critical of capitalism, and how many are sympathetic to capitalism and critical of socialism? On this fundamental issue that divides economists, any survey of literary criticism today would reveal a remarkable and nearly complete uniformity of opinion. Economic discussions of literature are almost all anti-capitalist in spirit, and are often avowedly pro-socialist.[3] John Vernon speaks for a whole generation of critics when he defines his position:

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[3]This is obviously a vast generalization, and I do not have the space to document it fully. I think it is true, however, to anyone's experience of literary criticism today. (And let me stress that I am not claiming that all literary criticism today is Marxist; only that virtually all criticism that attempts to apply economics to literature is fundamentally Marxist in its assumptions.) For a good overview of the history of economic criticism, see Mark Osteen and Martha Woodmansee, "Taking Account of the New Economic Criticism: An historical introduction" in the collection of essays they edited, *The New Economic Criticism: Studies at the intersection of literature and economics* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 3–50. Osteen and Woodmansee certainly succeed in showing the wide variety of approaches that have been taken in economic criticism, and yet somehow they all end up being, broadly speaking, on the left. Although mainly concerned with the past few decades, Osteen and Woodmansee concede that there is a long history of economic criticism: "Of course, economic criticism existed even before 1960 in, for example, the brand of Marxism practiced by Lukács, the Frankfurt school, and Left critics of the 1930s" (p. 13). As they turn to more recent work that "addresses the economic habits of individual authors," they characterize it as "generally adhering to Left or Marxist ideology" (p. 14). When they discuss individual authors, they criticize F. Rossi-Landi, whose "work is flawed by adherence to an old-fashioned Marxism that emphasizes production at the expense of consumption" (p. 14). They then praise Jean-Joseph Goux for "synthesizing Marxism and post-structuralism" (p. 16). Even when they finally turn to a non-Marxist approach—what they call "the theoretics of gift exchange"—they characterize it as "a broad range of anti-bourgeois and anti-capitalist writing" (p. 28). They describe approvingly the most recent work in the field this way: "Although proceeding from a Left political stance, these studies have initiated a more sophisticated understanding of the power—and limits—of capitalist discourses" (p. 34). In sum, Osteen and Woodmansee have studied the field of economic criticism carefully and yet do not mention a single form of pro-capitalist criticism. Their own volume illustrates the point; it is indeed "new" in many respects, but not in offering any pro-capitalist criticism (with the possible exception of Paul Delany's essay). It may be hard to believe—and I may well be missing

> And in this respect I am not a Marxist. I don't believe that social and economic reality always determines thought or that understanding modes of production is the single most important key to history. But I do accept much of the Marxist critique of capitalism, especially as it applies to the nineteenth century.[4]

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something—but I know of only two volumes of literary criticism that are openly pro-capitalist: Frederick Turner, *Shakespeare's Twenty-First Century Economics: The Morality of Love and Money* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) and Russell A. Berman, *Fiction Sets You Free: Literature, Liberty, and Western Culture* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007). Anti-socialist criticism is more common; I would particularly recommend George Watson's *The Lost Literature of Socialism* (Cambridge, U.K.: Lutterworth, 1998), and critics in the field of Slavics have generally been, for understandable reasons, less enamored of Marxism than their colleagues in other literatures (I discuss the case of Gary Saul Morson later in this essay). Two of the books of economic criticism that I have found most impressive are Lee Erickson, *The Economy of Literary Form: English Literature and the Industrialization of Publishing, 1800–1850* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) and Paul Delany, *Literature, Money and the Market: From Trollope to Amis* (London: Palgrave, 2002). These books are by no means programmatically pro-capitalist, but they do show an appreciation of how markets function in positive ways and, more generally, a fundamental grasp of economics. Erickson, for example, demonstrates that he understands the law of marginal utility (see *Literary Form*, pp. 9–10, 132–33). As for Delany, unlike all the other scholars in economic criticism I know of, he actually has a B.A. in economics from McGill and an M.A. from Stanford, and worked as an economist for the Bank of Canada in Ottawa and the International Labor Office in Geneva. He admits to having been taught by "Keynesian and Marxist" professors in economics, but his book shows that he has been heavily influenced by Richard Cobden, one of the great proponents of free trade in the nineteenth century (p. 234). That may explain why Delany says: "I want in this book to give commercial culture its due, and to respect the Cobdenite agenda that so closely anticipated the globalism of today" (p. 8). Another book of literary criticism that defends the market economy is Sharon O'Dair's *Class, Critics and Shakespeare: Bottom Lines in the Culture Wars* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), which offers, paradoxically, a kind of left-wing critique of Marxism. O'Dair states clearly that "capitalism is routinely demonized in critical discourse" (p. 60) and analyzes at length the anti-capitalistic bias in literary studies (see especially p. 65). She presents Max Weber's sociology as superior to Marxism in its understanding of the phenomenon of class (see especially pp. 51–52).

[4]John Vernon, *Money and Fiction: Literary Realism in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 22.

In short, Vernon is not a Marxist—except when it comes to criticizing capitalism. And he goes on to cite Marx throughout his book as his chief—and virtually his only—authority on economic matters.

Francis Barker and Peter Hulme epitomize the anti-capitalist orientation of contemporary criticism in this passage from their well-known essay on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*:

> Critique operates in a number of ways, adopting various strategies and lines of attack as it engages with the current ideological formations, but one aspect of its campaign is likely to have to remain constant. Capitalist societies have always presupposed the naturalness and universality of their own structures and modes of perception, so, at least for the foreseeable future, critiques will need to include an *historical* moment, countering capitalism's self-universalization by reasserting the rootedness of texts in the contingency of history.[5]

Barker and Hulme are trying to stress the pluralism of what they call "critique," but of one thing they are certain—its task must be to fight capitalism.

It is odd that this kind of Marxist thinking should enjoy such a monopoly in economic approaches to literature; academics rarely achieve this kind of agreement. This situation is all the odder when one considers that Marxism has lost a good deal of its credibility as an economic theory since the collapse of the Soviet Union and much of the communist bloc. Throughout the twentieth century many economists challenged the assumptions and conclusions of Marxism, and the way economic developments worked out in practice seemed to confirm these theoretical doubts.[6] Marxism, after all, claims to be a predictive science; Marx supposedly came up with laws of economic development,

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[5]Francis Barker and Peter Hulme, "Nymphs and reapers heavily vanish: the discursive con-texts of *The Tempest*," *Alternative Shakespeares*, John Drakakis, ed. (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 194.

[6]For critiques of Marxism in theoretical and practical terms, see David Conway, *A Farewell to Marx: An Outline and Appraisal of His Theories* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1987) and Yuri N. Maltsev, ed., *Requiem for Marx* (Auburn, Ala.: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1993).

centering on the inevitable transition from one economic mode of production to another (feudalism to capitalism, capitalism to socialism). The triumph of capitalist over communist economies in the late twentieth century thus dealt a serious blow to the prestige of Marxism, as history appeared to reverse itself in a way that should not have been possible according to Marx's theories. Of course, loyal Marxists have come up with ways to salvage their economic doctrines; they can claim, for example, that the Soviet Union never followed true Marxist principles. This argument might be more convincing if the same theorists had not earlier been offering the Soviet Union or China or Cuba as living proof that socialism can outperform capitalism. Thus, most observers of economic developments in the twentieth century have concluded that the active competition between capitalism and socialism has proved the superiority of the free market over the centrally planned, command economies of the communist bloc.[7]

This situation leaves us with an oft-noted paradox—just when Marxism has lost prestige in the world at large, even in many wings of the academy, it has seemed to triumph in literature departments and the humanities in general. A cynic might speak of the retreat of Marxism into literature departments—having failed to triumph in the real world, it had to seek refuge in the one place where it is least likely to be subject to the rigorous test of objective reality. And indeed the prominent role of Marxism in literary and cultural studies has developed in tandem with the spread of postmodernism in the academy and its attempt to subvert traditional conceptions of "naive" reality and objective truth. The curious alliance between Marxism and postmodernism in contemporary literary studies has led to the further paradox of a movement that once presented itself as an objective science joining forces with a movement that denies the possibility of objective science. Having begun under Marx as an explicitly anti-utopian movement, Marxism by the end of the

[7]For a comprehensive treatment of this subject, with a wealth of historical material, see Daniel Yergin and Joseph Stanislaw, *The Commanding Heights: The Battle Between Government and the Marketplace That Is Remaking the Modern World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998).

twentieth century seemed to have prolonged its life only by entering a world of postmodern fantasy in the humanities wing of the academy.[8] As the various attempts in literary criticism to salvage Marxism as a way of analyzing the world become increasingly subtle, sophisticated, and, some might say, sophistic, the time is ripe to raise the question of whether Marxism, which has proved to be a dubious guide to economic phenomena, is any more reliable when dealing with literary phenomena. Might forms of economic thinking sympathetic to free markets be more helpful in analyzing literature than Marxism, with its unrelenting hostility to capitalism?

Of course, someone might object that this alternative simply swings from one extreme to another, substituting a pro-market ideology for an anti-market ideology. One might prefer simply to reject economic approaches to literature entirely, and try to maintain the aesthetic purity of the realm of literature by keeping it strictly divorced from the sordid, mercenary considerations of the economic realm. In view of the crudeness of many Marxist analyses of literature, one can sympathize with the impulse to keep the realms of literature and economics separate. And yet for all the high-mindedness of this approach, it amounts to a refusal to confront the entrenched position of Marxist and quasi-Marxist literary critics in the academy, thus abandoning any attempt to undo the damage they may have done to our understanding of literature. Marxist literary criticism shows no signs of going away, and it cannot effectively be countered by simply denying that economics has any application to literature. We need to put something in its place. Marxist literary critics deserve at least this much credit: they have made a plausible and even a persuasive case for the relevance of economics to literature and literary activity. Economics is a central realm of human activity, and to the extent that literature attempts to deal with human life, it must inevitably come to terms with economic issues. And however idealistic a view one holds of the creation of literature, at some

[8]On the peculiar survival of Marxism in the academy, see Frederick Crews, *Skeptical Engagements* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 137–78 and Darío Fernández-Morera, *American Academia and the Survival of Marxist Ideas* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1996).

level it does seem to be bound up with economic activity as ordinarily understood. If we need to raise economic questions in order to achieve a fuller understanding of literature, we should take care that we are being guided by sound economic principles, not by an outdated and discredited ideology. Those who have been repelled by Marxist literary criticism may find that it was not an economic approach to literature as such that bothered them, but only the use of the wrong brand of economics. A more humane form of economics—one that grants a central place to the human element in economic activity—may turn out to be more applicable than Marxism in the realm of the humanities. The most effective way to counter the negative effects of Marxist literary criticism is not to deny that economics has any relevance to literature, but to substitute sound economics for unsound, to offer a positive alternative to Marxism for relating literature and economics.

For that positive alternative we have turned, largely though not exclusively, to the Austrian School of economics.[9] The name comes from the fact that the movement had its origins back in the nineteenth century in the then Austro-Hungarian Empire in the work of Carl Menger (1840–1921) and Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk (1851–1914), and its most famous representatives in the twentieth century, Ludwig von Mises (1881–1973) and Friedrich Hayek (1899–1992), were both Austrians by birth.[10] But there is nothing

[9]For a collection of essays on the history of the Austrian School, including accounts by several Austrian economists themselves, see Bettina Bien Graves, ed., *Austrian Economics: An Anthology* (Irvington-on-Hudson, N.Y.: Foundation for Economic Education, 1996). See also Wolfgang Grassl and Barry Smith, eds., *Austrian Economics: Historical and Philosophical Backgrounds* (New York: New York University Press, 1986), and Raimondo Cubeddu, *The Philosophy of the Austrian School*, Rachel M. Costa, née Barritt, trans. (London: Routledge, 1993). The great synoptic account of Austrian economics is Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1949).

[10]For an account of Mises's life and thought, see Jörg Guido Hülsmann, *Mises: The Last Knight of Liberalism* (Auburn, Ala.: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2007) and Israel M. Kirzner, *Ludwig von Mises* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2001). Both volumes also serve as excellent introductions to Austrian economics in general. For accounts of Hayek's life and thought, see Chandran

peculiarly "Austrian" about Austrian economics; in fact the movement is barely known in present-day Austria and it flourishes in the United States, where it developed under the guidance of a number of Mises's students, such as Murray Rothbard (1926–1995) and Israel Kirzner (1930–). From its beginning, the Austrian School participated in the most important development in economics in the second half of the nineteenth century, the marginalist revolution. Along with William Stanley Jevons and Léon Walras, Menger was one of the discoverers of the law of marginal utility, and that means that from its inception Austrian economics has been characterized by its subjective theory of value. Indeed, the Austrians, especially Böhm-Bawerk, have been among the most incisive critics of the labor theory of value, as developed in classical economics (Smith and Ricardo) and adopted by Marx.[11] It is one of the many ironies of literary criticism today that postmodernists, who deny all objectivity, have linked up with Marxism, a form of economics rooted in the labor theory of value, which seeks to determine value on the basis of an objective factor. The fact that Austrian economics clearly acknowledges that all economic value is purely subjective is one reason why it should be more attractive to literary critics than Marxism as an economic theory.

The Austrian School is known for the way it champions the free market as the only rational and effective form of economic organization and the way it opposes collectivist systems like communism and fascism. Mises, in particular, was probably the most uncompromising defender of pure *laissez-faire* capitalism in the history of economic thought; Hayek, by contrast, was more willing to make concessions to the principles of the welfare state (a good reminder that the Austrian School is not monolithic; it

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Kukathas, *Hayek and Modern Liberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), Alan O. Ebenstein, *Friedrich Hayek: A Biography* (London: Palgrave, 2001) and *Hayek's Journey: The Mind of Friedrich Hayek* (London: Palgrave, 2003), and Bruce Caldwell, *Hayek's Challenge: An Intellectual Biography of F.A. Hayek* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

[11]See especially Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk, "The Exploitation Theory," *Capital and Interest*, George D. Huncke and Hans F. Sennholz, trans. (South Holland, Ill.: Libertarian Press, 1959), vol. 1, pp. 241–321.

has over the years embraced a wide range of views on specific economic issues, within the context of an overall commitment to the free market). Austrian economics is today most famous for having predicted the collapse of communism. As early as 1920, Mises argued that a socialist economy simply cannot function because of its inability to price—and hence rationally allocate—factors of production in the absence of a freely competitive market for privately owned capital goods. Although Mises was scorned at the time by many economists for this thesis, events at the end of the twentieth century vindicated him and today he is generally acknowledged to have been the victor in what came to be known as the socialist calculation debate of the 1930s.[12] The second well-known contribution of the school is the Austrian theory of the business cycle, which blames recessions and depressions, not on the normal operation of capitalism, but on government interventions in the market which distort that normal operation (chiefly the manipulation of money and credit through a central banking system such as the Federal Reserve—for the Austrians, a recession is simply the necessary collapse of a boom artificially generated by easy money/credit policies).[13] The Austrian School has also made distinctive contributions on such subjects as capital and interest, money and banking, competition and

[12]On the socialist calculation debate, see Trygve J.B. Hoff, *Economic Calculation in the Socialist Society*, M.A. Michael, trans. (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Press, 1981) and David Ramsay Steele, *From Marx to Mises: Post-Capitalist Society and the Challenge of Economic Calculation* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1992). The most famous statement associated with the vindication of Mises after the events of 1989 came from Robert Heilbroner, author of the widely read history of economic thought, *The Worldly Philosophers*. Surveying the collapse of socialist economies around the world, Heilbroner—no fan of *laissez-faire* capitalism, to say the least—proclaimed: "It turns out, of course, that Mises was right." See his "After Communism," *The New Yorker*, vol. 66, no. 30 (September 10, 1990), p. 92.

[13]For the classic exposition of the Austrian theory of the business cycle, see the chapter "Interest, Credit Expansion, and the Trade Cycle" in Mises, *Human Action,* pp. 535–83. For the application of the Austrian theory to perhaps the most famous example of the downturn in the business cycle, see Murray Rothbard, *America's Great Depression* (New York: Richardson & Snyder, 1983).

monopoly, the nature of entrepreneurship, the epistemology of economics, and the history of economic thought.[14]

Thus, the Austrian School has something to say on virtually every issue in economics, and we have drawn upon these positions throughout this book (although not restricting ourselves to distinctively Austrian insights).[15] To be sure, the views of the Austrian School are highly controversial, and have been much disputed, not just by Marxists, but by mainstream economists as well, including many who are generally sympathetic to the free market. We can, however, assure our readers that, ever since Hayek was awarded the Nobel Prize for Economics in 1974, the general reputation, academic respectability, and influence on public policy of the Austrian School have all been on the rise. Austrian economics even made a favorable impression on one of the most important influences on contemporary literary criticism, Michel Foucault. As James Miller writes in his biography of Foucault:

> On January 10, 1979, Foucault began his annual series of lectures at the Collège de France. . . . [H]is political reflections veered off in a surprising direction. Despite his own "wishful participation" in the revolution in Iran, he advised his students to look elsewhere for ways to think about "the will not to be governed." He asked them to read with special care the collected works of Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich Hayek—distinguished Austrian economists, strident yet prescient critics of Marxism, apostles of a libertarian strand of modern social thought rooted in a defense of

[14]For a sense of the range of topics the Austrian School has dealt with, see Peter J. Boettke, ed., *The Elgar Companion to Austrian Economics* (Cheltenham, U.K.: Edward Elgar, 1994).

[15]I have found only one other extended attempt to apply Austrian economics to cultural issues: Don Lavoie and Emily Chamlee-Wright, *Culture and Enterprise: The Development, Representation and Morality of Business* (London: Routledge, 2000). Although this book does not involve much literary criticism (it deals chiefly with cinema and television), it makes many of the observations we are making about the relevance of Austrian economics to understanding cultural phenomena.

> the free market as a citadel of individual liberty and a bulwark against the power of the state.[16]

If the patron saint of New Historicism endorsed Mises and Hayek, we feel justified in drawing upon the concepts of the Austrian School in our effort to offer an alternative to Marxist understandings of the relation of literature and economics. I will begin this introductory essay, then, with a brief comparison of the ways Austrian economics and Marxism can be applied to literature, in an effort to suggest the superiority of the Austrian approach. Much of the essay will be devoted to showing how a key concept of the Austrian School, Hayek's idea of spontaneous order, can help to resolve one of the central dilemmas of literary theory, the conflict between the New Criticism and Deconstruction. To illustrate the applicability of the idea of spontaneous order to literature, I will examine at length the serialization of novels in the nineteenth century—a case study that will allow us to explore in detail the differences between Austrian economics and Marxism as ways of understanding literature.

II.

One might well wonder why Marxism has proved to be so attractive to scholars in the humanities. Marxism is fundamentally reductive in its understanding of human action, displacing the human subject from the center of its concerns and turning instead to vast, impersonal forces to explain historical and social patterns. In particular, Marxist thinkers tend to view culture as an epiphenomenon; economic forces provide the bedrock of explanation in Marxist theories, and culture constitutes a byproduct, a superstructure reflecting supposedly more basic developments in material modes of production. In Marx's famous formulation in *The Poverty of Philosophy*:

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[16]James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), p. 310; see also p. 287. Foucault's comments on Hayek and Mises are available in English in the posthumously published volume Michael Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–79*, Graham Burchell, trans. (London: Palgrave, 2008).

> Social relations are intimately bound up with productive forces. In acquiring new productive forces men change their mode of production, and in changing their mode of production, their manner of making a living, they change all their social relations. The windmill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam mill, society with the industrial capitalist. The same men who establish social relations in conformity with their material productivity also produce principles, ideas, and categories conforming to their social relations.[17]

This materialist approach to culture is the distinctive Marxist contribution to the understanding of human history. After all, many thinkers before Marx offered a historicist view of culture, and even argued that economic factors influence its development. What was new in Marx was his claim that economic forces are the *determining* factor in all history, including cultural history.[18]

But in its stark formulation—"the windmill gives you society with the feudal lord"—Marx's position proved too reductive and difficult to maintain. His colleagues and followers soon began to qualify the absolutism of his claim that economic factors simply govern history. In a letter explaining Marx's doctrine to Joseph Bloch, Friedrich Engels offered a more complex view of the interaction of economic and cultural factors in history:

> According to the materialist conception of history, the *ultimately* determining element in history is the production and reproduction of real life. More than

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[17]Loyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat, eds. & trans., *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967), p. 480. See also Marx's Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in Lewis S. Feuer, ed., *Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959), pp. 43–44.

[18]On the issue of economic determinism in Marx's theory, see Conway, *Farewell*, pp. 52–81, Murray Rothbard, *Classical Economics: An Austrian Perspective on the History of Economic Thought* (Cheltenham, U.K.: Edward Elgar, 1995), vol. 2, pp. 372–76, and Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), vol. 1, *The Founders*, pp. 335–75.

> this neither Marx nor I has ever asserted. Hence if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the *only* determining one he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure—political forms of the class struggle and its results, to wit: constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle, etc., juridical forms, and even the reflexes of all these actual struggles in the brains of the participants, political, juristic, philosophical theories, religious views . . . —also exercise their influence upon the course of historical struggles and in many cases preponderate in determining their *form*. There is an interaction of all these elements in which, amidst all the endless host of accidents, . . . the economic movement finally asserts itself as necessary.[19]

Engels's reformulation of the materialist position—the economic base ultimately determines the superstructure, but the superstructure can in the course of development react back upon the base—turned out to be more congenial to many Marxist literary critics.[20] It freed them from a purely materialist understanding of

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[19]From a letter to Joseph Bloch, September 21–22, 1890 (italics in the original), in Feuer, *Basic Writings,* pp. 397–98.

[20]But note Kolakowski's critique—that Engels, in trying to salvage Marx and make his materialism sound plausible, ends up stripping his doctrine of anything that makes it distinctive:

> It would seem that to say there is an interaction between the relations of production and the "superstructure" is to utter a truism which all would accept and which has nothing particularly Marxist about it. . . . That books and plays cannot be understood without knowledge of the historical circumstances and social conflicts of the time was known, long before Marx, to many French and other historians. . . . We must ask then, what exactly is historical materialism? If it means that every detail of the superstructure can be explained as in some way dictated by the demands of the "base," it is an absurdity with nothing to recommend it to credence; while if, as Engels's remarks suggest, it does not involve absolute determinism in this sense, it is no more than a fact of common knowledge. (*Main Currents*, vol. 1, p. 364)

literature, and indeed some Marxist critics can be quite subtle and perceptive in their readings of individual literary works, relating them to their socioeconomic context in illuminating ways. Many critics who call themselves Marxist have in fact rejected the base/superstructure model of culture.[21] For example, in perhaps the dominant form of quasi-Marxist criticism today, New Historicism, energy is viewed as circulating back and forth between economic and cultural forces.[22] But these more sophisticated forms of Marxist criticism are still fundamentally materialist in outlook (one prominent movement is known as "cultural materialism") and ultimately remain reductive in their application to literature. After having made all their qualifications concerning Marxist materialism, contemporary critics eventually circle back to what is essentially Engels's original position: "We make our history ourselves, but, in the first place, under very definite assumptions and conditions. Among these the economic ones are ultimately decisive. But the political ones, etc., and indeed even the traditions which haunt human minds also play a part, although not the decisive one."[23] In short, in explaining history, for Marxists and quasi-Marxists economics trumps culture after all.

One can see this tendency to privilege economic factors in the way contemporary literary critics carry on the Marxist polemic against the "great man" theory of history, the supposed bourgeois propensity to overrate the importance of individuals in historical

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[21]For an early example (1929) within the context of Soviet Marxism, see V.N. Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik, trans. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 17–24. For perhaps the most important example of this rejection, see Raymond Williams, "Base and Superstructure," *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 75–82 and "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London: Verso, 1982), pp. 31–49. On this subject, see Rothbard, *Classical Economics*, vol. 2, p. 376.

[22]On this subject, see Delany, *Literature, Money and the Market*, p. 5. For a fuller discussion of New Historicism, see my essay "Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicist Vision," *Academic Questions* 6, no. 4 (Fall 1993): 21–36; for the specific issue of determinism, see pp. 34–36.

[23]Engels, Letter to Joseph Bloch, in Feuer, *Basic Writings,* p. 398.

developments.[24] Much of Marxist literary criticism has been devoted to attacking the Romantic idea of genius, calling into question the very notion of artistic creativity as traditionally understood.[25] Where traditional critics speak of artistic creation, Marxists speak of cultural work or cultural production, thereby assimilating aesthetic activity to economic.[26] While traditional critics analyze the way that the great artist creates an individual world out of his private imagination, Marxists stress the social dimension of art, viewing literary works, for example, as mirroring a particular historical moment or the consciousness of a distinct socioeconomic class. With its collectivist impulses, Marxism downplays the role of the individual in artistic creation, wherever possible treating the work of art as the product of some kind of collaborative effort in which the individuality of the artist dissolves in a web of socioeconomic relations. Moreover, as a form of historical determinism, Marxism undercuts the idea that the artist is free as a creator. For Marxists, economics is the realm of harsh necessity (at least until the coming of the Communist Revolution). Thus, for a Marxist to show an artist involved in economic relations and especially in any form of marketplace activity is *ipso facto* to expose his lack of freedom. In classic Marxist literary criticism, authors operating in a market system are routinely portrayed as captives of capitalist ideology, and

[24]For the Marxist attack on the "great man" theory of history, see, for example, Engels, Letter to Heinz Starkenburg, January 25, 1894, in Feuer, *Basic Writings,* pp. 411–12.

[25]See, for example, Jerome J. McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983) and *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 8, 40, 42.

[26]See, for example, Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production*, Geoffrey Wall, trans. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), especially pp. 66–68, McGann, *Textual Criticism*, p. 48, and N.N. Feltes, *Modes of Production of Victorian Novels* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. x. Feltes's chapter on Dickens's *Pickwick Papers* (pp. 1–17) provides a good example of contemporary Marxist criticism. His explicit aim is to counter the common critical myth that "the publication of *Pickwick Papers* marks the explosion of Dickens's 'genius' upon the literary world" (p. 2; notice that Feltes places the word *genius* in scare quotes).

today's cultural materialists and new historicists, for all their critical sophistication, basically still operate within this tradition.

As a doctrine that undermines the idea of individual human agency, Marxism seems inappropriate to the study of art—a realm often taken to be the highest form of human self-expression, creativity, and freedom. Marxism is especially inappropriate because it is a species of what Hayek calls *scientism*.[27] Captivated by the success of the natural sciences in the nineteenth century, especially their ability to predict events in the physical world, Marx sought to create a science of economic and social phenomena modeled on Newtonian physics, one that could discover historical laws that operate with scientific regularity and hence strict predictability. Marx prided himself on the fact that he was offering for the first time a *scientific* socialism, as opposed to the utopian socialism of earlier thinkers like Saint-Simon and Fourier.[28] Marx writes in his *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* that "the material transformation of the economic conditions of production . . . can be determined with the precision of natural science."[29] Marxism thus involves a fundamental category error—it tries to understand economic and social phenomena on the model of events in the physical world, that is to say, human events on the model of non-human events. In modeling higher or more complex phenomena in terms of lower or less complex phenomena, Marxism loses sight of what is fundamentally distinctive about human action. In particular it oversimplifies human history in order to make it seem predictable (and above all to make the triumph of communism seem inevitable). Having sought to understand economic phenomena in terms of material forces, Marxism compounds the error by trying to understand cultural phenomena in terms of economic, and thus it becomes doubly reductionist in its treatment of art. In short, in the longstanding conflict between the natural sciences and the humanities, Marxism leans toward the former, making

[27]See F.A. Hayek, *The Counter-Revolution of Science: Studies on the Abuse of Reason* (New York: Free Press, 1958), especially pp. 13–16.

[28]See Engels, "Socialism: Utopian and Scientific" in Feuer, *Basic Writings,* pp. 68–111.

[29]Feuer, *Basic Writings,* p. 44.

us wonder even more why scholars in the humanities ever embraced Marxism.

But the reductionism of Marxism has actually turned out to be attractive to many critics. After generations of the Romantic celebration of artistic genius, many critics were happy to see authors taken down a peg or two.[30] Marxist analysis works to efface the distinction between the great author and the ordinary run of humanity, thus lessening the critic's sense of subordination to the figures he studies and in fact giving him a new-found power over authors. Knowing the truth of Marxism, the critic can, for example, expose the fallacies of capitalist ideology—the false consciousness—in the writers he discusses. Marxist reductionism provides a way of elevating the critic over his subject matter. Since Marxist analysis has been by far the most common form of applying economic theories to literature, the very notion of the enterprise has come to be suspect in many quarters. In its Marxist forms, criticism seems hostile to the literary imagination, or at least primarily interested in debunking it, exposing its limitations and above all its biases (originally class biases, but now extended to racial and gender biases as well).[31]

Here is where the Austrian School can come to the aid of critics who are interested in the relation of literature and economics but who are troubled by the reductionist implications of Marxism for the study of artistic creativity. Some Marxist literary critics have struggled to liberate themselves from the scientific/materialist/determinist biases of Marx's doctrine, when they could instead have turned to modes of economic thought that are free of these tendencies to begin with. The relation between literature and economics looks very different when one works from a form of economics, like the Austrian School, that celebrates freedom and the individual, rather than determinism and the collective. In its epistemological foundations,

[30]Harold Bloom has dubbed contemporary criticism "The School of Resentment." See T*he Western Canon: The Books and the School of the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), p. 4.

[31]For a critique of contemporary race/class/gender criticism, see John M. Ellis, *Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of the Humanities* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1997).

established by Menger and elaborated by Mises and Hayek, the Austrian School explicitly rejects the idea that the natural sciences provide the proper model for economic analysis.[32] In its concern to establish the autonomy of economics as an intellectual discipline, the Austrian School respects the heterogeneity of phenomena and hence of a variety of methods of studying them. The Austrians do not accept the idea of a master science, one method of knowing that provides the key to understanding all phenomena. Far from being reductionist, Austrian economics refuses to study the human in terms of the non-human. As the title of Mises's *magnum opus* indicates, the focus of Austrian economics is on human action, and it places the acting human subject squarely at the center of its concern. The Austrian School distinguishes itself from most other forms of economic thought by the fact that it views economic matters from the perspective of the acting individual and avoids dealing in macroeconomic abstractions like the Gross National Product. In epistemological terms, this is referred to as the "methodological individualism" of the Austrian School, an approach that one would think would be more attractive than the collectivism of Marxism to scholars in the humanities.[33]

Moreover, the way the Austrian School conceives economic activity ought to make it more congenial than Marxism to literary critics. The Austrian School views economics as the realm of freedom; indeed it regards economic behavior and above all the central act of choice as the defining manifestation of human freedom. Austrian economics is the very opposite of a deterministic

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[32]See Carl Menger, *Investigations into the Method of the Social Sciences with Special Reference to Economics*, Francis J. Nock, trans. (New York: New York University Press, 1985); Ludwig von Mises, *Epistemological Problems of Economics*, George Reisman, trans. (Princeton, N.J.: D. Van Nostrand, 1960), pp. 1–23 and *The Ultimate Foundation of Economic Science: An Essay on Method* (Princeton, N.J.: D. Van Nostrand, 1962), pp. 115–33; and Hayek, *Counter-Revolution,* pp. 17–79.

[33]The phrase "methodological individualism" was coined by the Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter in 1908. On this subject, see Mises, *Human Action,* pp. 41–44, *Epistemological Problems*, pp. 40–44, and *Ultimate Foundation*, pp. 80–83. See also the article on "Methodological Individualism" by Gregory B. Christainsen in Boettke, *Elgar Companion*, pp. 11–16.

doctrine.[34] In addition to resting on the axiom of human freedom of choice, it stresses the role of chance and contingency in human affairs.[35] Indeed, it champions the free market precisely as the best way of responding to the unpredictability of the world. Unlike most forms of mainstream economics, the Austrian School rejects the possibility of mathematical modeling of economic phenomena and refuses to make the kind of economic forecasts that are the stock in trade of many professionals in the field.

Instead of drawing graphs of so-called "perfect competition," Austrian economists concentrate on the messiness of the real world in which human beings act, the fact that at any given moment supply and demand are out of balance, instead of meeting perfectly at an imaginary point on some professor's blackboard. The Austrian School focuses on entrepreneurial behavior, the unceasing efforts of businessmen to adjust to the neverending changes in the economic world. More than any other school, the Austrians insist on the importance of uncertainty and risk as economic factors.[36] In their view, the entrepreneur is constantly

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[34]For a discussion of determinism, see Ludwig von Mises, *Theory and History: An Interpretation of Social and Economic Evolution* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1957), pp. 73–93.

[35]See, for example, the chapter on "Uncertainty" in Mises, *Human Action,* pp. 105–18. This issue offers a good illustration of how literary critics dealing with economics can be misled by their neglect of the Austrian School. Osteen and Woodmansee criticize the economics profession for its failure to appreciate the importance of uncertainty: "Other modernist economists—Frank Knight, J.M. Keynes, G.L.S. Shackle—similarly permit postmodern moments to seep into arguments by sometimes reluctantly recognizing the presence of uncertainty" ("Taking Account," p. 27). If Osteen and Woodmansee were familiar with the writings of Mises and Hayek, they would never claim that economists do not appreciate the importance of uncertainty; clearly they have expanded their legitimate criticism of the neoclassical school into a false generalization about economics as such. Incidentally, Osteen and Woodmansee are even unfair to Knight and Schackle, who do more than merely "reluctantly recognize" the importance of uncertainty. Knight, for example, named his most famous book *Risk, Uncertainty and Profit* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1971), a good emblem of the fact that "uncertainty" was a central concept in his economic thought.

[36]See, for example, Israel M. Kirzner, *How Markets Work: Disequilibrium, Entrepreneurship and Discovery* (London: Institute of Economic Affairs, 1997)

anticipating an uncertain future, trying to predict changes in demand and to figure out new economies of production for satisfying it. Thus, for the Austrian School, the entrepreneur becomes a kind of artist. Indeed, the Austrians stress the creativity of the entrepreneur.[37] Like an artist, he is a visionary, a risk-taker, and a pioneer, and if he is to be successful, he will generally be found running counter to the crowd, or at least ahead of it. Thus, with Austrian economics, one need not worry that linking artistic activity with economic will have a reductionist effect. Because the Austrian School views economic activity as creative in the first place, from its perspective, to show an artist implicated in the commercial world is perfectly compatible with asserting his freedom and individuality.

III.

Beyond its focus on freedom and individual human action, Austrian economics offers a model of order that can help us understand literature—what Hayek referred to as "spontaneous order."[38] This concept serves to highlight the place of Austrian economics in broader intellectual history. The Austrians are in many respects the culmination and the most cogent exponents of a large-scale shift in thinking that can be described as the movement from top-down to bottom-up models of order. For much of

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and Gerald P. O'Driscoll, Jr. and Mario J. Rizzo, *The Economics of Time and Ignorance* (London: Routledge, 1996).

[37]See Kirzner, *How Markets Work*, pp. 33–34. For the rare literary critic who speaks of the "entrepreneurial visionary" and "imaginative entrepreneurship," see Berman, *Fiction Sets You Free*, p. 188.

[38]For Hayek's understanding of spontaneous order, see chapters 1 and 2, "Reason and Evolution" and "Cosmos and Taxis," of the first volume, *Rules and Order*, of his trilogy *Law, Legislation and Liberty* (London: Routledge, 1982), pp. 8–54. See also his essays "The Theory of Complex Phenomena" and "The Results of Human Action but not of Human Design" in his *Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967), pp. 22–42, 96–105. For a brief but comprehensive survey of the development of the idea of spontaneous order, see Steven Horwitz, "From Smith to Menger to Hayek: Liberalism in the Spontaneous-Order Tradition," *The Independent Review: A Journal of Political Economy* 6 (2001): 81–97.

history, the only way of conceiving an order was to imagine it organized by a single person, some kind of central power imposing its will throughout a domain.[39] The model for this kind of centralized order was in political terms a king ruling his kingdom or in religious terms God creating and directing the whole universe. In this model, order has to be imposed from above or there is no order at all. One might debate when and where this conception began to be challenged, but one of the key moments came in the eighteenth century in the work of economists such as Adam Smith and, more broadly, the Scottish Enlightenment thinkers with whom he is associated.[40] Indeed, the great contribution of economics to thought in general has been a way of conceiving order that need not be imposed from above on phenomena but can grow up out of them, an order generated by the phenomena themselves. What Smith demonstrated with his famous notion of the "invisible hand" is that the government does not have to regulate or plan centrally the activities of businessmen in order to promote the public good.[41] Left to themselves to pursue what appear to be their merely private interests, businessmen will in fact serve the public because the market provides an impersonal mechanism for coordinating their activities.[42] In particular, the pricing mechanism works to bring supply in line with demand without anyone needing to oversee the process from a central position. From the perspective of traditional thinking, the market presents a paradox—an order without a single individual in control to order it.

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[39]See Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, vol. 1, pp. 9–10, 26–27 and *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 24. See also Ludwig von Mises, *Socialism: An Economic and Sociological Analysis*, J. Kahane, trans. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1951), p. 296.

[40]For a well-documented challenge to the widespread but mistaken view that the idea of the free market begins with Smith, see Darío Fernández-Morera's essay on *Don Quijote* in this volume.

[41]See John Eatwell, Murray Milgate, and Peter Newman, eds., *The Invisible Hand* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987), especially pp. 1–42.

[42]On the development of this idea, see Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977).

Many of the advances in nineteenth-century thinking resulted from extending the concept of spontaneous order to new areas. Darwin's theory of evolution is a good example of the shift from top-down to bottom-up models of order. In the traditional view, the complex order of biological form could be explained only by the notion of divine creation—of a God who consciously designed the intimate interplay between form and function in bodily organs. Whatever one may think of Darwin's specific version of the theory of evolution, he did provide a way of reconceiving the problem of biological form.[43] He showed the theoretical possibility of a process of natural selection accounting for the order we see in the biological world. For Darwin, the struggle for existence provides an impersonal mechanism that can explain the way, over time, organs become suited to their functions, without invoking the idea of some personal force to design and shape those organs at a single moment of creation. The fact that competition among members of the same species plays such an important role in Darwin's thinking is one indication that his version of spontaneous order thinking was deeply influenced by the work of the classical economists (Darwin himself acknowledged the importance of Thomas Malthus to his development of the concept of natural selection).[44] Thus, it is no accident that classical economics and Darwinian evolutionary theory converge precisely on the issue of spontaneous order, and indeed they represent the two

[43]For a treatment of Darwin in a larger intellectual and cultural context, see Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Darwin and the Darwinian Revolution* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968).

[44]See the introduction to *Origin of Species*, where Darwin writes: "This is the doctrine of Malthus, applied to the whole animal and vegetable kingdom." Quoted from the edition of Gillian Beer—Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 6; see also p. 54. For the influence of Smith and classical economics on Darwin, see Mises, *Socialism*, p. 296 and Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, vol. 1, pp. 20–22, 152–53, n. 33 and *Fatal Conceit*, pp. 24–25, 146–47. If Mises and Hayek seem biased in favor of a fellow economist, the point is confirmed by a natural scientist—see Stephen Jay Gould, *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 121–25, and especially p. 122: "the theory of natural selection is, in essence, Adam Smith's economics transferred to nature."

most significant examples of this new kind of thinking in the nineteenth century.[45] But the idea of spontaneous order is even more widespread in the period. "Evolution," broadly conceived, was in many ways the leading idea of the age, and appears in fields as diverse as linguistics and legal history.

But as fruitful as the idea of spontaneous order proved to be in the nineteenth century, at first sight it does not seem to be applicable to the study of literary phenomena. The concept of "bottom up" orders provides an alternative to the traditional concept of "top down" orders—not a replacement for it. The fact that spontaneous orders are possible in some realms does not mean that centrally planned orders do not exist at all. Bricks do not spontaneously order themselves into buildings. Despite anything that Smith, Mises, or Hayek proved, an architect is still necessary to plan a building and to direct its construction. At first glance, a poem would seem to fall into the same category as a building, that is, something that has to be created by a single guiding intellect. Indeed, a well-crafted poem seems to be a good example of a non-spontaneous, perfectly planned order. In the traditional understanding, a poem has a single author—the

[45]I introduce the subject of Darwinism here with some trepidation, but I hope that it will contribute to my argument. Darwin's theory of evolution is the form of spontaneous order thinking with which people generally are most familiar, and therefore it may help readers understand the distinctive thrust of Austrian economics. But I risk giving the impression that Austrian economics is a species of Darwinism (and, even worse, raising the specter of Social Darwinism—which in fact has nothing to do with Austrian economics; for Mises's explicit and emphatic rejection of Social Darwinism, see *Human Action,* p. 175). I want to stress, then, that Darwinism is only one form of spontaneous order thinking and has no claims to priority or preeminence over any of the others. All Darwinian orders are spontaneous, but not all spontaneous orders are Darwinian. Although Austrian economics and Darwinism have a good deal in common as forms of spontaneous order thinking, they also, as we will see, differ in fundamental respects, and economic order involves a higher level of complexity, unpredictability, and hence spontaneity than biological order. Let me say it again: Austrian economics is *not* a form of Darwinism; it is a parallel but entirely independent mode of spontaneous order thinking. To put it in biological terms: spontaneous order thinking is the genus; Darwinism and Austrian economics are two of its separate and distinct species.

author plans it out carefully ahead of time; he is in control of every detail of his poem, down to the last word; his aim is to create a perfect whole in each poem, a work of art in which every part contributes to the unity of the whole. If there ever were a legitimate example of perfect planning, the art of poetry would appear to provide it. One reason many authors have been predisposed toward socialism is that they are used to planning in their own line of work and have a hard time conceiving how any form of order can be produced without it.[46] As shown by the popularity of the genre of the utopia—which usually takes some kind of socialist form—authors enjoy planning out communities the same way they plan out their literary works. Indeed, in the utopia the two activities coalesce—the utopian community is as tightly plotted as the work of fiction that portrays it.[47]

Much of twentieth-century literary criticism was dominated by a movement that offered a model of order as perfectly planned and hence not spontaneous. The New Criticism upheld the ideal of the perfectly crafted poem. A New Critic typically concerned himself with showing how a literary work holds together, how each detail fits into the pattern of the whole.[48] There can be no question that the New Criticism made a significant and lasting contribution to our understanding of literature. Guided by their ideal of aesthetic unity, the New Critics learned to scrutinize literature with a new-found care and attention to detail. Precisely because the New Critics believed that every detail in a work of literature has to have a function, whenever some facet seemed extraneous or purposeless, they searched and searched until they found a reason for it. A New Critical reading

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[46]I develop this point in my essay on H.G. Wells's *The Invisible Man* in this volume.

[47]For an analysis and critique of utopian literature, see Gary Saul Morson, *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 257–60.

[48]See, for example, Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1947), where he defends "the proposition that *every word* in a poem plays its part" (p. 221; italics in the original). For a critical account of the New Criticism, see "What Was New Criticism?" in Gerald Graff, *Literature Against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), pp. 129–49.

of a literary work often begins with some seemingly anomalous detail and goes on to explain how what at first appears to be out of place in the work really is part of its larger and deeper design. In the heyday of the New Critics, it was hard not to be impressed by their ingenuity in finding evidence of design where accident and contingency seemed at first to prevail.[49]

But the problem with the New Criticism is that its readings came to seem over-ingenious, as its followers vied with each other to find some purpose in every last detail of all literary works. Although useful as a heuristic device, the postulate of literary unity began to seem extreme in its relentless application. As often happens in the academy, the New Criticism eventually gave birth to its opposite.[50] The movement known as Deconstruction is best understood as a reaction against the extremism of the New Criticism.[51] Rejecting the obsession with perfection of

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[49]I realize that the New Critics often spoke of what they called "the intentional fallacy" and tried to divert attention from what was going on in the mind of the poet in creating a poem to the poem itself, its form and structure. See W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1954), pp. 4–18. In that sense, the New Critics generally did not speak about the conscious process of designing a poem. But they did always speak about poetry *as if it had been consciously designed*. Precisely because the New Critics wanted to concentrate on the divinely perfect design of a poem, they chose to bracket out what was going on in the mind of the mere mortal who wrote it. Thus, although the New Critics seldom spoke about the intentions of poets, they were always talking about the intentionality of poems. They in effect invoked Kant's idea of *Zweckmässigkeit ohne Zweck* ("purposiveness without purpose"). See his *Critique of Judgment,* "Analytic of the Beautiful," Third Moment, section 10. For the significance of this turn to Kant in the New Criticism, see my essay "The Metaphysics of Botany: Rousseau and the New Criticism of Plants," *Southwest Review* 70 (1983): 362–80, and especially p. 379.

[50]For an account of developments out of and in reaction to the New Criticism, see Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

[51]For a manifesto of deconstructive criticism, featuring several of the most prominent figures in the movement, see Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey Hartman, and J. Hillis Miller, *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Seabury, 1979). For a generally sympathetic account of the movement, see Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*

literary form in the New Criticism, the deconstructive critics conjured up a contrary model of imperfection. Where the New Critics had labored to show how works of literature hang together, the deconstructionists spared no pains in showing how they fall apart. The typical deconstructive reading reverses the movement of the New Criticism. Starting with the common understanding of a literary work as unified, the deconstructive critic seeks to uncover some genuinely anomalous detail, a part that stubbornly refuses to fit into the pattern of the whole, something that cuts against the grain. The deconstructionists stress the recalcitrance of the means authors use to reach their ends, above all the recalcitrance of language itself. Deconstructive critics delight in uncovering secondary or tertiary meanings in words authors use—meanings that run counter to the primary meaning the author intended to express. Jacques Derrida, for example, wrote an essay on Plato's *Phaedrus* that takes off from the fact that the Greek word *pharmakon* means "helpful drug" but it can also mean "poison."[52] In a deconstructive reading, the literary work never measures up to the author's design. Indeed, it usually is presented as on some level saying the opposite of what the author seemed to intend. Where New Critical readings evoke the idea of perfect artistic design, deconstructive readings typically point in the direction of contingency and failure of design. For a deconstructionist, what may seem like a mere accident of the publishing process can offer a glimpse into the abyss of the indeterminacy of meaning.[53]

(London: Methuen, 1982). For a more critical account, see John M. Ellis, *Against Deconstruction* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989).

[52]See "Plato's Pharmacy" in Jacques Derrida, *Disseminations*, Barbara Johnson, trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 63–171.

[53]See, for example, J. Hillis Miller, "Ariachne's Broken Woof," *Georgia Review* 31 (1977): 44–60, where Miller makes an epistemological mountain out of a textual molehill. He starts from what most scholars have been content to dismiss as a mere printer's error in Shakespeare's T*roilus and Cressida*: the appearance of the name *Ariachne* in one of Troilus's speeches, which seems to be a conflation of two names from Greek mythology, Ariadne and Arachne. The portmanteau word *Ariachne* launches Miller into a frenzy of deconstructive speculation:

The battle between the New Criticism and Deconstruction emerged as one of the most significant critical debates of the second half of the twentieth century, and seemed to leave us with a difficult choice, between an idea of complete order and an idea of complete disorder in literature. On reflection, it is clear that one idea bred the other.[54] The insistence on complete perfection of literary form in the New Criticism provoked the deconstructive critics into denying that any consistency of form or meaning can be found in literature. In effect, the deconstructionists argued that if literature is not perfectly ordered, it is not meaningfully ordered at all. Indeed, if we try to maintain the New Criticism's ideal of all literature as perfectly ordered, theorists like the deconstructionists will always be able to come up with a great deal of evidence to the contrary and advance the claim that all literature is ultimately disordered and indeterminate in meaning.

> Slip of the tongue or of the pen? Ignorance on Shakespeare's part? Error of the scribe or of the typesetter who has put in one letter too many? The extra *i* . . . produce[s] a gap in the meaning and call[s] attention to the material base of signs. . . . The little *i* in "Ariachnes" has the effect of a bit of sand in a salad or of a random sound in a symphony, the flautist dropping his flute, the snap of a breaking violin string. . . . The conflation in "Ariachnes" of two myths which are and are not congruent is precisely in agreement with what happens in Troilus' speech, namely, an anguished confrontation with the subversive possibility of dialogue, reason divided hopelessly against itself. . . . The principle of identity is the basic assumption of monological metaphysics. . . . The "whole shebang" of Occidental metaphysics is, the reader can see, brought into question in Troilus' experience and in his speech. (pp. 45–47)

All this from what amounts to a typo!

[54]On the connection between the New Criticism and Deconstruction, see Graff, *Literature Against Itself*, pp. 145–46. See also Franco Moretti's characterization of literary criticism: "It is divided equitably between creationist faith (the text is a complete and perfect world, and the author is the watchmaker who foresees everything) and deconstructionist gnosis (at the slightest contradiction, the text collapses into total chaos)" (*Modern Epic: The World System from Goethe to García Márquez*, Quintin Hoare, trans. [London: Verso, 1996], p. 22). Moretti is exactly right to see deconstruction as a kind of gnostic inversion of the New Criticism.

In order to preserve a concept of the perfectly ordered work of literature, we need to limit it to a subset of the literary realm in general. Moreover, for the works that do not meet the strict New Criticism standard of perfection, we need to find a way of viewing their elements of imperfection as compatible with an underlying order and artistic integrity. Here is where the concept of spontaneous order can come to our aid, because it offers a middle term between divinely perfect order and complete chaos. Following the lead of Austrian economics and Darwinian biology, we have to find a way of admitting some element of contingency into our conception of literary form.

IV.

But to do so we have to examine more carefully what the idea of a spontaneous order entails. Discussions of spontaneous vs. non-spontaneous orders tend to get caught up in the issue of origins. Spontaneous orders are of course those that come into being spontaneously—without the intervention of an external force. Non-spontaneous orders are distinguished precisely by the presence of such an external force at their origin. The heated debate over Darwinism centers on precisely this question—whether some kind of intelligence was necessary to plan the complex biological order we see before us or whether it could have come into being without a divine creator. What tends to get lost in such controversies is the question of the *nature* of the order. Many people assume that spontaneous orders have essentially the same nature as non-spontaneous orders—they just come into being differently. The evolution controversy illustrates this potential confusion. Even people well versed in the subject sometimes think that Darwin was operating with basically the same conception of biological form as earlier thinkers, such as Aristotle. Darwin may at first appear to have, like Aristotle, a teleological conception of the organism. He talks about the remarkable ways in which the organs of animals are suited to their biological functions. According to this view, Darwin simply gave a different account of how these organs became suited to their functions. Instead of attributing their functionality to divine planning and creation, he explains it as the product of a wholly unconscious

process—natural selection. The way Darwin himself and many Darwinists argue for the theory of evolution only serves to reenforce this understandable but false impression. Darwin's own writings and biology textbooks to this day are saturated with the traditional language of teleology.[55] They speak of organs having purposes; indeed they speak of evolution as if it were a conscious process, with animals striving to adapt to their environment. Darwin often uses the language of *perfection* in the *Origin of Species*, offering as evidence for his theory the way organs are perfectly adapted to their functions, which he claims could have happened only through a process of natural selection over long periods of time.[56]

But as many commentators have pointed out, the real evidence for Darwin's distinctive account of evolution is to be found in the phenomenon of *imperfection* rather than perfection of biological form. If an organ is *perfectly* suited to its function, then it could just as well have been the product of conscious planning as of an impersonal process such as natural selection. But when one finds imperfection in an organism, one can legitimately question whether it was consciously designed and instead consider attributing its origins to some kind of history, and thus assume an element of contingency in the form it has taken.[57] Hence, the issue of vestigial organs becomes central to Darwin's theory

[55]At the high point of his teleological rhetoric in *Origin of Species*, Darwin claims that Nature set out to offer proof of his theory of evolution: "Nature may be said to have taken pains to reveal, by rudimentary organs and by homologous structure, her scheme of modification, which it seems that we wilfully will not understand" (p. 388). By comparison with this flight of anthropomorphic fantasy, Aristotle's view of nature's intentions seems positively sober and restrained.

[56]The rhetoric of perfection is evident throughout the pages of *Origin of Species*; as just one example, see the section "Organs of extreme perfection and complication" in chapter VI.

[57]For the importance of contingency in Darwinian biology, see Stephen Jay Gould, *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989), pp. 51, 283–91, 299–301, 317–318, and especially pp. 300–01 for the argument about imperfection of biological form.

(more than he himself realized).[58] When we see in an animal an organ that apparently has no function, it becomes difficult to ascribe its presence to the plans of an all-powerful, benevolent deity, who presumably would be able to achieve perfection in his creations and would not allow anything wasteful into his designs. Vestigial organs seem to be comprehensible only if species have histories. If *homo sapiens* has a tail bone, but no tail, the reason, Darwinists argue, is that human beings have evolved from monkey-like creatures that did have tails. The tail has since dropped out of the picture in the human species, but the tail bone remains as a reminder of its remote origins. Thus, Darwin, for all his own occasional confusion on this issue, does operate with a conception of biological form different from Aristotle's.[59] For Darwin biological form is generally a combination of perfection and imperfection.[60] The organism must be sufficiently well

[58]Darwin calls them "rudimentary, atrophied, or aborted Organs" and discusses them in chap. XIII of *Origin* (pp. 364–69).

[59]On this subject, see the section on "Mechanism and Teleology" in Himmelfarb, *Darwin*, pp. 337–52. For a contrary view—an Aristotelian reading of Darwin—see Larry Arnhart, *Darwinian Natural Right: The Biological Ethics of Human Nature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

[60]Darwin's way of formulating this point is to distinguish relative from absolute perfection. See, for example, *Origin,* pp. 167–68:

> Natural selection in each well-stocked country, must act chiefly through the competition of the inhabitants one with another, and consequently will produce perfection, or strength in the battle for life, only according to the standard of that country. Hence the inhabitants of one country, generally the smaller one, will often yield, as we see they do yield, to the inhabitants of another and generally larger country. For in the larger country there will have existed more individuals, and more diversified forms, and the competition will have been severer, and thus the standard of perfection will have been rendered higher. Natural selection will not necessarily produce absolute perfection; nor, as far we can judge by our limited faculties, can absolute perfection be everywhere found.

For the same point about "absolute perfection," see also p. 381.

formed and suited to its environment to survive—to that extent one can still speak of perfection of biological form in Darwin. But for Darwin, no organism can be, as it were, perfectly perfect, for that might suggest a divine hand in its creation.

All this does not necessarily prove Darwin's particular theory of evolution; the issue of vestigial organs remains controversial, with some of Darwin's critics insisting that organs appear to be vestigial only because we have not searched hard enough to find their function. But the issue of vestigial organs does serve to illustrate the nature of a spontaneous order and to suggest how it differs from a non-spontaneous order. The key point is that a spontaneous order will not look just like an order that has been planned by a single consciousness. Because of the way they come into being, spontaneous orders always embody an element of temporality, or what might be called historical contingency. Centrally designed orders, because they come into being at a single moment and in one stroke, can at least aspire to eliminate contingency and achieve complete perfection of form. But spontaneous orders always betray the history of their coming into being and hence display a certain messiness by comparison with consciously designed orders.

No one understands this point about spontaneous orders better than Austrian economists; they stress the elements of temporality and contingency in economic affairs and thus reject the possibility of mathematical modeling and economic forecasting. That is one way in which the Austrian School marks an advance beyond earlier economic thinking, including classical economics. The idea of spontaneous order was so novel when thinkers began to explore it that people took a long time to realize how truly revolutionary it is. Smith's ideas were subject to the same kind of misunderstanding that later dogged Darwin's (and like Darwin, Smith did not fully comprehend what was distinctive in his own thinking). People thought that Smith, with his "invisible hand" idea, had merely ascribed a different origin to economic order, but was still describing essentially the same kind of order. Supply would come perfectly into line with demand as if it had been consciously ordered to do so, even if no one really was directing the economy as a whole. The classical economists themselves were prone to this kind of misinterpretation of their own insights,

as witness the way both Smith and Ricardo mistakenly insisted on distinguishing between "market prices" and "natural prices."[61] The neoclassical economists, with their focus on equilibrium theory and the idea of perfect competition, perpetuated this kind of error. Their fundamental mistake is that they tried to defend capitalism as a way of achieving economic perfection, always guided by the chimera of perfect equilibrium. With their equations and diagrams, they pictured the market economy as if it had been planned by a single, giant intellect—and as if all market phenomena could be surveyed and taken in from the perspective of a single planner. This approach tempted socialists to think that by tinkering with these equations and diagrams, they could devise a system of central planning to improve upon the market.[62] By contrast, the Austrian economists realized that the market economy is a form of spontaneous order and hence characterized as much by its imperfection as its perfection. The Austrians never claim that the market economy can achieve perfection. What they argue is that of all economic systems, it is the only one able to work toward correcting its imperfections in a systematic and rational manner. In an imperfect and ever-changing world, the market will never achieve equilibrium, but it has a way of working out disequilibria over time. This is what distinguishes spontaneous orders in general—over time, they are self-correcting and hence self-regulating systems. They are always perfecting themselves but they never achieve perfection.[63]

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[61]For Smith, see bk. I, chap. VII—"Of the natural and market Prices of Commodities"—in his *Wealth of Nations*, and for Ricardo, see chap. IV—"On Natural and Market Price"—in his *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*. On this issue and its relation to neoclassical equilibrium theory, see Murray Rothbard, *Economic Thought before Adam Smith: An Austrian Perspective on the History of Economic Thought* (Cheltenham, U.K.: Edward Elgar, 1995), vol. 1, pp. 450–52 and Murray Milgate, "Equilibrium: development of the concept" in Eatwell, *Invisible Hand*, pp. 105–106.

[62]See Mises, *Human Action,* pp. 697–98, 706–711, Kirzner, *How Markets Work*, p. 29, and Karen I. Vaughn, "Introduction" to Hoff, *Economic Calculation*, pp. xii–xiii, xviii–xix.

[63]See Ulrich Fehl, "Spontaneous Order," in Boettke, *Elgar Companion*, pp. 197–205. See also Mises, *Human Action,* p. 701:

With their complicated interplay between perfection and imperfection, and their inescapable elements of temporality and contingency, spontaneous orders involve a higher level of complexity than centrally designed orders. In the case of economics, a single mind or any group of central planners is simply incapable of processing and coordinating the massive amounts of data in a modern economy in the way the impersonal price mechanism can. This insight emerged in the course of the economic calculation debate concerning socialism inaugurated by Mises in the early 1920s and continued by Hayek in the 1930s.[64] Mises demonstrated that in the absence of monetary prices and the financial accounting they make possible, no centrally planned command economy can solve the basic economic problem of allocating resources in a rational and efficient manner. Building upon Mises's insights, Hayek developed the economic calculation argument in an epistemological direction and turned it into a problem of knowledge.[65] He showed that in a modern

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> We do not assert that the capitalist mode of economic calculation guarantees the absolutely best solution of the allocation of factors of production. Such absolutely perfect solutions of any problem are out of reach of mortal men.

Notice that, as Darwin does in the biological realm, Mises rejects the possibility of "absolute perfection" in the economic realm.

[64]The socialist calculation debate began with Mises's essay "Die Wirtschaftsrechnung in sozialistischen Gemeinwesen," published in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaften* 47 (1920). For an English translation by S. Adler of this essay, see Ludwig von Mises, *Economic Calculation in the Socialist Commonwealth* (Auburn, Ala.: Praxeology Press, 1990). For Mises's classic statement of his position, see chap. XXVI of *Human Action,* "The Impossibility of Economic Calculation Under Socialism" (pp. 694–711). For Hayek's key contribution on the problem of knowledge, see his "The Use of Knowledge in Society" in his *Individualism and Economic Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948). This volume also contains several other chapters on the socialist calculation debate (chaps. 7–9). For further contributions to the debate, see Mises, *Socialism*, especially the section "The Economics of an Isolated Socialist Community" (pp. 111–220), and volume 10 in *The Collected Works of Friedrich Hayek, Socialism and War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977). For more on the socialist calculation debate, see the second section of Chandran Kukathas's essay on Ben Okri in this volume.

[65]Austrian economists have debated whether Hayek's position in the socialist calculation argument merely develops out of Mises's argument or

economy, the relevant and crucial knowledge—of consumer desires and the means for satisfying them—is always of necessity widely dispersed and only market prices can coordinate the information, giving entrepreneurs the signals they need to work toward bringing supply in line with demand.

Like Darwinian natural selection, the market involves a process of trial and error operating over time. Nobody can assemble from a single vantage point all the data necessary to run an economy properly, in part because much of this data is of necessity guesswork, an attempt to anticipate future conditions that cannot be extrapolated from the present with any certainty. The market economy works by allowing a multitude of entrepreneurs to operate freely and in competition with each other. Those who anticipate the future correctly will be rewarded and thus enabled to continue in the competition (though only as long as they keep guessing properly), while those who are wrong about the future have to move into other lines of endeavor.[66] In short, the free market will always produce failures, but, unlike other economic systems, it has a built-in mechanism for correcting them. That is why the efforts of a multitude of uncoordinated market actors can produce a more rational result than any centrally planned economy can generate. Centrally planned economies inevitably produce system-wide failures, whereas the free market tends toward merely local failures, which generally cancel each other out.[67]

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provides an alternative to it. See, for example, Joseph T. Salerno's postscript, "Why a Socialist Economy is 'Impossible,'" in Mises, *Economic Calculation*, pp. 59–66. Salerno argues convincingly that Hayek's position should be distinguished from Mises's. Nevertheless, in the larger picture, clearly Mises and Hayek were allied in opposition to the socialist camp. For another attempt to distinguish their positions, see Kirzner, *How Markets Work*, pp. 16–19, but Kirzner concludes that their arguments "turn out to be two sides of the same coin" (p. 18).

[66]See Mises, *Human Action,* p. 701.

[67]On this point, see Peter Rutland, *The Myth of the Plan: Lessons of Soviet planning experience* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1985), especially p. 39:

> Planned economies have an in-built tendency to reject the admission of error (although they all have to in the end), while market economies, by contrast, are built around the

Critics of capitalism who point to isolated examples of so-called market failure or imperfect competition thus miss the point of the Austrian defense.[68] They assume that economic perfection is somehow possible in human affairs, and if capitalism cannot produce it, we have to replace the free market with some form of central planning. The Austrian argument is that, in an imperfect world, where all economic factors, especially consumer desires, keep changing over time, the goal of a perfect economic order is a pure fantasy. Proponents of socialism condemn the actual and necessarily imperfect world of capitalism according to the impractical and indeed impossible standard of a theoretical model of perfect planning. But the point of economics is to look at the real world with all its constraints, and in actual practice the free market, although unable to produce perfection, performs significantly better than any alternative system in solving economic problems. Both the economic realm as the Austrians conceive it and the biological realm as Darwin conceives it are not some kind of Leibnizian best of all possible worlds, in which whatever is, is right. Austrian economics does not defend every individual result of the market as perfect but only the system as a whole for its self-correcting properties. Any attempt by an

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> principle of uncertainty—one man's error is another man's entrepreneurial gain. (If anything, market economies face the problem of over-generation of failure.) Planned systems lack any mechanisms for the automatic registration of failure, such as bankruptcy or takeover, or, more indirectly, stock market quotations, transferable international currencies and so forth.

For further critique of Soviet economic planning, see James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 193–222.

[68]See Kirzner, *How Markets Work*, p. 54:

> Many features of real-world markets which appear, from a perfectly competitive-ideal perspective to be direct evidence of inefficiency, turn out to be wholesome features of a vigorously and dynamically competitive world. So-called "imperfections" of competition emerge as crucial elements in the market process of discovery and correction of earlier entrepreneurial errors.

external force like government to intervene in the normal operation of the market will succeed only in interfering with its self-correcting processes and thereby produce a worse result. Austrian economics is no more "providential" in its thinking than Darwinian biology—it does not picture a whole of which every part can be shown to be both necessary and good. Like Darwin, Mises and Hayek deal with the only real world we have, one shot through with contingency and unintended and unanticipated consequences, and hence a profoundly imperfect world. As we will see, this is also the world in which literature is produced, and which it sometimes mirrors and portrays.

V.

We have seen that what might look like imperfections in a centrally designed order may be part of the hustle-bustle of a spontaneous order, which as a constantly self-correcting mechanism can never achieve a static perfection. Counterintuitively, in a spontaneous order, imperfection is thus compatible with order and indeed a defining characteristic of this particular kind of order. This insight might help us mediate between the extreme positions of the New Criticism and Deconstruction, that literature is either wholly ordered or wholly disordered. To be sure, literature will always offer us examples of perfectly designed order. When a great poet sits down to write, he may create a masterpiece in which every element falls perfectly into place. A great lyric poem comes as close to perfection of order as the human mind can produce. But does the lyric poem provide a proper model for all literature? In a way, that was the central claim of the New Critics,[69] but it is difficult to apply their conception of literary order to a five-hundred page novel. Every word in a twenty-line lyric poem may be meaningful and have a role to play in the whole, but is that true of every word in a five-hundred page novel? We know that some novelists have failed to notice when editors or publishers or even simple misprints have altered

[69]See my essay "The Primacy of the Literary Imagination, or, Which Came First: The Critic or the Author?", *Literary Imagination* 1 (1999): 133–37.

words in their texts.[70] Such observations suggest that large-scale literary works such as the novel may allow for a different kind of order than the lyric poem—one that can admit more messiness, the kind of imperfections that characterize a spontaneous order.[71]

The simple fact is that under normal circumstances a five-hundred page novel will take much longer to write than a twenty-line lyric poem. In theory, this difference in time of composition need not have any effect on the form of the finished product. There is no reason in the abstract why a novelist cannot maintain a lyric poet's strict control over his materials, and some novels do approach the kind of perfection of form we associate with the best lyric poetry—that was certainly Flaubert's hope for his novels. But in practice, the fact that novels generally take years rather than days to write tends to introduce a certain looseness into their form. Working on page 750 of his manuscript, a novelist will sometimes forget what he wrote several months earlier on page 150, and allow minor inconsistencies to slip into his narrative. Even when he goes back to revise his manuscript, a novelist may fail to notice such errors and allow them to survive in the published version.

This tendency toward looseness of form was compounded by the way novels often were published in the heyday of the genre

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[70]For many examples of this phenomenon, see Allan C. Dooley, *Author and Printer in Victorian England* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1992)—he shows how the mechanics of book production in the nineteenth century introduced all sorts of contingency into the final product. As he puts it in one case, "stereotype plates were subject to an insidious typographical entropy through which textual changes that nobody intended could occur" (p. 4). See also pp. 160, 164. For some specific examples of authors failing to spot textual changes introduced during the printing process by mistake, see p. 40 (William Makepeace Thackerary), p. 41 (Charles Dickens), and p. 48 (George Eliot).

[71]I am not setting up a classification of literature here based strictly on length—"short works are perfect in form; long works are imperfect." Many long works of literature may be governed by a careful, overarching plan and achieve a remarkable consistency in structure, imagery, and other literary aspects—one thinks of Dante's *Divine Comedy* or Joyce's *Ulysses*. By the same token, it is perfectly possible that a brief lyric might contain inconsistencies. I am talking simply about a literary rule of thumb—the longer the work, the more likely that it will contain inconsistencies and imperfections.

in the nineteenth century. Many were initially serialized in popular periodicals or published in independent parts, appearing in installments of a few chapters at a time on a weekly or monthly basis. Serial publication usually forced novelists to commit their ideas to print as they were composing and hence before their novels were finished. Evidence from novelists' notes, diaries, and communications to friends and publishers shows that they generally did plan out their works in advance.[72] They usually had a good idea of what the overall shape of their novels was going to be, and they often had sketches for the chapters they were going to write later. But precisely from looking at such sketches, we know that novelists frequently altered their plans in the course of composition, introducing new characters and plot turns as they worked up their material. Later installments could revise the direction in which the novel was going, but they could not unwrite the installments already published (and in some cases widely read and fixed in the public's imagination). Thus, later chapters in serialized novels sometimes ended up inconsistent with chapters published earlier.

Of course, the serialized version of a novel was often not its final form. Serialized novels were frequently repackaged in book form, and at that stage novelists had a chance to revise their work. Some availed themselves of the opportunity to change the text, sometimes eliminating inconsistencies that had crept into their plots, sometimes tightening up the narratives, sometimes writing new scenes, even new endings.[73] But given the way we

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[72]In the case of Dickens, for example, a large amount of the working material for his novels has survived and it is available in facsimile reproduction and transcription in Harry Stone, ed., *Dickens' Working Notes for His Novels* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). In a note to *Little Dorrit*, for example, we can see Dickens planning how to structure his novel around parallel scenes: "A companion scene between father & daughter, to the old scene in the Marshalsea" (p. 293). On Dickens's planning of his novels, see Gary Saul Morson, "Contingency and the Literature of Process," *Bakhtin and the Classics*, R. Bracht Branham, ed. (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2002), p. 254.

[73]See Dooley, *Author and Printer*, pp. 94, 99:

> a genuine second edition was guaranteed for most serialized works, when they came out in volume form after the

romanticize the author's ceaseless quest for formal perfection, we may be surprised to learn that nineteenth-century novelists often did not take full advantage of the chance to revise their work carefully for book publication. Sometimes an author was too engrossed in new work to take pains with the old; sometimes the way the public had become attached to particular scenes during the process of serialization made an author reluctant to tamper with his own work. Whatever the reasons, many book versions of novels do not depart substantially from the original serial installments, or at least the serialized version heavily influenced the final form the novel took.

In such cases, the form a novel takes is not the result of a single moment of centrally planned creation, but must be explained in terms of the history of its composition and publication. Thus, the novel's form comes to incorporate an element of temporality or historical contingency. Serial publication—and the serial composition that went along with it—could therefore result in the presence in some novels of the equivalent of vestigial organs. A novelist might introduce a character in an early chapter, thinking at the time that he would later develop the character into a major figure in the story. He might start a subplot in motion that looked as if it were going to propel the character to prominence later in the action.[74] But in the course of months of serial publication, the

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> last magazine installment or monthly part had appeared. Successful authors who regularly published their works initially as serials knew they would have a chance to revise their entire texts, and could plan accordingly. Thackeray, Dickens, Eliot, Arnold, Trollope, and Hardy, for example, all at various times submitted work for serial publication already knowing that they would make changes for subsequent publication in book form. . . . Many Victorian authors seem to have taken a perfectabilitarian view of their texts, looking forward from the time of first publication to a series of editions and impressions, each affording an occasion to reduce errors, correct misstatements, add clarifications, or revise in response to criticism.

[74]For an example in Dostoevsky's composition of *The Idiot*, see Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, p. 137:

author might for one reason or another lose interest in the character and demote him to minor status or perhaps just drop him from the narrative entirely. In the course of hundreds of pages in the novel a character who originally seemed promising might end up more or less extraneous to the narrative and all-but-forgotten by the closing chapter (indeed readers might not even notice his absence at the end). But such a character might not be excised from the final book version of the novel, perhaps because the author had a lingering affection for him, or more likely just because cutting him out of the narrative would seem more trouble than it was worth. The character would remain as a monument to an earlier stage of the evolution of the novel, much as a vestigial organ points to an earlier stage of a species' evolution.

A scholar with a New Critical bent looking for perfection of literary form in the book version of such a novel (and perhaps not knowing the details of its serial publication) would be puzzled by the presence of a character in the early chapters who seems to have no role to play in the later chapters and hence in the book as a whole. Of course, the New Critics were nothing if not ingenious, and no matter how forgotten a character might be by the end of a novel, any New Critic worth his salt would be able to demonstrate that the novel would not be the same without him. But this seems to be a case where we would be better served by invoking the concept of history and turning to the novel's process of composition to explain its anomalies. Instead of trying to find the place of the character in a perfect plan for the

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> part I of *The Idiot* contains much stronger signs of a future conflict between Myshkin and Ganya—constant misunderstandings, insults, vague threats, and a blow—all of which seem to lay the groundwork for them to be significant enemies. When Ganya ominously (and eponymously) calls Myshkin an idiot, the full weight of the title seems to promise a dramatic clash. But in fact Ganya turns into a minor, though frequently present, character, and nothing significant or "fatal" takes place between him and Myshkin. . . . In the notebooks written after the publication of part I, [Dostoevsky] reminds himself to do something more with Ganya but never does.

novel that was carried out successfully, we should look to a plan that was in fact revised and perhaps abandoned in the course of composition. But the presence of this kind of extraneous element in a novel does not necessarily impugn its fundamental integrity as a work of art. It suggests that the novel is not entirely perfect according to a New Critical conception of literary form, but it also points to the fact that the author was working on perfecting his novel over time, revising an original conception, presumably to improve upon it. One might wish that the author had revised the character completely out of the book when assembling it from the installments,[75] but some remnants of imperfection in the final version do not mean that the book completely lacks unity and order. In fact, only because such a novel is generally well-ordered are we able to note a few elements in it that are extraneous. If the book lacked all coherence, we would never notice that some elements are out of place.

For a concrete example of contingency of form in the novel, especially of how some elements of imperfection are compatible with overall order in the case of a long, serialized novel, we can turn to the case of Elizabeth Gaskell. Gaskell's last novel, *Wives and Daughters*, is widely considered to be one of her best works, if not her artistic masterpiece.[76] As the editor of the Penguin edition

[75]Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, p. 24, points out that authors often cover over the process by which their works were written:

> the creative process typically traces not a single line to a goal but a series of false leads, missed opportunities, new possibilities, improvisations, visions, and revisions. It is constituted by an intention that evolves over time. To be sure, authors typically remove the traces of this process and present their work as if it were the product of a clear plan, known from the outset. By convention, works are usually offered as the expression of an intention that is essentially instantaneous even if it took time to execute and takes time to appreciate. After the work is complete, the authors remove the "scaffolding," as Bakhtin liked to say.

[76]See Pam Morris's introduction to her edition of *Wives and Daughters* (London: Penguin, 1996), pp. viii–ix:

explains, "*Wives and Daughters* was first published in eighteen monthly parts in the *Cornhill Magazine* from August 1864 to January 1866."[77] The novel shows how skillfully a talented and experienced Victorian novelist could work within the serial format. It is well-planned overall; Gaskell artfully juggles a number of plot lines, as her characters fall in and out of love with each other. As in one of Shakespeare's romantic comedies, Gaskell's young lovers are originally mismatched and must realign their affections for a happy ending to become possible. As evidence of Gaskell's careful advance planning, the opening scene from her heroine's childhood clearly foreshadows many of the central motifs of the novel. In general, Gaskell telegraphs her narrative punches. The alert reader can anticipate plot developments and in particular can tell ahead of time when a given love match is going to work out, and indeed foresee how the plot will eventually be resolved.

Nevertheless, for a book that is generally well-planned and well-executed, *Wives and Daughters* has some surprising and striking inconsistencies. In Chapter 9, Gaskell writes of one of her main characters, the troublesome stepmother of her heroine: "She could no longer blush; and at eighteen she had been very proud of her blushes."[78] Yet in the very next chapter, Gaskell writes of the same woman: "She felt herself blush."[79] Compounding the

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For her contemporary readers, this last novel along with *Cranford* (1853) represented her greatest achievements. No less a figure than Henry James wrote of it: ". . . in 'Wives and Daughters' the late Mrs. Gaskell has added to the number of those works of fiction—of which we can not perhaps count more than a score as having been produced in our time—which will outlast the duration of their novelty and continue for years to come to be read and relished for a higher order of merits. . . . So delicately, so elaborately, so artistically, so truthfully, and heartily is the story wrought out." Another contemporary reviewer praised the novel above the work of Jane Austen and George Eliot.

[77]Pam Morris, "A Note on the Text," *Wives and Daughters*, p. xxxiv.

[78]*Wives and Daughters*, p. 96.

[79]Ibid., p. 104.

error, Gaskell later in the same chapter has Mrs. Kirkpatrick blush again,[80] and in the following chapter she has her yet once more "get up a very becoming blush."[81] This is a trivial matter, but it seems strange that as accomplished a writer as Gaskell could make such a glaring error. As another "example of Gaskell's occasional forgetfulness as to detail,"[82] the Penguin editor points out that she is inconsistent about the allowances the sons of the country squire in the novel get while in college; at one point they are said to receive £250 and £200 respectively;[83] later the figures are set at £300 and £200.[84] Right at the beginning of the novel, the chief aristocratic family in the story is presented as Tory in their allegiances.[85] But later in the novel Gaskell makes a great deal of the Whig sympathies of this same family, which she pointedly contrasts with the Tory sympathies of the country squire and his family.

One might well wonder why Gaskell failed to eliminate such glaring inconsistencies in the serial version when the novel came out in book form (Smith and Elder published it in two volumes in 1866). It is here that an element of historical contingency enters the story. Gaskell died suddenly just before finishing the novel and thus never had a chance to revise her work for book publication. Indeed, she did not live to write the final chapters, and the editor of *Cornhill Magazine*, Frederick Greenwood, had the melancholy task of composing a concluding note, in which he undertakes to tie up the loose threads in the novel, based on internal evidence and remarks Gaskell had made about how she intended to bring the story to an end. Gaskell's untimely death explains why she left inconsistencies in her narrative, but it raises a more fundamental question. How can we regard *Wives and Daughters* as an artistic whole if Gaskell did not live to finish it? According to Aristotle, a well-made plot has a beginning, a middle, and an end

[80]Ibid., p. 108

[81]Ibid., p. 132.

[82]Ibid., p. 663.

[83]Ibid., p. 192.

[84]Ibid., p. 258.

[85]Ibid., p. 6.

(*Poetics* 1450b). But strictly speaking, *Wives and Daughters* has no end. Despite the *Cornhill* editor's efforts, we are left with some loose threads; for example, we never find out what happened to one important character in the novel, Mr. Preston, and since he is in many respects the villain of the piece (he creates serious problems for two young women), we are disappointed that we do not see him get his ultimate comeuppance. More importantly, as Gaskell's story breaks off, the hero and heroine are not yet married, thus denying the proper closure we would expect in a Victorian novel. The *Cornhill* editor was moved to write of Gaskell's death and what it did to the novel: "A few days longer, and it would have been a triumphal column, crowned with a capital of festal leaves and flowers; now it is another sort of column—one of those sad white pillars which stand broken in the churchyard."[86] Instead of picturing *Wives and Daughters* as the crowning achievement of Gaskell's career, Greenwood implies that her death turned it into a ruin.

But is *Wives and Daughters* truly a ruin? This view seems to be the product of the kind of false dichotomy we have been discussing—a novel must either be perfectly complete or remain hopelessly fragmentary and imperfect. But this way of talking about the book does not seem true to the average reader's impression. A critic might insist on theoretical grounds that without its final chapters *Wives and Daughters* must be regarded as a mere fragment of a novel, but the fact is that readers tend to put the book down with a feeling of satisfaction at the end. Gaskell composed enough of the story for us to see clearly how it was going to come out. We have no doubt that the hero and heroine are going to be married. Dickens died in the middle of writing his last novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, but it was literally *in the middle*—he had composed only about half the book when he was felled by a fatal stroke. Thus, *Edwin Drood* does really feel like a fragment—indeed readers have debated ever since its first publication what the solution to Dickens's mystery was going to be. But no such mystery surrounds the ending of *Wives and Daughters*. If one had to formulate the situation mathematically, one

[86]Ibid., p. 648.

might say that Gaskell's novel is about 90 percent complete, and that is very different from 50 percent complete. Indeed, one feels like saying that Gaskell's novel is "complete enough"—complete enough for us to appreciate it as an artistic whole.

Thus, *Wives and Daughters* is more like one of Darwin's animals than one of Aristotle's. The book's parts do not form a perfect whole—various inconsistencies remain in the plot and above all it lacks a proper ending. Still, its form suffices—the novel has enough narrative consistency and closure to function as a satisfying reading experience. *Wives and Daughters* is therefore an excellent example of how isolated elements of temporality and historical contingency in a work are compatible with its possessing literary form on a larger scale. The fact that the novel was composed over a long period of time led to the inconsistencies in the narrative, and the fact that Gaskell happened to die before completing the story left it without the full closure we would normally expect. In its final published form, *Wives and Daughters* thus combines imperfection with perfection. But one can still talk about the novel as a coherent literary experience in the face of its manifest imperfections. Ever since Aristotle, critics have been speaking of literary form as organic and have used biological analogies in talking about literature. But that means that if Darwin revised our notion of biological form, we need to consider revising our notion of literary form as well. Darwin's looser conception of biological form may prove more useful in comprehending the genre of the novel than the Aristotelian conception that provided the foundation for the New Criticism and its analysis of poetry.

Wives and Daughters is of course only one novel and in many ways it constitutes a special case.[87] Fortunately, authors do not

[87]My point in discussing *Wives and Daughters* is indeed to offer an extreme case—to show that even when an author dies before finishing a novel and hence perfecting it, she may have finished enough for us still to be able to treat it as a (relatively) successful artistic whole. Just as Darwin does in the biological realm and Mises in the economic realm, we do not always have to speak of "absolute perfection" in the aesthetic realm. Darwin points the way with his criterion of biological sufficiency—just as an animal may be "perfect enough" to survive in a given environment without being

routinely die just before finishing their novels. Nevertheless, the imperfections of Gaskell's last novel are more typical of the genre than one might expect. For example, Gaskell did have a chance to revise the serialized version of her earlier novel *North and South* before book publication, but in the first edition she actually introduced some errors into the text, which she did not correct until the second edition.[88] Contingencies other than the author's death have frequently led to anomalies in the texts of serialized novels, and thus introduced an element of temporality into their form. But this is exactly what the model of spontaneous order would lead us to expect. What we have learned from economics and biology is that in spontaneous orders, which develop or evolve over time, some imperfections are compatible with an overall coherence. This insight can in turn show us a way out of the aporia into which the conflict between the New Criticism and Deconstruction threatened to lead us. The New Critics took the lyric poem as their basic model of literary order, and wanted even long novels to manifest the same kind of tight coherence one can find in a fourteen-line sonnet. The deconstructionists thought that they had refuted the New Critics and overturned any notion of coherence in literature when they were able to show that some literary works do not fit the model of perfect poetic form. It is revealing that much of the early deconstructive criticism dealt with novels, where it is indeed easier to find loose threads and

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absolutely perfect, we may say that a novel is "perfect enough" to provide a coherent aesthetic experience without being absolutely perfect.

[88]See Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, Patricia Ingham, ed. (London: Penguin, 1995), pp. xxvii–xxviii; Ingram says of the second edition:

> The edition also rightly removed the second occurrence of two paragraphs which appear erroneously in the first edition. . . . The repetition is evidently to be accounted for by the insertion of much additional material to the serial edition for the volume edition, immediately after their first occurrence. Gaskell then evidently overlooked this earlier use and repeated them at the end of the added material. In the second edition the second of these passages is deleted. . . . There were many other careful corrections.

imperfection of form.[89] But the deconstructive critics ended up over-generalizing just as the New Critics had done.[90] The fact that a five-hundred page novel has some loose threads does not mean that a perfectly crafted fourteen-line sonnet does too. The New Critics erred by taking the brief lyric masterpiece as their model of all literature, and the deconstructive critics erred by taking the loose, baggy novel as their model of all literature. As Austrian economics suggests, we need to respect the heterogeneity of phenomena, and a "one size fits all" approach to every kind of literature is unlikely to work. While recognizing that some literary works may achieve perfection of form, we need to allow for the possibility that other works may incorporate some formal imperfection without losing all coherence.

VI.

By invoking the idea of spontaneous order, we have found a way of describing a long novel as ordered even if it does not have the tight unity of a brief lyric. But we have done so in a manner that makes the novel seem at first like an inferior form. Indeed, we sound as if we were making excuses for the novel—it is too long, it takes too much time to write, the serial mode of production introduces inconsistencies, and so on. With our expanded conception of literary form, we can speak of novels as ordered wholes, but we seem to have condemned them to the status of second-class citizens in the literary world. Such is the power and allure of the critical ideal of the perfectly unified work of literature. It is difficult to escape its spell and its claim to universality. It has bewitched critics ever since Aristotle's *Poetics*, and much of our greatest literature has been created by authors trying to live up to it and successfully interpreted by critics guided by it as a heuristic device. But the ideal of perfect unity is only one literary model, and we need to remember that it was developed largely with regard to poetry and may not be equally applicable to other

[89]See, for example, J. Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982).

[90]See my "Literary Imagination," pp. 137–43.

genres. There is something profoundly misleading about treating novels as second-class poems; surely something has gone wrong when we find ourselves saying that *The Brothers Karamazov* is inferior to a Petrarch sonnet because it is by comparison loosely organized and seems to have superfluous words in a way that the lyric poem does not. Up to now we have been talking about how novels depart from the New Critics' model of literature, and of course viewed from this angle they will inevitably seem inferior to poems. But it is time to reverse perspectives, and consider in what way novels may be superior to poems. What look like defects in the novel from the perspective of the New Critics' ideal of the perfect poem may turn out to be virtues from another angle. After all, many people prefer novels to poems, and not just because novels are easier or more fun to read.

The novel is in fact in many respects a richer and more complex form than lyric poetry.[91] Precisely because it is more loosely organized, the novel is a more inclusive form—it can embrace a wider range of voices, it can present a more varied cast of characters and develop them more fully over time, and it can explore more complicated plots. The wide-ranging and all embracing character of the novel at its best may be purchased at the price of a certain disunity and inconsistency by the standards of strict poetic form, but this is a price we are prepared to pay in return for the novel's greater ability to capture the texture of lived experience. The looseness of form of a novel as compared to a lyric poem may well be truer to the spontaneity of life itself. Poetry shapes its material into artificial patterns—this was clearest in traditional poetry, when, before the days of free verse, to write a poem was to translate experience into highly elaborate patterns of meter and rhyme. Prose is only one of the many devices that

[91]The theorist most closely associated with the position that the novel is the most complex of literary forms is Mikhail M. Bakhtin (especially in the way he contrasts the novel with the epic). See, for example, a collection of his essays entitled *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981). For a discussion of Bakhtin's theory of the novel, see Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1990), especially pt. III, "Theories of the Novel," pp. 272–470.

novelists use to give a more realistic feel to their works. Several of the characteristic novelistic techniques, from first-person confessional narration to the use of diary and letter form, help create the impression of spontaneity in the genre.

This positive understanding of the novel allows us to revisit the issue of serialization in a new light. We originally presented the nineteenth-century practice of serializing novels as a negative factor that simply introduced errors into the works, that made them deviate from the strict standards of poetic unity. But serialization may also have had a positive effect on novels; it may have been in part responsible for some of the distinctive virtues the form developed. In short, we have to take more seriously the applicability of the concept of spontaneous order to the novel. It is not just that a novel may end up having the "look" of a spontaneous order because of the complicated history of its composition. That history itself turns out to be a form of spontaneous order. Serialized novels were produced over time by a process that involved trial-and-error, including a form of feedback—a process that is, then, analogous to biological evolution and that even more closely resembles the economic form of spontaneous order—the market. The phenomenon of the nineteenth-century serialized novel gives us an opportunity to look at the economics of literature in a concrete form, that is, the economics of literary production. And we will see that in this case the way that novelists actively participated in the commercial publishing industry of the nineteenth century, far from debasing or corrupting their work (as Marxists critics often suggest), gave them a means of improving it and honing their craft.

The case of the serialized novel is indeed a problem for anyone who thinks that capitalism always has a deleterious effect on art. Serialized novels in England and the rest of Europe were among the artistic glories of the nineteenth century, and yet they were at the same time items of commerce. In the Victorian economy, serialized novels were one of the most advanced of all marketing phenomena.[92] Magazines looked to increase their circulation by

[92]See Erickson, *Literary Form*, "Marketing the Novel, 1820–1850," pp. 142–69.

serializing the work of the most popular novelists of the day, and they developed sophisticated methods of boosting sales, including various promotional gimmicks like souvenir merchandise and tie-in products (what we would call Dickens action figures, for example).[93] The novelists in turn stood to make large sums of money from serialization.[94] Accordingly, they learned to write with this mode of publication specifically in mind and worked on exploiting the new medium for all it was worth. Serialized novels have much in common with a contemporary serial form of popular culture—the television soap opera.[95] Like soap opera episodes, serial installments of novels often ended with "cliffhangers." Novelists learned how to make the final chapter of an installment build up to a moment of great suspense—so

[93]For products connected to Dickens's first great commercial success, *The Pickwick Papers*, see Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1990), p. 197. See also Jennifer Wicke, *Advertising Fictions: Literature, Advertisement, & Social Reading* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 36: "after the publication of *Pickwick*, Weller cabs were plying the streets. *Pickwick*'s name *was* written in gold: versions of it were soon affixed to the most popular penny cigars and a writing pen, and Pickwick toby mugs, Sawyer cough drops, Weller boot polish, and candy tins printed with Pickwickian revels began to be sold" (for products associated with other Dickens novels, see p. 52). In the Victorian period, Dickens was as merchandised as any celebrity is in the world today. Wicke discusses what may be the first example of a "product placement" in one of the original Pickwick illustrations:

> Depicting Mr. Weller helping his son Samuel . . . the picture clearly shows a placard on the mantel . . . reading distinctly "Guinness Dublin Stout." The placard was originally the wooden crate side of the box containing Guinness; by being replicated in the illustration for Pickwick, it became an ad peeping out over Weller's head. (p. 30)

[94]For some examples of the amounts involved, see Erickson, *Literary Form*, p. 159.

[95]For an extended study of the parallels, see Jennifer Hayward, *Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997).

that readers could hardly wait to buy the next issue of the magazine to find out how the story continued.[96]

This is a good reminder that novel writing in the nineteenth century was indeed a commercial art, and even the greatest of the novelists—Dickens and Dostoevsky, for example—were out to earn their living as authors and hence were by no means indifferent to the demands of the reading public. In fact, they learned to pay close attention to how their audience was reacting to their works, and the method of serial publication gave them a feedback mechanism that put them in touch with their readers. I initially described the matter of "vestigial" characters as if it were simply an issue between a novelist and his artistic conscience. But in fact, the situation was more complicated and often involved interaction between an author and his readers. Sometimes what led an author to demote a particular character was the fact that the figure did not appear to be going over well with the reading (and the buying) public.[97] We are familiar with this

[96]Angus Easson in his introduction to *The Old Curiosity Shop* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1972) discusses Dickens's use of cliffhangers in that novel:

> Dickens exploited these opportunities for keeping his readers in suspense: for example, at the close of *Clock* 30, Nell shrieks and faints at the sight of a figure ahead of them on the road leading out of the second industrial city. The reader had to restrain his impatience for a week—or a whole month, if he was relying only on the monthly parts—when the opening chapter of the next number would immediately identify the figure as. . . . Again, at the end of *Clock* 39, Dick Swiveller is suddenly "seized with an alarming illness, and in twenty-four hours was stricken with a raging fever." Another week or month intervenes before his fate is known. (p. 15)

(*Clock* stands for *Master Humphrey's Clock*, the weekly magazine in which *The Old Curiosity Shop* first appeared.)

[97]Erickson, *Literary Form*, p. 163, points out that "some authors . . ., such as Charles Lever, an Irish novelist . . ., found serial publication an artistic advantage because from the responses of readers that he received to installments he could judge 'what characters & incidents *tell* best with readers'"

phenomenon in television soap operas—when a character is suddenly and mysteriously killed off if ratings seem to drop when he or she is on screen. Nineteenth-century novelists similarly followed the weekly or monthly sales figures for their serializations, and they could sense, especially with the help of reviews and word-of-mouth, when a character was boosting or depressing sales. The fate of a character thus sometimes hung less on the author's original artistic plan and more on the public's reception of the figure.[98] Given the Romantic notion of the autonomy of the artist in which many of us were brought up, we might be shocked to learn that nineteenth-century novelists allowed sales figures to influence the way they plotted their works. But that reaction is predicated on the assumption that the customer is always wrong, which may be no more sensible than the opposite claim.[99] Perhaps we should learn to appreciate the serialization of novels as a way of keeping authors in touch with their readers and allowing them to learn something useful from responses to their work. Indeed, the serialization of novels as it developed in the nineteenth century offers a good example of spontaneous

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(italics in the original). See also Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund, "Textual/sexual Pleasure and Serial Production," *Literature in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-Century British Publishing and Reading Practices*, John O. Jordan and Robert I. Patten, eds. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 145.

[98]For examples of Dickens expanding the role of his characters or killing them off in response to sales figures, see Hayward, *Consuming Pleasures*, pp. 58–59, 61; see especially p. 58: "he greatly expanded Sam Weller's role in *Pickwick Papers*, when sales jumped to forty thousand after Sam's first appearance." Delany discusses the same phenomenon in Thackeray; see *Literature, Money and the Market*, p. 98 and especially p. 206, n. 3, where he notes Thackeray's "decision to 'kill' Mrs Proudie during the serialization of *The Last Chronicle of Barset*."

[99]Cf. Delany's comment:

> This is not to say that the market always knows best. . . . But cultural critics should admit their ignorance of precisely why "art happens," and should not assume that they can point the way to an alternative society whose art would be superior to that of the existing order. (*Literature, Money and the Market*, p. 122).

order—of a self-regulating or self-correcting mechanism. Novelists could experiment with different characters, situations, and plot developments, and see what worked with their audience, thus allowing for midcourse corrections in the composition of a novel.[100]

To be sure, the process of serialization imposed certain burdens on novelists, which led some of them to try to avoid this form of publication.[101] If nothing else, serialization forced novelists to

[100]An extreme case is provided by *The Old Curiosity Shop*; Dickens did not originally intend this work to be a novel at all, but rather a sort of loose miscellany of tales and essays; only pressure from his public forced him to develop one of them at novel length. The character of Little Nell proved to be so popular, boosting sales from "60,000 of the first number" to "an unprecedented 100,000 copies" (Easson, *Curiosity Shop*, p. 13), that Dickens decided to devote a whole book to her story. But as Easson points out, Dickens paid a price in aesthetic imperfections in *The Old Curiosity Shop* for this midcourse change in plan:

> The awkward results of this last-minute expansion of the little tale can be detected in the early part of the novel. . . . The malicious profligate Fred Trent is soon dropped as Dickens prefers to develop the far more spectacular malice of Quilp, and Dick Swiveller's engaging profligacy. The Sophie Wackles episode proves to be a hilarious irrelevancy. Kit, who is introduced as a harmless semi-idiot, occasioning some light relief in Chapter 1, by some twenty chapters later has become an earnest responsible young man. (p. 14)

[101]See Dooley, *Author and Printer*, p. 147 for Anthony Trollope's quarrel with the serial publication system:

> Trollope did not wish to succumb to "this hurried publication of incompleted work." He held that "the rushing mode of publication to which the system of serial stories had given rise, and by which small parts as they were written were sent hot to the press, was injurious to the work done." To Trollope's eyes, the serial system, when it came to affect not only the publication but also the initial composition of a work, resulted in a loss of artistic control. His customary protection against pressure that might have led to hasty publication was to complete a novel and revise it thoroughly before sending any of it to a publisher. If serial issue

write on a strict schedule and to commit to a pre-arranged length for their novels—and this in itself involved a sacrifice of their artistic freedom.[102] We have records of novelists objecting to the way their editors or publishers were asking them to adapt their work to the demands of the paying public. No one would argue that serialization provided ideal working conditions for novelists,

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> was planned, he then metered out the manuscript to the printers while he went to work on his next book.

Erickson, *Literary Form*, pp. 162–63, quotes from Harriet Martineau's *Autobiography* to show how one Victorian author objected particularly to the cliffhanger convention of serial publication:

> I could not conscientiously adopt any method so unprincipled in an artistic sense as piecemeal publication. Whatever other merits it may have, a work of fiction cannot possibly be good in an artistic sense which can be cut up into portions of an arbitrary length. The success of the portions requires that each should have some sort of effective close; and to provide a certain number of these at regular intervals, is like breaking up the broad lights and shadows of a great picture, and spoiling it as a composition. I might never do any thing to advance or sustain literary art; but I would never do nothing to corrupt it, by adopting a false principle of composition.

[102]A good example is provided by the case of Gaskell's *North and South*, originally serialized in Dickens's periodical *Household Words*. As Patricia Ingham writes in her edition:

> Thanks partly to miscalculation on [Dickens's] part, Gaskell found herself pressurized to make the work shorter than she intended. What from her viewpoint constituted the worst compression was that made in the last few chapters of the novel. Consequently for the first (two) volume edition . . . the narrative was considerably expanded. (p. xxvii)

For a detailed analysis of the conflict between Gaskell and Dickens over the text of *North and South*, see Hughes and Lund, "Textual-sexual Pleasure," pp. 151–59. Gaskell was so upset by her experience with *North and South* that she did not allow any of her subsequent novels to be serialized until *Wives and Daughters*. In view of the problems Dickens created for Gaskell, it is ironic that early in his own career he himself found that serial publication inhibited him: "I was obliged to cramp most dreadfully what I thought a pretty idea in the last chapter. I hadn't room to turn" (quoted in Easson, *Curiosity Shop*, p. 15).

especially when they were at the early stages of their careers and had little or no bargaining power with their publishers. But still, many novelists—above all, Dickens—were energized by the serialization process—it gave them a sense of being in touch with their audience and hence of not writing in an artistic vacuum. It is a common assumption today that artists will produce their best work only if they are shielded from all commercial pressures, but the history of the nineteenth-century novel suggests just the opposite—that an author writing with his audience in mind in a competitive commercial environment will be more inventive and even experimental in an effort to stay one step ahead of his rivals and stand out in the crowd.

Thus, although Marxist critics would argue that serialization allowed capitalist publishers to exploit novelists,[103] in fact it was a medium that often worked to their advantage. Gary Saul Morson has shown how certain nineteenth-century authors, in particular Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, learned to use the serialization medium for new artistic purposes; he argues that they elevated it to a new height of aesthetic sophistication. For Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, according to Morson, even the novel as developed by authors like Dickens was too structured. The way the loose threads of the Victorian novel are typically tied up at the end of the story is too neat; it does not reflect the reality of chance and contingency in human life. As Morson writes:

> When we complete an artistic narrative and see how all the pieces fit, we think that, yes, things had to work out in just this way. For Dostoevsky, such a feeling ran contrary to his belief in free will. Things did not have to work out as they did, because people might have made countless different choices. What they chose was not what they had to choose: and we are all capable of

[103]See, for example, Feltes, *Modes of Production*, p. 9:

> Whether the commodity-text is to take the particular form of a series of books, a magazine serial, or a part-issue novel, series production, by allowing the bourgeois audience's ideological engagements to be sensed and expanded, allows as well the extraction of ever greater surplus value from the very production (or "creative") process itself.

> living more lives than one. But the structured wholeness of art suggests that freedom is an illusion, a product of mere ignorance of higher design. For Dickens, it was apparently a sign of Providence.[104]

Thus, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy set out to create a new form of serialized novel, a more open-ended one that would properly reflect the element of freedom in human life by allowing characters in the novel to make real choices and in effect determine the course of the narrative themselves, leaving not just readers but the author himself genuinely surprised by the turns of events.[105]

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[104]Gary Saul Morson, "The Prosaics of Process," *Literary Imagination* 2 (2000): 378–79.

[105]As Morson, following Bakhtin, formulates the point, Dostoevsky creates a kind of novel which "allows the hero to be truly free, capable of surprising not only other characters but also the author. . . . Strange as it may seem the Dostoevskian hero is not wholly the author's product; once created, he has a life of his own" (*Narrative and Freedom*, p. 91). Morson points out that other authors have had similar experiences with the "freedom" of their characters, but they usually revise their novels accordingly:

> To be sure, other authors are often surprised by their characters, whose inner logic may invalidate an earlier plan. It is not unusual for an author to discover that a character "refuses to do" what the author has destined for him; that is, the author recognizes that the outcome he or she has in mind would be perceived as false and forced. But in such cases most authors revise so that their surprise is not visible to readers. They may rewrite earlier sections so that the desired outcome does not appear forced or they may recast the novel so that what turned out to be the better outcome is prepared for all along. In either case the surprise that altered the original plan is masked. (*Narrative and Freedom*, p. 98)

What strikes Morson about Dostoevsky is the degree to which he accepted the freedom of his characters and hence the open-endedness of his narratives:

> The notebooks to *The Idiot* reveal conclusively that even after Dostoevsky had published the first part, he had little idea of how to continue. To mention just a few important questions of plot, he did not know whether Nastasya Filippovna would marry Rogozhin or Myshkin; whether she

"To begin with, the author takes advantage of serial publication to forbid himself the luxury of revising earlier sections to look forward to later ones, and so allows the reader to experience the work's composition as on ongoing event."[106] Morson shows how this principle governs Tolstoy's procedure in *War and Peace*:

> While *War and Peace* was being serialized, Tolstoy published a separate essay, "Some Words About the Book *War and Peace*" in which he insisted that, like life itself, his book would not unfold according to any overall design. . . . In his published essay and in his draft introductions to the book, Tolstoy explains that in printing each part of the work, he has no idea what will happen in the next parts, and that the work tends to no denouement. It will therefore lack closure, have no point "at which interest in the narration ceases." Rather, the author would, in each serialized section, respond to the needs of the present moment, developing some potentials from early parts and forgetting others, so that the work would have numerous loose ends and events that lead nowhere. "I strove only so that each part of the work would have an independent interest which would consist not in the development of events but in development [itself]." Each section would lead on to the next, and there would never be, could never be, a conclusion. No overall design governs, and presentness is all: the work would embody, as well as describe, "development itself."[107]

Morson does not use the term "spontaneous order," but it perfectly describes the aspect of life he argues Dostoevsky and Tolstoy were trying to capture in their novels; note in particular his claim that in Tolstoy's novels "no overall design governs."[108]

> would kill herself, be killed, or die naturally, or whether Rogozhin would be damned or saved. (*Narrative and Freedom*, p. 136)

[106]Morson, "Prosaics," p. 385.

[107]Ibid., pp. 380–81. See also Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, pp. 169–70 and "Contingency," pp. 266–67.

[108]A critic might counter Morson's claims by insisting that the fact that "no overall design governs" in Tolstoy's novels is itself his overall design.

In Morson's fascinating analysis—perhaps the most sophisticated attempt to relate the idea of freedom to narrative form—we see how in Dostoevsky and Tolstoy what at first appears to be the defect of the serial mode—the inability to revise and impose a vision of a whole on the separate parts—becomes its distinctive virtue—a way of mirroring the reality of freedom and contingency in human life. Morson thus justifies the serial form of the novel in the highest possible aesthetic terms; in the works of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, it ceased to be just a commercial mode of publication and became the vehicle for expressing a complex vision of the human condition.

As Morson formulates the point in the case of Tolstoy:

> It follows that serial publication was not simply the way in which *War and Peace* was published—as it was, say, for *Barchester Towers*—but was essential to its form. . . . *War and Peace* is like life and like history; . . . it teaches the wisdom of the provisional and presumes the openness of the future. . . . Tolstoy's war on foreshadowing, structure, and closure was ultimately an attempt to present a written artifact as an artifact still being written, and so closer to lived experience. . . . Above all, Tolstoy wanted to change our habit of viewing our lives as if they resembled conventional narratives. Our lives have not been authored in advance, but are lived as we go along. They are process, not product, and every moment could have been different, for contingency always reigns.[109]

To be sure, Tolstoy was ultimately responsible for the form his novels took and in that sense one can speak of intentionality being at work in his writing. Still, Morson is right to insist on the difference between novelists who plan out their works completely in advance and novelists who deliberately build an element of spontaneity into their creative process (with the understanding that there are all kinds of intermediate and borderline cases). As we have seen, the resulting novels look quite different, and, as Morson shows, they may embody distinct views of human existence. The central insight behind the concept of spontaneous order is that structure and form can be achieved without an "overall design." The idea of spontaneous order is important precisely because it supplies a middle term between perfect design and pure chance.

[109]Morson, *Narrative and Freedom*, pp. 170–72; see also Morson, "Contingency," p. 268.

In the way Morson talks of "process, not product" and the reign of contingency here, he could equally well be speaking about Austrian economics.[110] Although he does not in fact make use of Austrian economics in his analysis, he does draw heavily upon Darwin's idea of contingency in biological form, and in that sense he can be said to be working within the broader spontaneous order tradition.[111]

Franco Moretti also has applied Darwin's ideas to understanding nineteenth-century fiction, analyzing the process of literary canon formation as a kind of natural selection in the world of commercial publishing. For Moretti, "the market selects the canon"[112] via a thoroughly commercial process: "Readers read A and so keep it alive; better they buy A, inducing its publisher to keep it in print until another generation shows up."[113] Leaving the selection of great works of literature to the marketplace might seem like an arbitrary process and unlikely to yield aesthetically satisfying results, but Moretti's thesis "is that what makes readers

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[110]Compare the way Kirzner contrasts the Austrian view of human action with that of neoclassical equilibrium theory:

> It is impossible to imagine any real-world situation in which a decision-maker does not recognise that he must make his choices within an open-ended context. The decision-maker is *not* presented, as it were, with given resources. On the contrary, it is *in the course of the decision itself* that the human decision-maker *determines* what objectives are most important, and what resources are in fact available to him. . . . The inescapable and radical uncertainty faced by each human agent ensures the open-endedness of human choice. (*How Markets Work*, p. 26; italics in the original)

Morson and Kirzner are clearly describing the same world, one in literary terms, one in economic.

[111]See especially Morson, *Narrative Freedom*, pp. 249–51, for the way he draws upon Stephen Jay Gould's interpretation of Darwinian evolution.

[112]Franco Moretti, "The Slaughterhouse of Literature," *Modern Language Quarterly* 61 (2000): 210. See also his *Atlas of the European Novel 1800–1900* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 146, n. 5 and his *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 72–77.

[113]Moretti, "Slaughterhouse," p. 209.

'like' this or that book is—form."[114] In his view, authors compete with each other for commercial success by trying to introduce formal innovations, and the reading public picks out those that succeed artistically. Calling this the "Darwinian feature of literary history," Moretti describes this process in just the terms that characterize a spontaneous order—it involves a "feedback loop" and "trial and error."[115] Moretti's ideas are controversial, but his study of the development of formal techniques in nineteenth-century detective stories and the way Arthur Conan Doyle beat out his competitors, makes an impressive case for his thesis.[116] Thus, he lends support to the claim that the highly commercial system of serializing novels improved their quality through a process of literary evolution.

The serial novelists offered up a wide variety of literary possibilities to the reading public—variations from novel to novel and even varying options within individual novels as they were published serially. The reading public then acted as the environment does in Darwin's theory of natural selection, picking out the winners and losers in the competitive struggle among novelists for commercial success. It would be too much to speak of the survival of the "aesthetically fittest" in this process. No one would claim that the taste of the Victorian reading public, for example, was infallible. But it was not completely fallible either.[117] The Victorians did after all make Dickens the most commercially

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[114]Ibid., p. 211.

[115]Ibid., pp. 211, 215.

[116]Through a careful mode of empirical investigation written up in "Slaughterhouse," Moretti shows that Doyle, in contrast to all his contemporaries, figured out by a process of trial and error the optimal use of the new fictional device of clues in detective stories (they should be necessary, visible, decodable, and so on).

[117]As Moretti puts it, "if it is perverse to believe that the market always rewards the better solution, it is just as perverse to believe that it always rewards the worse one!" ("Slaughterhouse," p. 219, n. 12). In view of this pro-market statement, readers may be surprised to hear that Moretti generally describes himself as a Marxist; indeed he is very much embedded in the tradition of Marxist literary criticism, and often quotes Marx himself

successful of their novelists, and to this day critics also regard him as the most artistically gifted novelist of the era. By and large, with a few notable exceptions, the Victorian reading public did a reasonably good job of sorting out genuinely good from genuinely bad novelists.[118] And we can certainly identify ways in which the intense competition among novelists for the public's favor spurred them on to do better work and led them to improve their writing in a process that resembles biological evolution. In particular, the serial mode of nineteenth-century publication encouraged precisely the kind of sustained character development and complication of narrative that we have identified as among the distinctive virtues of the novel. The serial form gave nineteenth-century novelists the broad canvas they needed to create the rich novelistic worlds for which they are justly famous, and the very process of serialization gave them the time they needed to develop their characters and their plots, with the help of feedback from their audience.

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approvingly. Nevertheless, his empirical studies of literary history have led him to an understanding of how competitive markets function and contribute to the evolution of literary forms. Moretti seems more comfortable with the language of Darwin rather than that of Adam Smith, but whatever terms he chooses, he is in fact discussing the aesthetic benefits of capitalist competition.

[118]See Moretti, "Slaughterhouse," p. 210 for the equivalent in the eighteenth century:

> if one looks at the table of "the most popular novelists by editions printed 1750–1769," it's quite clear that the interplay of readers and publishers in the marketplace had completely shaped the canon of the eighteenth-century novel many generations before any academic ever dreamed of teaching a course on the novel: on that list of editions, Sterne is first, Fielding second, Smollett fourth, Defoe fifth, Richardson sixth, Voltaire eleventh, Goldsmith fifteenth, Cervantes seventeenth, and Rousseau nineteenth. They are all there.

VII.

The parallel between biological evolution and the evolution of a novel in the process of serialization is of course rough. In Darwin's theory, a conscious mind does not get involved at any stage of the process. Both the producing of variations and the selecting out of the survivors are the work of purely unconscious forces. But conscious human minds are involved at every stage of the evolution of a novel as we have described it.[119] Authors consciously write their novels installment by installment, readers consciously make decisions as to which parts of the novels they like, the authors in turn consciously decide how to respond to the feedback they get from their audience, and so on. But this process can still be regarded as a form of spontaneous order because no

[119]Biological and cultural evolution both involve a process of variation and then selection from among the variants by some kind of feedback. But the process of selection in the two cases is fundamentally different. By founding his theory on the concept of natural selection, Darwin emphasized the fact that conscious choice by something resembling the human mind is nowhere involved in the process. In all forms of cultural evolution, including literary, the human mind of course does come into play and conscious selections must be made. Cultural evolution in fact resembles Darwin's chief analogy for natural selection—the domestic breeding of animals. The first chapter of *The Origin of Species* is entitled "Variation under Domestication" and shows how species change over time when human beings set out deliberately and consciously to alter them in line with ideas of how they might be improved. This chapter makes it clear that Darwin himself recognized that evolution can occur as a result of either conscious or unconscious processes. And he recognized how the processes differ; domestic breeding, for example, produces results much faster than the unconscious process of natural selection. So too does cultural evolution, because, unlike biological evolution, it is decidedly "Lamarckian"—in literary evolution, for example, acquired characteristics *can* be inherited (which is to say that literary developments and traditions are passed down to new generations directly). For further discussion of the important differences between biological and cultural evolution, see Hayek, *Fatal Conceit*, pp. 23–28. See also Moretti, *Graphs*, pp. 78–80 and his brief note, "Structure, Change, and Survival: A Response to Winthrop-Young," *Diacritics* 29, no. 2 (1999): 41–42, where he discusses the "Lamarckian" implications of his theory of literary evolution. This is a point where Moretti would be better off using the language of economics instead of that of evolutionary biology.

single mind plans and controls it from start to finish. In describing spontaneous orders in the human realm, Hayek makes use of a phrase from the Scottish Enlightenment thinker, Adam Ferguson: "the result of human action but not of human design."[120] That is, in the human realm certain orders (not all) result from the uncoordinated activities of the participants; they are thus the result of human action (and hence conscious intentions are involved) but they are not the result of overall design—a single mind does not plan out the entire order in advance.

A wide range of human institutions, customs, and practices cannot be centrally planned or managed by a single intellect; instead they evolve through the interaction of many different minds over time, with no one in total control, and hence they develop in spontaneous and unpredictable ways. The growth of language itself is a good example of this kind of development, as is the growth of cities. Attempts by planners to design perfect cities always fail; we feel like saying that cities have a mind of their own, by which we mean that they grow to meet the needs and desires of the people who actually live in them and not the rigid schemes of urban planners.[121] The economic form

[120]See Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, vol. 1, p. 20. On p. 150, n. 19, Hayek quotes Ferguson's exact words from his *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (1767): "Nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design." Rothbard, *Classical Economics*, vol. 2, p. 367, n. 7 argues that Hayek took Ferguson's words out of context and misinterpreted them as applying to the free market, rather than to God's providence in history, as Ferguson intended.

[121]For the classic account of the conflict between central planning and spontaneous order in the modern city, see Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Modern Library, 1993). See also Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, pp. 102–46. The fact that the urban landscape offers an example of spontaneous order is profoundly relevant to our understanding of the novel. As many critics have noted, the development of the novel is intimately bound up with the development of the modern city. One might even say that the novel was developed in order to represent one of the principal forms of spontaneous order—the modern city. For the connection between the novel and the modern city, see Moretti, *Atlas*, pp. 77–140. At one point Moretti describes the way city dwellers in Balzac come together as a "sinister parody of Smith's invisible hand" (p. 95).

of spontaneous order—the market—is another case in which conscious minds are involved at every stage of the process, but no single mind plans and directs it all. Thus, an economic analogy rather than a biological is more appropriate to the way we have been describing the evolution of a novel.[122] An entrepreneur creates a product with a potential market in mind; he introduces it and sees how customers react; he may then modify the product to please his customers better—the result is an improvement in the product that could not have been planned or predicted ahead of time. Some forms of literary evolution proceed in similar stages, as Moretti recognizes when he describes canon formation as a "market" activity. An appreciation of how markets generally function would thus lead us to expect that the commercial and indeed competitive nature of nineteenth-century publishing made a positive contribution to the quality of the literature it produced.

This issue allows us to differentiate more precisely between Austrian economics and Marxism as ways of analyzing literature. As economic approaches, both call into question the Romantic ideal of the autonomy of art and the isolated creative genius. Both Austrian economics and Marxism lead us to picture the novelist as involved in a social process, but they understand and evaluate this process very differently. From the Austrian perspective, if some form of collaborative activity is involved in the creation of literature, it is still always collaboration among *individuals*, whereas in the Marxist view collaboration is typically understood in collectivist terms. In analyzing a literary phenomenon like the

[122]This is the crucial point at which we must remind ourselves that Austrian economics is *not* a species of Darwinism, but an independent form of thinking. Both the free market and biological evolution are forms of spontaneous order, but the mechanism that brings about the order is different in each case. The conscious human mind is very much involved in the economic realm, whereas it is barred from natural selection in Darwin's understanding. That is why the market economy is of a higher order of complexity than the biological realm—and why it is more "spontaneous"—faster moving and more unpredictable. Both Morson and Moretti gain insight into culture as a spontaneous order by invoking concepts from Darwin, but they would actually be able to describe the process of literary creation better if they employed the more relevant concepts of Austrian economics.

serialization of novels, Austrian economics, because of its methodological individualism, would suggest focusing on how those engaged in the process acted as individuals. It would look at how individual novelists approached serialization and how individual members of their audience reacted to their work, and finally at how novelists in turn reacted individually to these reactions. An Austrian economist would not expect either all novelists or all members of the novel-reading public to act or react in the same way; he would instead expect individuality and even idiosyncrasy to come into play at all stages of the process. That is why an Austrian would predict only that a process like serialization would have unpredictable results. One could never know in advance which novels would succeed with the reading public or for what reasons. Leaving room for elements of contingency and uncertainty leaves room for elements of creativity in the artistic process, even if it is no longer conceived as the achievement of purely solitary creators. From an Austrian perspective, both novelists and their readers have an active—and hence creative—role to play in the process of serialization; they are not, as some Marxists picture them, the mere passive victims of a market process imposed upon them by an all-powerful capitalist system.

That is indeed the point of describing serialization as a form of spontaneous order. The emergence of an artistically successful novel out of the interaction of an author with his reading public is the result of human action, but not of human design. As effective—as "well-designed"—as the system of serializing novels in the nineteenth century now looks to us, in fact no one planned it out ahead of time. It just evolved—spontaneously—as individual publishers and authors seized upon opportunities that opened up to them. To be sure, by comparison with other forms of spontaneous order, the novelist seems to have an unusually central role in the serialization process, but it is still not an example of pure central planning. As we have seen, in many cases the works that resulted from serialization were quite different from what the authors originally intended or planned because of the way they adjusted their novels to the demands of their audience as they wrote them. And we must not underestimate the role that anticipation of what the public wanted played in the formulation of

novelists' plans in the first place—this consideration gives novel readers an even more active part in the creative process as a whole. The case of serialized novels is a good illustration of one of the fundamental principles of Austrian economics—consumer sovereignty—which in turn dictates the importance of entrepreneurial activity.[123] What distinguishes the Austrian School is its orientation to the future—for example, it views anticipated prices as determining current costs. This process is what forces entrepreneurs always to look ahead and be creative—to anticipate consumer demand and adapt productive processes accordingly. From an Austrian perspective, then, it is readily understandable that the commercial pressures nineteenth-century novelists experienced in the process of serialization in many cases drove them to be more creative in writing fiction. In striving to give the public what it wanted, these novelists actually raised the level of their art.

Marxism, by contrast, typically approaches economics from the perspective of the producer not the consumer. Indeed, it views the economy as production-driven, not (as in the Austrian view) consumption-driven. As Marx writes in the *Grundrisse*: "production is the real point of departure and hence also the predominant moment. Consumption as urgency, as need, is itself an intrinsic moment of productive activity."[124] Marx allowed himself to be dazzled by the Industrial Revolution and all the marvelous new machinery it generated.[125] He came to think of the economy as a kind of giant mechanism, beyond the control of individuals (precisely because he failed to understand the principle of the invisible hand). He thought that all these new productive powers had come into being under their own steam, so to

[123]On the principle of consumer sovereignty, see Mises, *Human Action,* pp. 270–72.

[124]Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, Martin Nicolaus, trans. (New York: Vintage, 1973), p. 94.

[125]Marx's awe of the productive power of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie is clearly evident in his tributes to its industrial achievements in the *Communist Manifesto*; see Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, English Edition of 1888, in Feuer, *Basic Writings,* pp. 8–13, and especially p. 12. See also Rothbard, *Classical Economics*, vol. 2, p. 374.

speak, and not as a way of ultimately satisfying consumer demand.[126] The Marxist fetishizing of production in theory proved to be the bane of the Soviet and other communist economies in practice. They set out to produce and produce and produce, with no particular connection to potential consumption. Thus, the Soviet Union could turn out large amounts of capital goods like steel; it just could not produce them efficiently and with a view to real consumer needs and demands.[127] Severing the understanding of production from the understanding of consumption is one of the chief defects of Marxist thinking. It means that Marxists fail to understand how the market operates as a feedback mechanism, allowing consumers to send signals to producers that guide their business plans. Because of the Marxists' failure to appreciate the anticipatory role of the entrepreneur, they typically view capitalists as producing unwanted goods and only then seeking ways to sell them to a gullible public. Marxists mistake the fact that inevitably some entrepreneurs incorrectly anticipate consumer demand for a general failure of the capitalist system.

This attitude is especially prevalent in Marxist discussions of cultural production, which posit a culture industry that manufactures meretricious forms of entertainment and then foists them on an unsuspecting and naive mass audience. In the best-known example of this Marxist approach to culture, the Frankfurt School,

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[126]For a rethinking of the Industrial Revolution as driven by an earlier revolution in consumption, see Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), especially p. 9.

[127]For a discussion of this aspect of the Soviet economy, particularly in the era of the five-year plans, see Rutland, *Myth of the Plan*, p. 109:

> The 1930s growth model was built around the sheer expansion in the volume of factors of production set to work. Capital investments were jacked up to the highest bearable level (with a concomitant drop in the share of resources going to consumption). . . . The result is an extremely lopsided economy, in which a disproportionate amount of resources never actually leave the industrial sector.

Rutland points out that Michael Polanyi characterized this phenomenon "cleverly" as "conspicuous production" (p. 110). For further critique of overproduction of capital goods in the Soviet economy, see pp. 115, 135–36, 138.

consumers are portrayed as the dupes of advertising and other forms of marketing, passively accepting whatever kinds of entertainment Hollywood and other media centers serve up to them.[128] The myth of all-powerful media moguls and their captive audiences long dominated the field of Cultural Studies. In a way, Marxist cultural critics have simply bought into the fantasies and flattering self-images of executives in the entertainment business who dream of being smart enough to control their audiences. In fact, executives in the mass media are at the mercy of their unpredictable audiences, and live in constant fear of the fickleness of the public and its ever-changing taste. That is why the turnover rate among executives in the entertainment business is so high (try telling a fired head of a Hollywood studio about his hegemony over his audience).[129] Since

[128]For the classic statement of the Frankfurt School position, see "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" in Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, John Cumming, trans. (New York: Continuum, 1986), pp. 120–67. For a critique of this position, see Lavoie and Chamlee-Wright, *Culture*, p. 96. See also my essay, "Film Noir and the Frankfurt School: America as Wasteland in Edgar Ulmer's *Detour*" in *The Philosophy of Film Noir*, Mark Conard, ed. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), pp. 139–61.

[129]See the section "Why is it musical chairs in the Hollywood studio executive suite?" in Colin Hoskins, Stuart McFadyen, and Adam Finn, *Global Television and Film: An Introduction to the Economics of the Business* (Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 114–15. On Hollywood's inability to control its audience, see pp. 117–18:

> A Hollywood blockbuster such as *Independence Day* can make over $200 million in North American box office, whereas another movie with similar costs can open at as many theatres and flop, taking in only one or two million. . . . The fallibility of even the Hollywood majors in predicting success is illustrated by the many industry hits turned down by various studios, including *Star Wars, Back to the Future, Driving Miss Daisy*, and *Dances with Wolves*.

For a detailed account of the rapid turnover of motion picture executives even in the golden age of the studio system studied by the Frankfurt School, see Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996). For a treatment of the same phenomenon in the contemporary television industry, see Bill Carter, *Desperate Networks*

the 1980s, scholars in Cultural Studies have begun to break free from the Frankfurt School paradigm of the passive audience. Empirical studies of how audiences actually behave have shown that, far from passively accepting what is offered to them in the mass media, they take an active role in their reception of even the most commercial forms of popular culture.[130] It turns out that many Marxist critics have been too eager to impose a collectivist

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(New York: Doubleday, 2006). For amusing accounts of some of the movie industry's most spectacular failures to predict—let alone create—demand, see James Robert Parish, *Fiasco: A History of Hollywood's Iconic Flops* (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley, 2006).

[130]For a general discussion of these issues, see John Storey, *Inventing Popular Culture: From Folklore to Globalization* (Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell, 2003), especially pp. 48–62. For the turn in Cultural Studies to the idea of the active consumer, see Lavoie and Chamlee-Wright, *Culture*, pp. 19, 89–92. For the French theorist often credited with bringing about this turn, see Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life,* Steven Rendell, trans. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), especially pp. 164–76. For some specific studies of the active cultural consumer, see, for example, Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) and John Tullock and Henry Jenkins, *Science Fiction Audiences: Doctor Who, Star Trek, and Their Fans* (London: Routledge, 1995). Hayward, *Consuming Pleasures*, offers extensive evidence of the way that fans of serial forms from the Victorian novel to the television soap opera have influenced the direction of popular culture. As she writes:

> In the last two decades, critics working to reverse both the long-standing rejection of mass culture and the more insidious rejections of audience agency. . . have sought, in various ways, to assert the relative autonomy of the consumer. . . . Creators' innovations, artistic power, and complexity work to increase the texts' value for audiences and arise not in spite of the pressure to catch and keep a mass audience but in many cases as a result of that pressure. . . . Serial fans contribute to the shaping of their narratives, and creators attest to the creative inspiration this interaction can provide; on the other hand, creators also have the power to resist fan pressure and often do resist to keep texts from becoming too predictable and thus lessen their ability to intrigue and involve their audiences. (pp. 10–12)

Or as De Certeau succinctly puts it: "it is always good to remind ourselves that we musn't take people for fools" (p. 176).

model on cultural production and consumption. In lumping all members of the so-called mass audience together, they have missed the subtleties and nuances of many pop culture phenomena, especially the effects of audience segmentation. In contrast to Austrian economists, they have closed their eyes to the individuality of producers and consumers.[131]

The debate over whether the audiences for modern forms of mass entertainment are passive or active has obvious relevance to our understanding of the nineteenth-century novel, especially in its serialized form, which was one of the chief examples of mass entertainment in the earlier age. Marxist critics have tried to present the serialization of novels as just one more example of the process of industrialization and commodification that they see as endemic to capitalism. This kind of Marxist analysis typically presents both authors and readers as caught in a system of production that effectively governs their every move and response. Far from allowing any expression of their distinctive individualities, the publishing industry supposedly shapes them as individuals in the first place in line with its marketing needs and schemes. N.N. Feltes's *Modes of Production of Victorian Novels* may be extreme in its insistence on the iron grip of capitalist publishers on both authors and readers, but it is a well-known and well-received book and illustrates a basic tendency of Marxist understandings of culture. Feltes concludes his book with a study of E.M. Forster, insisting that, however anti-capitalist Forster may have been, he ended up serving the ideological and financial interests of his capitalist publishers:

> For while Forster assuredly did not set himself in 1909–10 to write a best-seller in *Howards End*, he nevertheless equally surely wrote within a determinate structure of book production, developed over the preceding twenty years, which enabled publishers to use the new means of production to produce commodity-texts. . . . I have denied the "dictatorship" of

[131]As John Ellis observes: "The fantasy of the single, centralized, multinational corporate agenda is only the mirror image of Marxism's desire for conformity and control; neither does justice to the diversity of human life" (*Literature Lost*, pp. 131–32).

> the consumer, insisting instead on the control of the capitalist publisher. . . . (R)eaders were being reagglomerated as "consumers" of commodity-texts by the new, rampant, fully capitalist literary mode of production, with the publishers' sway stretching past the bookseller to "capture the retailer's customers." And because these powerful lines of control extended themselves through the production process the interpellated subject was also transformed. Whatever Forster's political or social "liberalism," . . . the reader addressed by *Howards End* . . . was inevitably determined by these material realities of its production.[132]

Notice that Feltes explicitly rejects the Austrian principle of consumer sovereignty in favor of the Marxist idea of producer hegemony. For Feltes, neither the author nor the reader of novels is free; both are the prisoners of a capitalist mode of production; indeed he seems to claim that both are in fact *produced* by that mode of production, presumably by the marketing demands of the publishing industry (as if publishers were dictating to authors: "You will write what we want" and dictating to readers: "You will read what we publish").[133] This kind of Marxist argument is based on *ex post facto* reasoning. It assumes that because the publishing

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[132]Feltes, *Modes of Production*, pp. 97–98.

[133]In developing the idea that producers create demand, rather than responding to it, Feltes begins by rejecting any "assertion which arises out of 'free market' assumptions, based on the simple efficacy of 'demand.'" He goes on to claim that "the publishers may be seen to have eventually so expanded net books as sophisticated 'branded goods' that 'demand' became a controlled effect of production." Publishers thus succeeded, according to Feltes, in

> creating a new audience, although ideologically it might be explained as "satisfying a demand." Publishers were now in a position in the economic structure to undertake in a controlled way the creation of the kinds of mass audiences which the different careers of Charles Dickens and Charles Knight, seventy-five years earlier, had shown to be accessible to a new literary mode of production, by exploiting systematically the power of a commodity-text to interpellate an infinity of unknown subjects. (*Modes of Production*, pp. 87–88)

industry continually generates bestsellers, executives in the industry actually know what they are doing—that they know ahead of time exactly how to create the bestsellers. But if that were so, there would never be any failures in the publishing business, when in fact the failures typically outnumber the successes by a wide margin.[134] As with any form of mass entertainment, the publishing industry is, from the perspective of its executives, a mercilessly hit-or-miss business. Unable to predict reliably the taste of the reading public, and equally unable to manipulate it, let alone create it, publishers must rely on a shotgun form of marketing, publishing a wide range of titles in the hope that one will be a hit with a mass of readers. That is why Moretti can

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Because of Feltes's Marxist failure to see the link between consumption and production, he misinterprets the role of publishers. For a critique of the general idea that entrepreneurs create demand, see Kirzner, *How Markets Work*, pp. 54–58.

[134]It is true that, as many critics have noted, books for the mass market are often produced according to a formula (the Harlequin romance plot, for example). But such books rarely become bestsellers. The bestseller is often precisely the book that breaks the mold—and then is imitated endlessly in later works. This is how all markets operate; the truly innovative product is then copied by competitors. It is also true that some bestselling authors in effect become brand names, and can continue to churn out bestsellers according to a proven formula (perhaps no longer even writing the books themselves but merely allowing their names to be attached to ghostwritten texts). But as any publisher will admit, no one's name on a cover can *guarantee* that the book will be a bestseller. As with all markets, the book business has some elements of predictability, and at any given moment publishers have some idea of what is likely to sell. But, on the whole, publishing remains maddeningly unpredictable for those actively engaged in the business. Marxist critics betray their Hegelian roots by ignoring the element of contingency in publishing history and continually showing that what happened in the book market somehow *had* to happen according to the iron laws of capitalism. On "the extraordinary degree of uncertainty about consumer demand" in any form of mass entertainment, see Hoskins, McFadyen, and Finn, *Global Television*, pp. 113–30, and especially their conclusion: "There is no magic formula that a producer can apply to consistently turn out successes" (p. 118). It is a sad commentary on the current state of culture critique when it now takes professors of business economics to remind us that "creativity is an extraordinarily elusive concept" (p. 113) and cannot be reduced to a mechanical formula.

apply a Darwinian model in his analysis of success in the literary marketplace.[135] Like all markets, the book market can proceed only by a process of trial and error, in which nobody is in control and above all nobody can be certain of outcomes ahead of time.[136] As we have repeatedly seen, that is the nature of a spontaneous order.

Feltes's analysis is collectivist, determinist, and materialist; he downplays the role of individuals in the process, and works to deny their freedom and creativity. Instead, he tries to present a production process that is bigger than any of the participating individuals, and that in fact manufactures their subjectivity even as it manufactures commodities. In the Austrian view, by contrast, commodities are produced in response to the subjective desires of consumers, and any market activity therefore inevitably involves elements of contingency, uncertainty, and unpredictability. That opens up a realm of freedom and creativity for entrepreneurial activity in any business, including the

[135]See especially *Graphs*, p. 77:

> when a new genre first arises, and no "central" convention has yet crystallized, its space-of-forms is usually open to the most varied experiments. And, then, there is the pressure of the market. The twenty-five authors of the *Strand Magazine* are all competing for the same, limited market niche, and their meanderings through morphospace have probably a lot to do with a keen desire to outdo each other's inventions: after all, when mystery writers come up with an "aeronaut" who kills a hiker with the anchor of his balloon, or a somnambulist painter who draws the face of the man he has murdered, or a chair that catapults its occupants into a neighboring park, they are clearly looking for the Great Idea that will seal their success. And yet, just as clearly, aeronauts and catapults are totally *random* attempts at innovation, in the sense in which evolutionary theory uses the term: they show no foreknowledge—no idea, really—of what may be good for literary survival. In making writers branch out in every direction, then, the market pushes them into all sorts of crazy blind alleys; and divergence becomes indeed, as Darwin had seen, inseparable from extinction.

[136]Even Feltes has to concede that "trial and error" was involved in Victorian publishing; see *Modes of Production*, p. 85.

writing of novels insofar as it is a business. Thus, although like Marxism, the Austrian approach would deny that novelists are solitary creators, that recognition need not involve denying their creativity. Moreover, in terms of its implications for literary interpretation, Austrian economics supports the quest for understanding the intentions of authors because it concentrates on the intentions of all actors as individuals. Rather than substituting the critic's understanding for the author's, an Austrian approach would look to understand an author as he understood himself. Austrian economics always tries to look at actions from the perspective of the actors themselves, and thus relies on the concept of intentionality.

But Austrian economics does complicate our understanding of intentionality because it views the market as a means of mediating among the intentions of the vast number of individuals who participate in it, actors whose interaction often produces results larger and more complex than anything at which an isolated individual can aim. Thus, Austrian economics suggests a way in which one can avoid focusing too narrowly on the single intentions of a solitary creator (as in the Romantic tradition or its New Criticism descendants) and yet not allow the individual to dissolve into a Marxist collective. At the heart of Austrian economics is the idea that human life is filled with social processes, but that these processes still take place among individuals and are rooted in individual preferences and decisions—and hence in human intentionality. Where a literary work evolves over time and in a marketplace situation, to understand it fully one may have to take into account the intentions of several people, not just the author. Editors, publishers, and even readers may have a role to play in the final form a novel takes. But Austrian economics would still insist on viewing each of the participants in the publishing process as an individual and not deal in Marxist collective abstractions like "the capitalist system" or "the culture industry." In short, Austrian economics shares with Marxism the possibility of understanding literature as the product of a social process, but because Austrian economics understands social processes in individualistic terms, it shares with traditional literary criticism an emphasis on the intentionality of authors as individuals. All that the understanding of the serialization of novels as a form of

spontaneous order does is to spread the intentionality and the creativity around—to suggest that readers may have an active role in the shaping of a serialized novel—as well as editors and publishers to the extent that they, like any middlemen in the economy, help provide useful feedback to novelists.

VIII.

The issue of middlemen provides a good way of distinguishing Austrian economics from Marxism as ways of analyzing literary activity. Critics of capitalism and Marxists in particular are relentless in their hostility to economic middlemen. If one believes that the only real economic problem is production, then one naturally has contempt for someone who merely is involved in the distribution of goods and who therefore seems to add nothing to their value. Anyone who subscribes to the labor theory of value will especially be convinced that middlemen have no legitimate role to play in the economy. If the value of a good lies entirely in its production, what does it add to a good simply to help get it from the point of production to the point of sale? Marxists think that middlemen are simply exploiting the real producers of goods, the laborers who manufacture them and are therefore entirely responsible for whatever value they have. By contrast, Austrian economists, with their subjective theory of value, know that in economic terms a good has no intrinsic value and is worth only what it means to an individual customer. Hence a good at point A may have a different value from the exact same good at point B, especially if the would-be consumer of the good is at B and cannot get to A. The job of the middleman in an economy is to get the good at point A to point B when the consumer wants it. That is the value the middleman adds to the good, and he earns his financial reward by making sure that goods are available to consumers when and where they want them.[137] To armchair theorists, this

[137]This is the economic theory behind convenience stores, and might be called the "Twinkie defense" of capitalism. A Twinkie locked up at midnight in a bargain supermarket is worthless at that moment to the consumer who wants his late-night snack. That is why the consumer is in fact willing

may sound like a minimal accomplishment, but anyone involved in real economic activity knows that in many cases distribution can be the most difficult of all tasks in the providing of goods and services. Middlemen are the grease in the machinery of an economy—they make sure that the wheels run smoothly and the economy as a whole functions. It is precisely the middlemen who make the market work as a feedback mechanism.

In short, middlemen participate in the essential and complicated process of continually adjusting supply and demand to each other by carrying messages back and forth between producers and consumers. In their capacities as retailers, wholesalers, distributors, rackjobbers, marketers, and advertisers, middlemen are constantly informing consumers about what goods are available and how they might serve their needs and desires. At the same time the vast apparatus of distribution in a capitalist economy works to carry information back to producers about the ever-changing tastes of consumers. The system is by no means perfect and can be abused, but it is exactly the kind of feedback mechanism we have been discussing that over time makes it possible for a free market to provide the goods and services consumers really want. Because Marxists focus on production as *the* economic task, they tend to neglect the importance of distribution networks and thereby fail to understand the feedback element in markets.[138] They bracket middlemen out of their picture

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to pay more for the Twinkie at night than he would during the day—"convenience" is part of the value of a good.

[138]Marx does discuss "distribution," but he is using the term in its sense in classical economics—the distribution of wealth in society. See, for example, Marx, *Grundrisse*, pp. 88–89, 95. Marx discusses the distribution of goods in a market under the term "circulation," and does specifically raise the issue of transportation. Characteristically, he regards the transporting of goods as adding to their value only because it involves the additional *labor* of moving them. See *Grundrisse*, pp. 522, 524, 525, 534, and especially p. 548:

> Circulation can *create value* only in so far as it requires fresh employment—of *alien labor*—in addition to that directly consumed in the production process. This is then the same as if more necessary labour were used in the direct production process. Only the actual *circulation costs* increase the *value* of the product. (italics in the original)

of the economy, and then turn around and claim that the market has no way of putting producers in touch with consumers. Capitalism rewards middlemen precisely for paying attention to the complex problem of coordinating production and consumption through distribution channels. In contrast, the socialist systems of the communist world, by doing whatever they could to eliminate middlemen, sealed their doom. These socialist economies could in fact produce goods—where they failed was in not being able to produce the goods people wanted, when and where they wanted them. Socialist economies prided themselves on the way they eliminated or drastically reduced the kinds of middlemen who supposedly exploit workers under capitalism. In the process, they succeeded only in offering proof of what a vital economic role middlemen actually play—the communist world showed that a complex modern economy cannot function without a vast array of middlemen. There is, after all, a reason why they are called "middlemen"—they supply the key middle term between consumers and producers.

Whatever may be true of the economy in general, it is difficult for many people to accept the idea that cultural middlemen have a legitimate and positive role to play in the creation of literature.

Typically, Marx views the transporting of goods as a physical (material) problem. He does not see that the real problem is entrepreneurial and hence mental—figuring out how to get the right goods to the right place at the right time. As he does throughout his economic thought, Marx neglects the distinctive role of the entrepreneur. Given his objective theory of value, Marx cannot conceive how a good can increase in value simply by changing hands. Hence he rejects the idea that middlemen contribute value to an economy: "This kind of circulation offers the dealers all manner of speculative opportunities; but while it enriches some, it ruins the others, and the nation's wealth gains nothing thereby" (*Grundrisse*, p. 636). Marx also discusses the issue of what he calls "circulation" in *Das Kapital*, and deals specifically with the "expenses of transportation" in vol. II, pt. I, chap. VI, sec. III, where he makes the same point: "The productive capital invested in this industry adds value to the transported products, partly by transferring value from the means of transportation, partly by adding value through the labor-power used in transportation." See Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Ernest Untermann, trans. (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1933), vol. 2, p. 170.

Ever since the Romantics, people like to think of authors and readers in an unmediated relationship, and tend to regard anyone who comes between them as a corrupting force. But this understanding of literary creativity, which harks back to the ancient image of the Homeric bard directly addressing a crowd of enraptured listeners, has become anachronistic in the modern world with its modern media. Media require middlemen. Books do not magically fall into the hands of readers. The nineteenth-century novel was a capitalist commodity, and it had to be produced industrially and distributed commercially. The Victorians witnessed the development of the complex world of publishing we still have with us today, and that involved the growth of all sorts of middlemen in the business: publishers, editors, printers, agents, booksellers, reviewers, librarians, and so on. These people were pursuing their own interests, and authors did not always welcome their role in the publishing process, and in fact often condemned them for interfering with their creativity. But the cultural middlemen did have something positive to contribute to literary creativity precisely in their role as mediators, helping to put authors in touch with their potential and actual audiences.

Insofar as authors embraced and were embraced by the world of capitalism in the nineteenth century, they extended their reach to an unprecedented degree. In its usual fashion, capitalism achieved the mass production of literature by paying attention to the mass distribution of literature. For good or ill, capitalism made a mass reading public possible for the first time in history. Whereas well-meaning, philanthropic efforts to spread literacy in Britain essentially failed, the self-interest of those involved in the publishing business succeeded in making reading a widespread habit and bringing literature to a public vaster than earlier authors had ever dreamed of.[139] To be sure, literature was

[139]For a thorough study of the development of the mass reading public in Britain, see Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800–1900* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998). On philanthropic efforts to spread literacy, Altick reluctantly concludes:

> The village libraries, the penny-a-day circulating libraries, the mutual improvement societies, the mechanics' institute

to some extent corrupted in the process of being turned into a mass commodity, and critics, Marxist and otherwise, have been dwelling obsessively on the negative results ever since. But we should not forget how much high quality literature grew out of the nineteenth-century British publishing industry, and, although the authors deserve most of the credit, we should not completely dismiss the contribution of all the cultural middlemen who made the system as a whole function.[140]

For an extended and illuminating study of the role of cultural middlemen in the literary marketplace, we may turn briefly to the work of the distinguished historian of France, Robert Darnton. Early in his career, Darnton discovered a treasure trove for a cultural historian, the archive of an eighteenth-century Swiss publishing firm, the Société typographique de Neuchâtel. This archive contains some 50,000 letters chronicling the interaction of the publisher with all sorts of participants in the book trade, chiefly authors and booksellers, but also some of their customers and some of the workers in their print shop. Darnton has spent much of his career analyzing the contents of this rich archive and demonstrating how the world of publishing in eighteenth-century France actually worked.[141] He has shown in great detail and

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> libraries—all had, for one reason or another, failed to meet the needs of intellectually ambitious workmen who could not afford the outright purchase of new books. (p. 259)

Altick goes on to show that capitalism solved the problem of making books widely available in Victorian Britain through all the usual benefits of competition (lowering of costs, innovation of products, stimulating demand, and so on). Like most literary critics, Altick is no friend of capitalism and he would never formulate his thesis this way, but in fact his book is a great tribute to the positive power of capitalism as a cultural force.

[140]For an excellent and concrete study of the contribution of commercial editors to literary masterpieces, see Jack Stillinger, *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 139–62. For a more theoretical discussion of the collaborative role of editors and publishers in the writing process, see McGann, *Textual Criticism*, pp. 34–35, 42–44, 52–53, 75, 78–79.

[141]The firm Darnton discusses was headquartered in Switzerland but its principal market was in France, and as its name suggests, the books it published were generally in French. The fact that the firm was located just

with meticulous documentation what an important role middlemen in the publishing business played in the development of French literary culture in the eighteenth century. For example, he discusses how the Swiss publisher continually sent sales agents throughout France, carrying news of its latest publications to booksellers and reporting back on what sorts of books the reading public was interested in. Darnton repeatedly talks about how these agents helped the publishers adjust supply to demand.[142] He also looks at how the publishers communicated with authors and tried to get them to write the kinds of books the public wanted.

Darnton treats French publishing as a thoroughly capitalist enterprise, and even stresses the dubious business practices the Swiss publishing firm and others often engaged in.[143] But, on the whole, Darnton reveals the positive aspects of what he discovered in the Neuchâtel archive. He shows how the Swiss publisher helped provide the public with the books it wanted, and many of them were of high literary quality, including the philosophic classics of Voltaire and Rousseau. At the same time, the Swiss firm provided employment for members of the newly emerging class of literary intellectuals in France and helped them find a

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across the French border in Switzerland allowed it to publish books in French that could not be produced in France because of censorship.

[142]See, for example, Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), p. 22: "[publishers and booksellers] made it their business to mediate between supply and demand."

[143]See, for example, Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 198:

> They were tough businessmen who produced anything that would sell. They took risks, broke traditions, and maximized profits by quantity instead of quality production. Rather than try to corner some segment of the market by a legal monopoly, they wanted to be left alone by the state and would even bribe it to do so. They were entrepreneurs who made a business of Enlightenment.

(When Darnton speaks of "quantity instead of quality" here, he is referring to the physical appearance of the books, not their quality as literature.)

public for their writing. Much of Darnton's work is devoted to recounting how publishers like the Swiss firm managed to get around the strict censorship of books in eighteenth-century France and thereby made the classics of the Enlightenment widely available. To be sure, the Swiss publisher was also interested in providing pornography to the public. But, as Darnton makes clear, in eighteenth-century France the distribution channels for philosophy and for pornography were literally one and the same. Darnton thus tells a tale of Adam Smith's invisible hand in action. Acting out of self-interest and with little or no public spiritedness in mind, publishers nevertheless succeeded in performing a great service to the public in eighteenth-century France. Darnton's major book is appropriately entitled *The Business of Enlightenment*, and it studies one of the greatest cultural achievements of eighteenth-century France, the production and dissemination of the famous French *Encyclopédie* to a wide reading public. Darnton documents how unscrupulous the participants in this publishing venture were; they used every business trick in the book and invented a few of their own in their unceasing efforts to beat out their rivals in what was indeed a cutthroat competition.[144] But the result of their self-interested endeavor was to put the masterwork of the French Enlightenment into the hands of middle-class readers throughout France.[145]

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[144]See especially the chapter "Encylopedism, Capitalism, and Revolution" in Robert Darnton, *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopédie 1775–1800* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 460–519.

[145]In *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1983), Elizabeth Eisenstein also views capitalist entrepreneurship in the publishing industry as a positive cultural force. Indeed, she argues that the commercial development of printing is what made both the Renaissance and the Reformation possible. As she puts it, "eager to expand markets and diversify production, the enterprising publisher was the natural enemy of narrow minds" (p. 177). Thus, Eisenstein sees Smith's invisible hand at work in the early modern publishing industry: "The important point is that selfishness and altruism could be served at the same time" (p. 77). Above all, Eisenstein, like Darnton, stresses the role

Darnton's work is invaluable in the way it offers a detailed and comprehensive look at how capitalism actually operates in the literary marketplace. In his attempt to picture the process, Darnton offers a diagram of what he calls "the Communications Circuit," tracing the complex interaction of all the participants in the book trade.[146] The diagram is an excellent example of the kind of feedback loop we have been discussing and repays careful attention. Darnton's description of the circuit sums up much of what I have been trying to show about the literary marketplace as a form of spontaneous order:

> It could be described as a communications circuit that runs from the author to the publisher (if the bookseller does not assume that role), the printer, the shipper, the bookseller, and the reader. The reader completes the circuit because he influences the author both before and after the act of composition. Authors are readers themselves. By reading and associating with other readers and writers, they form notions of genre and style and a general sense of the literary enterprise, which affects their texts, whether they are composing Shakespearean sonnets or directions for assembling radio kits. A writer may respond in his writing to criticisms of his previous work or anticipate reactions that his text will elicit. He addresses implicit readers and hears from explicit reviewers. So the circuit runs full cycle. It transmits messages, transforming them en

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of print publishers as middlemen, as cultural mediators: "a new communications network . . . coordinated diverse intellectual activities while producing tangible commodities to be marketed for profit. . . . The activities of early printers provide a natural connection between the movement of ideas, economic developments, and affairs of church and state" (p. 263). She concludes by characterizing the early modern print industry as "a kind of marvelous alchemy to transmute private interest into public good" (p. 274). Whereas literary critics have generally failed to appreciate the contribution of capitalism to culture, historians of the book have admirably filled in the gap in our understanding.

[146]Robert Darnton, *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), p. 112. This book contains an important essay called "The Forgotten Middlemen of Literature" (pp. 136–53).

> route, as they pass from thought to writing to printed characters and back to thought again.[147]

Here Darnton describes the literary marketplace as a special case of how markets always operate under capitalism, as feedback mechanisms that allow producers and consumers to "speak" to each other and modify their behavior accordingly.[148] Darnton's work on French publishing is a model of how to approach the interaction of capitalism and literature. Thanks to his archival discoveries, he deals not with theoretical abstractions, but with the actual individuals who participated in the French publishing business. While not neglecting the importance of the authors themselves, he demonstrates how much help they received (and needed) from cultural middlemen in order to get their works to the public. Instead of portraying the publishing industry as simply the enemy of authors, Darnton recognizes how it provides the preconditions for their work and facilitates their endeavors.[149]

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[147]Darnton, *Kiss of Lamourette*, p. 111.

[148]Eisenstein similarly characterizes the printing revolution as introducing new forms of feedback into European culture: "After printing, large-scale data collection did become subject to new forms of feedback which had not been possible in the age of scribes" (*Printing Revolution*, p. 76).

[149]For a similar study in the world of art, detailing and carefully analyzing the role of commercial art dealers as cultural middlemen, see Michael C. Fitzgerald, *Making Modernism: Picasso and the Creation of the Market for Twentieth-Century Art* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1996). Far from being hostile to the role of markets in art, Fitzgerald views "the artist as an entrepreneur in modern culture" (p. 268). Art historians seem more open than literary critics to the possibility that free enterprise is beneficial to culture. An excellent example is Svetlana Alpers's provocative book *Rembrandt's Enterprise: The Studio and the Market* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). Alpers concludes:

> The evidence is that Rembrandt took to the new marketplace economy not only because he wanted freedom from patrons, but also because he wanted freedom for himself. . . . Two different but reciprocal values—that established in the marketplace and that of the individual suited to that market—are juxtaposed. Taken together, they constitute

By contrast, a Marxist critic like Feltes views the author as a mere pawn in the hands of an all-powerful and manipulative publishing industry. Consider, for example, his effort to deny that Dickens's genius was responsible for the unprecedented success of his first bestseller:

> Much of what Dickens had done in *Pickwick Papers* was beyond his understanding because it was out of his hands, produced by a set of forces and production relations whose historical determinations I have tried to trace. . . . What these structures (and Dickens) produced was a commodity-text with a determinate form, itself producing ideology, and the commodity-text, form, and ideology creating the "wild and widespread enthusiasm" of a mass bourgeois audience. . . . For the future, the new literary mode of production determined by the developing structures of Victorian capitalism, lay just there, in the ever more self-conscious, ever more assured exploitation of the surplus value of commodity-texts, within the dominant ideology of the commodity-book and the dominant structure in which it was embedded.[150]

Is Feltes really trying to claim that Dickens's genius as a writer was not principally responsible for the market triumph of *Pickwick Papers*? Is he claiming that Dickens's savvy publisher could have taken any novel by any other author and through clever marketing tactics have turned it into an equal bestseller? It is difficult to believe that even a hardcore Marxist critic like Feltes could advance such claims, and yet that seems to be the thrust of his argument. He claims that what matters in the case of *Pickwick Papers* was its historical moment and a certain stage of material production and not anything so ethereal as Dickens's "genius." In a typically Marxist move, Feltes asserts that the publishing

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> that ideology of the free market and the free individual that modern society has inherited in great part from the example of Rembrandt's Holland. (pp. 113–14)

Alpers aptly characterizes Rembrandt as "an entrepreneur of the self" (p. 118).

[150]Feltes, *Modes of Production*, p. 17.

industry created the enthusiasm of the novel-reading public. In the Austrian view, an entrepreneur taps into an already existing demand, or rather shows his "genius" in the way he is able to anticipate what the public will respond favorably to.[151]

An Austrian economic approach to literature would never go along with an attempt to bracket out the role of an individual author in the market success of his work; poor Dickens gets consigned to a parenthesis in Feltes's account of the production of *Pickwick*. The Austrian view would acknowledge that, as in all market activity, there might well have been an element of luck in Dickens's success (being at the right place at the right time) and also that a number of non-aesthetic and even material factors might have contributed to the huge extent of his triumph in the marketplace (new economies in book production helped to make it possible, for example).[152] But an Austrian approach would still grant Dickens the principal creative role in his own literary success, both artistic and commercial. Insofar as it attributed a creative role to other participants in the process of serialization, including Dickens's readers, it would do so only to the extent that

[151]See Kirzner, *How Markets Work*, p. 56.

[152]In analyzing culture, Marxists typically mistake a necessary for a sufficient condition; they jump from the legitimate principle that material conditions inevitably *affect* cultural production to the illegitimate conclusion that they *determine* it. Dickens could not have been as commercially successful as he was if the British publishing industry had not reached a certain level of development and sophistication in his day. But the fact remains that it was something about *Pickwick Papers*—and not any other work—that gave the great boost to the serialized novel as a market phenomenon in Victorian England, and Dickens in his artistic genius was primarily responsible for that mysterious, creative "something." The *Pickwick* phenomenon was utterly unpredictable (and in fact unpredicted)—and hence spontaneous. Dickens's discovery of a mass audience for the serialized novel in turn spurred the further economic and technological development of the British publishing industry in a pattern familiar in all types of marketing. It is, then, true that Dickens could not have reached the heights he did without the British publishing industry, but it is equally true that the British publishing industry could not have reached the heights it did without Dickens. Even if this seems like a "chicken-and-egg" controversy, Dickens's creativity has a central role to play in any proper view of the story.

their feedback helped him to find his way to improving *Pickwick* as a work of fiction. Like any entrepreneur in creating a successful product, Dickens looked to his potential and then actual consumers for guidance, to some extent anticipating what they wanted and then responding to their reactions to his work as he produced it.

Suggesting the importance of the links between the consumer and the producer might well be the chief contribution of Austrian economics to our understanding of the creation of literature. One of the central insights of Austrian economics is that markets are forms of cooperation, ways of pooling talent, aggregating information, and in general coordinating the activities of people with different interests for their mutual benefit. Thus, an Austrian economist looking at a literary marketplace would not assume the way a Marxist would that the various participants are necessarily at odds, looking to exploit each other. An Austrian approach would look instead at how a literary marketplace harmonizes a variety of interests, leading authors, editors, publishers, and readers to work together in productive ways. For most Marxists, the commercialization of literature debases it, whereas from the Austrian perspective, this process gives the works produced greater vitality by putting the artist in touch with his audience through the mediating efforts of various middlemen. On this issue, Marxism betrays its roots in German Romanticism.[153] Despite its rejection of the Romantic idea of the solitary genius, Marxism constantly suggests in Romantic fashion that insofar as literature gets involved in the marketplace, it can only be corrupted, precisely because the writer is forced to cater to the middle class and its petty bourgeois values. Romanticism posits a perennial opposition between commerce and culture, but the history of the nineteenth-century novel shows that the demands of commercial publishing were not simply at odds with the demands of aesthetic quality.

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[153]For the connection between Marxism and Romanticism, see Alvin W. Gouldner, *Against Fragmentation: The Origins of Marxism and the Sociology of Intellectuals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 39–41, 267–71. Gouldner argues that Marxism paradoxically managed to combine Romanticism and scientism.

IX.

We have seen some of the ways in which the idea of spontaneous order can be applied to literature. Its broader and looser conception of form helps to suggest how a novel can be regarded as an artistic whole even when it does not meet lyric poetry's strict standards of unity.[154] In the case of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, we have

[154]For heuristic purposes, I have set up my discussion in terms of a contrast between the perfectly planned form of the lyric poem and the more spontaneously generated and open-ended form of the novel. Let me state clearly that I regard this opposition as an oversimplification. The contrast I have been drawing is not simply a matter of genre, and in fact cuts across conventional generic distinctions. Some novelists have aspired to achieve the formal perfection of lyric poetry; one thinks particularly of "art novels" of the modern period, such as Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist* (note that such novels were usually not created according to the process of serial publication). By the same token, some poetry has been created by a process that involves forms of feedback and trial-and-error, and even serial publication. In his *Critique of Modern Textual Criticism*, McGann discusses several such cases, including Tennyson (p. 48) and Byron (pp. 59–60). In particular, McGann shows that Byron's narrative poem *The Giaour* does not even exist in a single definitive or perfected form because of the poem's incredibly complicated genesis, including the fact that "the poem's readers and reviewers were another important influence upon the work's development and process of accretion" (p. 60). Morson's work in developing what he calls a prosaics as opposed to a poetics also cuts across the conventional distinction between the novel and the poem. He includes among the works he regards as "governed by a processual aesthetic" several examples of works written in poetry: Samuel Butler's *Hudibras,* Byron's *Don Juan*, and Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* ("Prosaics," p. 382). *Don Juan* is a particularly good example of a poem that was published in installments and that has an open-ended "novelistic" form (like Gaskell, Byron did not live to finish his masterpiece or to revise it for a single-volume edition). At the same time, Morson denies that all novels, even all serialized novels, are examples of the "processual aesthetic." See for example "Contingency," p. 268: "To be clear: processual works are typically published serially, but the converse is not true. As *Middlemarch* and *Bleak House* testify, serial works can, and usually are, written according to an advance plan." Morson thus distinguishes between some novels, such as *The Idiot* and *War and Peace*, which are genuinely "processual" and the majority of novels, which are not. It seems to me that most novels, even if they do not meet Morson's standards for being "processual," still embody more elements of contingency than most lyric

seen how this more open-ended conception of literary form can be used to mirror and celebrate the freedom and spontaneity of human action. In the aesthetic of the solitary genius we have inherited from the Romantics, a work of art should be a perfect unity, unified in conception in a single consciousness and unified in execution by a single hand in an unbroken act of sustained inspiration. According to this view, any interference with the realization of the solitary genius' original conception of his work can only compromise its artistic integrity, and hence art can only be tainted by contact with the world of commerce. Analyzing the world of commercial publishing in nineteenth-century Britain in light of the Austrian idea of spontaneous order has allowed us to develop an alternative model of artistic genesis (an alternative, not a replacement). A work of art may betray evidence of contingency and even lack of advance planning in its formation and yet still maintain an overall aesthetic integrity. And a genuine work of art may be the product of some form of artistic collaboration, provided that the collaboration is understood, not as the operation of some collective entity ("society"), but as the interaction of individuals in a market framework that allows for productive feedback among them.

We have thus seen that the manner in which serialized novels were produced in the nineteenth century can be characterized as a species of spontaneous order, and these novels actually benefitted from the way they grew out of the rough-and-tumble, give-and-take world of commercial publishing. Viewed from the Austrian perspective, commercial publishing in nineteenth-century Britain by and large worked to everybody's benefit as market activity usually does (it of course did not work perfectly but it worked well enough and better than any alternative system we can imagine). A vastly increased reading public came into being and generally got the kind of books it wanted to read (as shown by the basic fact that it rented and purchased them in such large

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poems do. These are obviously very complicated matters, and I do not have the space to explore them fully here, but I want to make it clear that I am aware of these complexities and that I am not simplistically identifying the poem with perfection of literary form and the novel with spontaneity of form.

numbers). The huge growth in the market for published material allowed more people than ever before to earn their living as authors, and in the process of satisfying the new demand for novels, they managed to produce—admittedly amongst a good deal of trash—some of the greatest artistic achievements in the genre, including the masterpieces of Dickens. In short, in nineteenth-century Britain more people wanted to read books and more people wanted to write books, and somehow the market when left to its own devices managed, as it always finds a way of doing, to bring potential consumers and potential producers together.

To be sure, publishers profited from the book market, but only to the extent that they anticipated the market correctly and succeeded in linking up supply and demand by helping authors to write the kinds of books the new reading public wanted. Marxists of course offer a completely different interpretation of this process, because they view the marketplace as the locus of exploitation, not of social cooperation. In the Marxist view, the nineteenth-century book industry took advantage of both consumers and producers. Publishers forced passive consumers to buy books they really did not want to read, and at the same time forced authors to produce books they really did not want to write. There is of course more than a grain of truth in this Marxist view. Like all markets, nineteenth-century publishing in Britain was an imperfect system. Customers were not always happy with the books they bought and many of the serialized novels were not of high artistic quality. Authors were not always happy with the conditions in which they wrote or with the literary products that resulted from serial publication or with the financial rewards they received. But like all (relatively) free markets, publishing in nineteenth-century Britain constantly adapted to changing conditions in both consumption and production, and both readers and authors had options even within an established book industry. In fact, the highly competitive and dynamic nature of that industry constantly broadened the range of those options. In the course of the nineteenth century, the reading public had more and more books to choose from and at lower and lower prices, while authors could play off one publisher against

another to obtain better terms, and sometimes even went into business for themselves.

For Marxists, the market is a zero-sum game, and hence publishers could make their profits only at the expense of both readers and authors. With their top-down view of the economy, Marxists view publishers as sitting at the center of a spider's web, in which hapless authors and readers are simply trapped. To Austrian economists, this web would look instead like a feedback loop, or what Darnton calls a "communications circuit," in which authors, readers, and publishers are complexly interlinked, and no one is completely in control. Austrian economics teaches us how to appreciate the contribution of publishers to nineteenth-century British culture in their role as entrepreneurs who had to deal with all the uncertainty and unpredictability of the book market. Publishers deserved whatever profits they made—and remember that they often incurred losses to the point of bankruptcy—because they provided authors with working capital, editorial services, the physical means of publishing and distributing their books, and finally a whole range of marketing services.[155] Above all, in most cases the publishers bore the brunt of

[155]To see why nineteenth-century authors needed the services of their publishers, one might consider the counterexample of William Blake. The very model of the solitary genius, Blake in true Romantic fashion scorned the whole world of commercial publishing (in which he was brought up as an apprentice engraver) and insisted on going his own way as an author. For much of his career, he printed his own books with no editorial intervention, illustrated them himself (with help from his wife), advertised them himself, and retailed them himself. The result of Blake's total autonomy as a self-published author was that he succeeded in producing books that presumably were exactly the way he wanted them to be. But Blake paid a great price for his autonomy in financial and—I would argue—aesthetic terms. The most he ever sold of any of his self-published books was 28 copies, and with several titles, he sold only one or two. In retrospect, we would have to say that he was lucky that his works survived at all to make him famous long after his death. And although it is heresy for me to say this as a Blake scholar, perhaps works such as *Milton* and *Jerusalem* might have benefitted from a little editorial intervention. Blake might have been more successful even in artistic terms if he had been willing to meet the reading public, if not halfway, at least part of the way. One hesitates to think of Blake selling out

the financial risks endemic to any book project. For all the tensions between authors and publishers in nineteenth-century Britain, their partnership proved to be fruitful, in terms of both commercial and artistic success.

Thus, we see the advantages of viewing literature in the light of Austrian economics. Most literary critics would hesitate to argue that the commercialization of literature in the nineteenth century had any beneficial effects.[156] But what escapes critics has not always been lost on authors. Some of them learned to appreciate the new commercial basis for literature that developed in the nineteenth century, particularly in England. It is fitting that of all authors, Dickens paid the most eloquent tribute to the new middle-class reading public, and celebrated precisely its bourgeois virtues. At a banquet in his honor in Birmingham in 1853, he proposed a toast to his bourgeois hosts in terms that would make a Romantic poet or a Marxist critic cringe:

> To the great compact phalanx of the people, by whose industry, perseverance, and intelligence, and their result in money-wealth such places as Birmingham, and many others like it, have arisen—to that great centre of support, that comprehensive experience, and that beating heart—Literature has turned happily from individual patrons, sometimes munificent, often sordid, always few, and has found there at once its highest purpose, its natural range of action, and its best reward.[157]

Standing in the heart of the industrial Midlands—ground zero for middle-class values—Dickens expressed his deep faith in the bourgeois reading public: "Let a good book in these 'bad times'

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and "going commercial," but some regard for his readers might have led him to avoid the obscurity that often cripples his works, especially the later ones. On Blake's career as an author-publisher, see Joseph Viscomi, *Blake and the Idea of the Book* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993).

[156]Moretti, Erickson, Berman, and Delany are among the exceptions to this generalization.

[157]K.J. Fielding, ed., *The Speeches of Charles Dickens* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960), p. 156.

be made accessible,—even upon an abstruse and difficult subject—and my life upon it, it shall be extensively bought, read, and well considered."[158]

Some might cynically observe that Dickens had every reason to speak well of a middle-class public that had made him rich and famous. But that is just the point—the Victorian audience had the good taste to single out Dickens as the greatest literary genius in its midst, thus effectively refuting the Romantic myth that a true artist is always misunderstood by his contemporaries and rejected by the commercial marketplace. Others might be surprised to hear Dickens speaking well of the middle class and its commercial interests because he is commonly thought to have been hostile to capitalism. But in fact, despite his doubts about industrialism, he shared many of the views of prominent pro-capitalist thinkers of his day, such as Richard Cobden and John Bright. For example, under Dickens's leadership, the journal he edited, *Household Words*, was a staunch advocate of free trade—the central cause of the defenders of capitalism in mid-Victorian England.[159] And Dickens himself was an accomplished entrepreneur. When he grew dissatisfied with the conditions under which he was being "forced" to publish, nothing stopped him from setting up as a publisher himself, and he became very wealthy in the process. But his praise of the commercial spirit of Victorian England was not simply motivated by financial self-interest. He understood that the rapid development of the commercial publishing industry had a liberating effect on authors. It freed them from their centuries-old dependence on patrons by giving them a more direct access to a newly created mass audience. All Dickens wanted was a chance to prove himself as an author in the marketplace, and when he had the opportunity, he clearly made the most of it. Along with Shakespeare, Dickens

[158]*Speeches of Dickens*, p. 157.

[159]For examples of articles in *Household Words* in support of free trade, see "Silk from the Punjab" (vol. I—New Series, no. 17, 1853), "A Picture of Merchandise" (no. 450, November 6, 1858) and "Trading in Fetters" (no. 455, December 11, 1858).

stands as the most convincing proof that commercial and artistic success in literature are not incompatible.[160]

Critics could learn from Dickens's celebration of the virtues of his middle-class audience and the liberating effect of their broad-based support for literature as a commercial enterprise. But to do so they would have to overcome some very ingrained prejudices. Both the Romantic cult of the solitary genius and the Marxist antipathy to all aspects of capitalism have made generations of critics believe that the middle class and its supposedly crass commercial concerns are the enemy of true art. But one must reject this set of prejudices if one hopes to understand how the new commercial market for literature actually functioned in the nineteenth century. To be sure, the burgeoning literary marketplace put new pressures and constraints on authors, and often frustrated them as much as the old patronage system did. But that is only half the story, and, as Dickens's testimony indicates, many authors found something profoundly empowering in the new challenge of marketing their works to a vastly expanded reading public. This is especially true of novelists, and indeed, as we have seen, one cannot comprehend the phenomenon of the nineteenth-century novel without seeing how embedded it was in new developments in nineteenth-century commerce. For this purpose, one must have some sympathy for capitalism and be open to the possibility that the free market has its virtues. To anyone familiar with most forms of modern economics—not necessarily the Austrian School—it is obvious that competition can be a force for good, that it can bring out the best in people, including authors. An economist looking at the publishing industry in Victorian England would have no trouble identifying its salient characteristics—the many outlets for publication, the great advances in reducing costs, the large potential rewards for both publishers and authors, the relative ease of market entry—and

[160]I hasten to add that this does not mean that commercial and artistic success are identical. For a wide-ranging and incisive defense of commercial culture, see Tyler Cowen, *In Praise of Commercial Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

hence in general the intensely competitive environment.[161] Observing these conditions, an economist would predict that the era would produce a boom in literary achievement, particularly in the novel—the most commercialized and competitive of the literary forms. But a point that would be obvious to an economist is too easily lost on many literary critics, who in Marxist fashion look upon all market activity with distrust and contempt.

For many decades Marxist critics have been trying to document how authors have been implicated in the capitalist system. Given the anti-capitalist biases of these critics, this project has served to lower the authors in their esteem; it should instead have raised their opinion of capitalism. Marxist literary critics have in fact been staring for years at concrete evidence of how markets function successfully and failed to understand it. They are so anti-capitalist that they interpret any signs of authors participating in market activity as a strike against them. They should instead be learning from such phenomena as the nineteenth-century novel that market competition is a genuinely productive force (even if it has certain drawbacks). In short, Marxist critics have been casting doubt on artistic creativity by trying to portray it as a market phenomenon; in the process they have inadvertently uncovered fresh evidence of the creativity of markets. Critics in Cultural Studies in fact deserve a great deal of credit for the way they have broken with a long Marxist tradition and begun to uncover the active role of consumers in popular culture. But to do so, they have had to struggle out of rigid Marxist paradigms and introduce a new subtlety and sophistication into their understanding of how markets function. These Marxist critics have succeeded in spite of their Marxism, not because of it. Only to the

[161]Delany does in fact identify these elements (*Literature, Money and the Market*, p. 102). But, then again, he was trained as an economist before he went into literary criticism. Berman is one of the few other literary critics who is willing to consider the possibility that "the integration of the artistic production into a capitalist system may in fact be salutary and a source of its emancipatory substance" (*Fiction Sets You Free*, p. 183). Berman concisely lays out the advantages of a commercial market for art over the patronage system, and discusses the Romantic origins of aesthetic anti-commercialism (pp. 182–84).

extent that they have found ways of modifying and moderating the strict determinism of classic Marxist doctrine have they been able to contribute to our understanding of cultural phenomena. But their task would have been much easier if they had realized that alternatives to Marxist economics exist, and that the Austrian School in particular has elaborated a theory of freedom in the economic realm and especially of consumer sovereignty. In short, instead of constantly revising and refining Marxist paradigms—often beyond recognition—critics in literary and cultural studies need to free themselves from the spell of Marxism and realize that other forms of economics offer them what they are really seeking—a way of understanding how producers and consumers freely and complexly interact in any market activity and hence a way of understanding how the literary and cultural marketplace can actually work to foster artistic creativity.

That in sum is why it is useful to bring Austrian economics to bear on the study of literature. I have made a preliminary attempt to do so in this essay by showing how Hayek's idea of spontaneous order might be profitably applied to the understanding of literature. I have only scratched the surface of this important topic, and much remains to be done to work out the full relevance of this concept from Austrian economics to literary criticism.[162] Several of the other essays in this volume carry on this project, and suggest how widely applicable the concept of spontaneous order is to understanding the content and the form of literature and even the way it is produced. I have also tried to show how this project links up with other developments in contemporary criticism, especially the work of Gary Saul Morson and Franco Moretti—ideas that have been developed quite independently of Austrian economics, but that point to similar conclusions. Because both Morson and Moretti draw upon Darwin's ideas, they can be viewed as working within the spontaneous

[162]For an application of the idea of spontaneous order to the broader area of Cultural Studies, see my essay "Popular Culture and Spontaneous Order, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Tube" in William Irwin and Jorge J.E. Gracia, eds., *Philosophy and the Interpretation of Popular Culture* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), pp. 161–86.

order tradition, broadly conceived. Some of the most fruitful lines of research in literary criticism today are converging on the idea of spontaneous order. Since its elaboration in the realm of economics in the eighteenth century, the idea of spontaneous order has proved capable of illuminating a wide variety of fields of knowledge, including linguistics and evolutionary biology. In retrospect it looks as if the discovery of the phenomenon of spontaneous order constitutes one of the great paradigm shifts in intellectual history. The time has come to begin applying this concept in literary criticism.

2
Cervantes and Economic Theory

Darío Fernández-Morera

Critics often subject a great writer to tortured interpretations that reflect their interests, obsessions, insecurities, and career needs. Shakespeare is a well-known example, with theatrical directors fiercely setting loose their creativity upon his texts, and producing a cigar-smoking Iago, a sympathetic Lady Macbeth, a lesbian *Midsummer Night's Dream*, a feminist *Taming of the Shrew*, and a pacifist *Henry V* complete with British soldiers stomping on the flag of St. George.

Cervantes's fate has paralleled Shakespeare's. At one time, Cervantes was read as a supporter of the Counter Reformation and the expulsion of the Moslems still remaining in Spain, the *moriscos*.[1]

[1] Cf. Cesare de Llolis, *Cervantes: Reazionario* (Rome: Fratelli Treves, 1924). Stagings of Cervantes's tragedy *Numancia*, for example, would emphasize its appeal to patriotism, nationalism, honor, and the Spanish martial character. I offer a more nuanced interpretation in Darío Fernández-Morera, "Cervantes and Islam: A Contemporary Analogy," *Cervantes y su mundo III*, K. Reichenberger and R.A. Lauer, eds. (Kassel: Reichenberger, 2005), pp. 123–57. Online at: http://books.google.com/books?id=NQz5W94fbysC&pg=PA123&lpg=PA137&ots=WAirwAnr1G&dq=christians+enslaved+cantigas&ie=ISO-8859-1&output=html. See also Darío Fernández-Morera, "The Myth of the Andalusian Paradise," *Intercollegiate Review* 41, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 23–31. Online at: http://www.isi.org/journals/archive/issue.aspx?id=f6e1ad61-8699-4622-9d66-3d4aac01b072.

But after the Spanish Civil War, the exiles who populated foreign language literature departments outside Spain turned him into someone with ideas not unlike those of a Spanish Republic liberal.[2] Marxists went further, reading him as a socialist.[3] Sharing many of the Marxists' basic premises, academic practitioners of Cultural and Post-Colonial Studies have turned Cervantes into a replica of the professors themselves, occasionally dressing him in a somewhat different vocabulary, though along with Marxist polylogism many venerable Marxist terms linger on, such as "material base," "ideology," "ownership of the means of production," "alienation," "fetishism," "overdetermination," "social discourses," "distribution of wealth," "superstructure," "bourgeois," "material culture," "class," "conditions of production," "social formations," and "imperialism."[4] Feminist critics have of course given us a feminist Cervantes.[5] A few Catholic critics have read him, naturally, as a Catholic and even a mystic; though the more numerous anti-Catholic professors have seen him as an

[2]Cf. the later works of Américo Castro, for example, and his disciples.

[3]See, for example, Ludovik Osterc, *El pensamiento social y político del Quijote* (Mexico: Ediciones Andrea, 1963).

[4]For a sample, see the self-consciously daring www.chronicle.com/weekly/v47/i21/21a01.htm. For Marxist polylogism and other premises and vocabulary inherited by contemporary academic research, see Darío Fernández-Morera, *American Academia and the Survival of Marxist Ideas* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997); for Marxist polylogism in general see Ludwig von Mises, *Theory and History* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1957; reprinted Auburn, Ala.: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1985); *Human Action* (Auburn, Ala.: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1998). For an example of the continuing wide use of Marxist terminology and premises at the highest levels of the language and literature profession, see the 1986 Modern Language Association Presidential Address by J. Hillis Miller in *PMLA* 102, no. 3 (May 1987): 281–91. For a good treatment of Cervantes from the point of view of the Marxist ("materialist") premises of practitioners of "Cultural Studies," see Carroll B. Johnson, *Cervantes and the Material World* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999). Johnson's previous work on the Spanish Golden Age included Freudian approaches, when Freudianism was still fashionable.

[5]Representative is Ruth El Saffar, "Voces marginales y la visión del ser cervantino," *Anthropos* 98–99 (1989): 52–62.

Erasmian, or even anti-Catholic writer.[6] More recently, Cervantes has been interpreted as a homosexual and a Queer Theorist *avant la lettre*.[7]

Inspired by such examples, and theoretically authorized by the post-structuralist assertion according to which every text undermines its own presumably fixed meaning, I want to examine Cervantes not so much as a capitalist *avant la lettre* but as a writer whose works present situations, statements, and ideas that illuminate sympathetically important aspects of the market economy, while providing material for a critique of collectivism, statism, and redistributionism.

This approach seems open to a historical objection. The word "capitalism" was not even in use in Cervantes's day; he was not familiar with many of the practices we associate with capitalism; and he wrote nearly two centuries before Adam Smith, the thinker commonly thought of as the first one to offer a theoretical

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[6]For the former, see Dmitri de Merejkowski, "Cervantes," *Hispania* (Paris) 4 (1921): 97–124; G.K. Chesterton, "The Divine Parody of Don Quixote," *Daily News* (1901); reprinted in *A Handful of Authors*, Dorothy Collins, ed. (New York and London: Sheed and Ward, 1969), pp. 24–27; W.H. Auden, "The Ironic Hero: Some Reflections on Don Quixote," *Horizon 20* (1949): 86–94; reprinted in *Cervantes*, Lowry Nelson, Jr., ed. (Englewood, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), pp. 73–81. Particularly impressive is Fernando Rielo, *Teoría del Quijote: Su mística hispánica* (Madrid: Porrúa, 1982). For Erasmianism in Cervantes, see among others Américo Castro, *El pensamiento de Cervantes* (Madrid: Hernando, 1925). The best general work on Erasmianism in Spain is Marcel Bataillon, *Erasme et l'Espagne* (Paris: Droz, 1937), which has been variously reprinted and translated. Walter Kaiser's *Praisers of Folly* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963) is a very readable positioning of Cervantes within the Erasmian Praise of Folly tradition.

[7]Gay writer Fernando Arrabal, in *Un esclavo llamado Cervantes* (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 1996), considers Cervantes a bisexual, a *marrano* (of Jewish *converso* family, an idea that Américo Castro, himself of *converso* ancestry, popularized in Cervantes's studies). Arrabal also affirms that Cervantes was a liar about being a cripple: he never lost the use of his left hand, as generally believed, though he was on the verge of having it cut off to punish him for homosexuality, but escaped in time. Kryzstof Sliwa's new and monumentally documented biography shows that there is no foundation for the speculation (of twentieth-century, not seventeenth-century origin) regarding Cervantes's converso ancestry or homosexuality: Kryzstof Sliwa, *Vida de Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra* (Kassel: Reichenberger, 2005).

foundation for capitalism. If Cervantes was ignorant of capitalism in both theory and practice, how could he have anything to teach us on the subject?

The objection to looking at Cervantes in light of free market economics is compounded by the fact that he lived and wrote in Catholic Spain. As a bastion of European mercantilism, Spain is not usually associated with the development of capitalism. Ever since Max Weber's famous book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, it has been common to view capitalism as developing in the Protestant countries of Northern Europe, especially Great Britain and the Netherlands. Those who adopt this viewpoint think that capitalism must have been first theorized in Protestant Northern Europe and so they single out the man from Scotland, Adam Smith.[8]

In fact, Weber's thesis has distorted our understanding of the history of economic theory and practice. Many of the distinctive institutions and practices we associate with capitalism were developed in the Catholic world of Southern Europe. For example, banking in the modern sense and methods of accounting first emerge in the city states of Catholic Italy, such as Venice, Genoa, Florence, and Milan, during the late Middle Ages. And in Cervantes's day, Catholic Spain was one of the greatest economic powers in Europe. This allowed him to observe a good deal of economic activity firsthand. Moreover, contrary to the popular view, economic theory did not begin with Adam Smith, nor was he the first to develop an explanation of the free market. As historians of economic thought like H.M. Robertson, Murray Rothbard, Jesús Huerta de Soto, and Alejandro Chafuén have shown, the traditional view of the development of economic theory needs to be revised to recognize the contributions of a host of thinkers before Adam Smith.[9]

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[8]Similarly, international law is associated by many with Northern Protestants like Hugo Grotius, rather than with earlier Catholic Spanish founders like Francisco de Vitoria and Domingo de Soto.

[9]H.M. Robertson, *Aspects of the Rise of Economic Individualism: A Criticism of Max Weber and His School* (Clifton, N.J.: Augustus M. Kelley, 1973); Murray Rothbard, *Economic Thought Before Adam Smith: An Austrian Perspective on the History of Economic Thought*, vol. 1 (Brookfield, Vt.: Edward Elgar, 1995); Jesús Huerta de Soto, "New Light on the Prehistory of the Theory of Banking and

Of particular importance is the contribution of the so-called School of Salamanca, sixteenth-century Spanish thinkers who anticipated many of the basic ideas of modern, free market economics, including the subjective theory of value, the law of comparative advantage, the theory of supply and demand, the understanding of inflation as a monetary phenomenon, and the productivity problem in the theory and practice of socialism. These Spanish Catholics had a more sophisticated understanding of free markets than Smith did. Therefore, one of my aims is to call attention to these thinkers and show that Cervantes could have been exposed to a whole range of important economic ideas, some of them supportive of economic freedom, some of them critical of government interventionism. Cervantes's historical situation actually makes it quite plausible that in many of his writings he might be commenting, among other things, on important economic questions having to do with socioeconomic freedom and government attempts to restrict it.

CERVANTES AND THE SPANISH SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS

During the reign of Charles V, the center of economic gravity in Europe moved from the commercial cities of North Italy to the port city of Seville because of the massive influx of gold from the Americas. During this time, too, the Spanish government began a series of foreign policy adventures that required large amounts of revenue. Government deficits became enormous and more than once the State declared bankruptcy and repudiated its debts.[10] First Charles V, and later his successors, used the banking system unscrupulously and taxed their subjects relentlessly to obtain the liquidity necessary to finance uncontrolled government spending.[11]

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the School of Salamanca," *Review of Austrian Economics* 9, no. 2 (1996): 59–81; Alejandro A. Chafuén et al., *Cristianismo y libertad* (Buenos Aires: Fundación para el Avance de la Educación, 1984); Chafuén, *Christians for Freedom: Late Scholastic Economics* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1986). For the Italian city states, see Rodney Stark, *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success* (New York: Random House, 2005), pp. 84–117.

[10]R. Trevor Davies, *The Golden Century of Spain* (London: Macmillan, 1937; reprinted Harper & Row, 1961), p. 78.

[11]Huerta de Soto, "New Light."

The Spanish centrality in economic matters and the spectacle of a profligate and greedy Spanish government sucking the life out of producers—among them shop keepers and other businessmen, artisans, professionals, sheep growers, farmers, and working members of the nobility—and otherwise thwarting the functioning of a market economy partly explain the until then unheard of concentration in Europe of very sharp minds on the subject of economics.[12] They included, among others, Domingo de Soto (1495–1560), Domingo de Báñez (1528–1604), Luis de Molina (1535–1600), Juan de Mariana (1535–1624), Martín de Azpilcueta (1493–1596), Francisco de Vitoria (1480–1546), and Tomás de Mercado (1500–1575), and are collectively known variously as the Spanish Scholastics, the Spanish School of Economics, or the Salamanca School of Economics, although some of the more important of these thinkers did not teach at the University of Salamanca.

Such was the case, for example, of Domingo de Soto, who taught at the University Complutense of Alcalá de Henares, a city where Cervantes seems to have been born, which he mentions in *Don Quijote*, and where he published his pastoral novel *La Galatea*.[13] In his business trips to his native city, Cervantes could have been directly in contact with the legacy of free market ideas that de Soto had published and lectured on a generation before.

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[12]Many members of the lower nobility (*hidalgos*) had to work for a living or starve. See David A. Vassberg, *Land and Society in Golden Age Spain* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 91. It is generally ignored that the nobility, like the Church, was subject to some types of taxes, such as the *alcabala* and the *millones*. The nobility was not a homogenous or monolithic class. Neither was the middle class. I avoid the term "the bourgeoisie" because it bundles together many dissimilar individuals and activities and is therefore inexact, and because it dehumanizes people. After the extermination of tens of millions of so-called "bourgeois" under Marxist regimes throughout the world, the use of this term is more than offensive. Anti-bourgeoisism is as hideous as anti-Semitism. For the logical problems of the term "bourgeoisie," never even considered by Marxism, see Mises, *Human Action* and *Theory and History* as well as Benedetto Croce, *My Philosophy* (New York: Collier, 1962).

[13]The only other viable candidate to be Cervantes's birthplace is Alcázar de San Juan. See among others Manuel Rubio Erguido, *Desagravio a Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra* (Alcázar de San Juan: Mata, 1978).

Moreover, if, as some scholars have suggested, he attended the Jesuit school in Seville, which he does remember fondly in his Exemplary Novel, *The Dialogue of the Dogs*, he could have heard of the contributions to free market economics by Scholastic thinkers like the Jesuits Luis de Molina and Juan de Mariana.[14] At the time, Jesuit thinkers were pioneers in the defense of expanding free trade, free enterprise, and free speculation. According to H.M. Robertson, the Jesuits, not the Calvinists, pioneered the spirit of capitalism in Europe.[15] Mariana boldly linked prosperity to self-interest and business activity: "Is there anything more injudicious than to act against our own interests . . . in order to serve the interests of another person?" In words reminiscent of Ludwig von Mises and Adam Smith, he wrote that "nothing induces action more than one's utility, be the man a prince or a citizen."[16] For him commerce was necessary for the well-being of all: "If the exchange of goods were abolished, society would be impossible and we would all live in distress and anguish." He also addressed the economic problem of scarcity and its solution via the market place: "Scarcity can be overcome through the mutual exchange of [goods]." Mariana observed how owning things in common as part of their vows of poverty made Jesuits wasteful: in a classic statement of why government and, in general, publicly owned property is inefficient, he wrote, "We [Jesuits] are too wasteful. . . . Certainly it is natural for people to spend much more when they are supplied in common than when they have to obtain things on their own."[17]

If Cervantes ever attended some classes at the University of Salamanca, as other scholars have thought, he could have been

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[14]Among those who thought Cervantes studied with the Jesuits are F. Rodríguez Marín and W. Krauss; see Castro, *El pensamiento*, pp. 280, 320, n. 133.

[15]Robertson, *Aspects of the Rise of Economic Individualism*.

[16]For this and the following, see Juan de Mariana, *Del Rey y de la Institución Real* in *Biblioteca de Autores Españoles* (Madrid: Ediciones Atlas, 1950), vol. 31, pp. 559ff.

[17]Juan de Mariana, *Discurso de las cosas de la Compañía,* in *Biblioteca de Autores Españoles*, vol. 31, p. 604.

exposed to the free market ideas of the Salamanca School. Economists like Rothbard, Huerta de Soto, and Chafuén have traced the direct connection between these thinkers of Cervantes's Spanish Golden Age and the modern theory of capitalism.[18] It is difficult to imagine that Cervantes, so interested in everything around him, including economics, would not have encountered these ideas.[19] Cervantes's knowledge of the world of his time and his intellectual curiosity and voracious reading are impressive. *Don Quijote* alone constitutes a veritable encyclopedia of Renaissance and pre-Renaissance literature and ideas; one of the authorial voices in *Quijote* alludes to such intellectual curiosity and voracious reading practices when it admits a passion for looking at anything printed, including torn papers found on the street;[20] and Don Quijote's fascination with the printed word is evident both in his characteristically obsessive relationship with books and in his vivid interest in the process of book production, most clearly during his visit to the printing business in Barcelona.[21]

The Spanish School of economics was part of the culture of Cervantes's time and, given the sensitiveness of his "cultural antennae," he may well have been aware of at least some of their ideas. But even if Cervantes never came across the economics of the Spanish Scholastics, it is likely that his close attention to how and why men act, evident in all of his works, would have facilitated his praxeological insights into some fundamentals of the market economy. Moreover, his years in the commercial beehive of Seville, and his unique experiences inside the belly of the

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[18]Rothbard, *Economic Thought Before Adam Smith*; Huerta de Soto, "New Light"; Chafuén et al., *Cristianismo y libertad*; Chafuén, *Christians for Freedom*.

[19]A recent study of numismatics even considers *Don Quijote* one of the "primary numismatic resources" for the study of this subject in the Golden Age. See David Brian Fiero, "Don Quijote: A Numismatic and Economic Analysis. Literary Images of Coinage, Wealth and Poverty," www.lib.umi.com/dissertations/fullcit. This otherwise interesting study is marred by the persistence of materialist (Marxist) assumptions and perspectives.

[20]Cervantes, *Don Quijote*, pt. I, chap. ix. I cite *Don Quijote* by part and chapter numbers.

[21]Ibid., pt. II, chap. lxii.

greedy "government beast" as a functionary in charge of supplies for the Invincible Armada and later as a tax collector, could have made him sympathetic to the difficulties faced by producers and aware of the problems created by wrong-headed government policies. And as we shall see, Cervantes's own problems as a producer of wealth may also have contributed to his awareness of economic issues.

THE DEFENSE OF PRIVATE PROPERTY IN CERVANTES

Private property and its protection are fundamental to a market economy. The Spanish Scholastics of Cervantes's time grasped this fact clearly and wrote extensively on the subject. Domingo de Soto criticized public ownership of the means of production. He argued that abundance was not possible under common ownership. If land is privately owned while its produce is commonly shared, this injustice will create problems: "The rewards of labor will be unequal. Those who own more land will have to work more, while the fruits of their labor will be distributed to all equally according to need. They will resent receiving less though working more."[22] If there is common ownership of land and private enjoyment of produce, "everyone will expect the other to do the work . . . the distribution of goods will cause great envy." If both land and produce are commonly owned, "Each worker will try to appropriate as many goods as possible, and given the way human beings desire riches, everyone will behave in the same fashion. The peace, tranquility and friendship sought by the philosophers will thus inevitably be subverted." De Soto realized the immorality of the lack of private property: "those who own nothing cannot be liberal," and therefore generosity will suffer. Without having lived under socialism, de Soto foresaw the problems of socialist economies of the twentieth-century. Reading de Soto one is reminded of Russian mathematician and writer Alexander Zinoviev's powerful anti-socialist novel *The Radiant*

[22]This and the following in Domingo de Soto, *De Iuistitia et Iure* (Mardrid: IEP, 1968), bk. IV, chap. 3, pp. 105–06. My quotations of the Spanish Scholastics reproduce the translations in Chafuén, *Christians for Freedom.*

Future, where all the theoretical and, more strikingly, moral consequences of a common ownership of the means of production are shown to permeate everyday life in Soviet Russia.[23]

Tomás de Mercado also seemed to be talking against modern socialism, but he was simply making theoretical statements derived from his keen observations of concrete life in the Spain of his time. Postulating the modern economic truism of the limited supply of materials, goods, and services in real life (the economic fact of scarcity), Mercado notices how private property reduces scarcity by leading to greater productivity, whereas common property contributes to scarcity by leading to lesser productivity:

> We can see that privately owned property flourishes, while city- and council-owned property suffers from inadequate care and worse management. . . . If universal love will not induce people to take care of things, private interest will. Hence, privately owned goods will multiply. Had they remained in common possession, the opposite would be true.[24]

Like de Soto, he saw clearly the problems of not only thoroughly socialized economies but even government enterprises. One may contrast his views with, for example, those of Lenin, who, inspired by Marx's "economics," saw the Post Office as a model of how to run both business and country.[25] According to Mercado, common (public) ownership is bad policy

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[23]Alexander Zinoviev, *The Radiant Future* (New York: Random House, 1980). I have examined this novel in relation to Marxist theory in my *American Academia*.

[24]Tomás de Mercado, *Summa de Tratos y Contratos* (Seville, 1571), bk. II, chap. ii, pp. 18–19.

[25]For an expose and a critique of Lenin's astonishingly primitive views on economics, see Mises, *Theory and History*, p. 328; and *Socialism: An Economic and Sociological Analysis* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1981), pp. 188–89. For the fundamental problems of Marx's "economics" and its theoretical unviability, see Eugen von Böhm-Bawerk, "Unresolved Contradiction in the Marxian Economic System," reprinted in *Shorter Classics of Böhm-Bawerk* (South Holland, Ill.: Libertarian Press, 1962), vol. I, pp. 199–302; idem, "The Exploitation Theory and Its Common Offshoot" in *Capital and*

> because people love most those things that belong to them. If I love God, it is *my* God, Creator and Savior that I love. If I love him who engendered me, it is *my* father whom I love. If a father loves his children, it is because they are *his*. If a wife loves her husband it is because he *belongs* to *her* and vice versa. . . . And if I love a friend it is *my* friend or *my* parent or *my* neighbor. If I desire the common good, it is for the benefit of *my* religion or *my* country or *my* republic. Love always involves the word *mine* and the concept of property is basic to love's nature and essence.

Likewise, Francisco de Vitoria thought private property necessary for the universal virtue of generosity and therefore for morality: "Alms should be given from private goods, and not from common ones."[26]

Interest (South Holland, Ill.: Libertarian Press, 1959), pp. 422–32; Mises, *Human Action*; Thomas Sowell, *Marxism: Philosophy and Economics* (New York: William Morrow, 1985); David Gordon, *Critics of Marxism* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1986). These books are purely theoretical discussions that do not touch on the failed practical applications of Marx's economic ideas in many different countries by many different bright people and under conditions ranging from industrial societies (e.g., Germany) to peasant ones (e.g., China and Cambodia) and everything in between (Russia, Poland, and so forth).

[26]Francisco de Vitoria, *De Iustitia*, Beltrán de Heredia, ed. (Madrid: Publicaciones de la Asociación Francisco de Vitoria, 1934), vols. I–II, chap. 66, art. 2, p. 324. Vitoria does not say it, but implicit in his assertion is that forcefully taking money away from people (say, through taxation) to give it to others (redistribution) stops people from having the chance of giving their own money out of their volition and therefore stops people from being truly liberal, hospitable, and generous. This is a purely moral argument that does not even take into account the practical or utilitarian objections to redistribution made by scholars like Mises and F.A. Hayek, and that is not mentioned in Bertrand de Jouvenel's classic moral critique, *The Ethics of Redistribution*. See Mises, *Human Action*; *Socialism*; F.A. Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Bertrand de Jouvenel, *The Ethics of Redistribution* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1990). Only Hans Hoppe comes close: see Hans-Hermann Hoppe, *A Theory of Socialism and Capitalism: Economics, Politics, and Ethics* (Boston: Kluwer, 1989), pp. 178–210.

As an author, Cervantes had professional reasons for supporting private property, as the publishing history of *Don Quijote* shows. One of the crucial facts in the writing and structure of *Don Quijote* (Part I appeared in 1608; Part II in 1615) was the appropriation of its main characters, Don Quijote and Sancho, by another writer using the pseudonym Alonso Fernández de Avellaneda, who in 1614 published in Tordesillas a *Segunda parte de las hazañas de don Quijote de la Mancha*. Part I of Cervantes's *Don Quijote* is almost a collage of pre-existing books which not only influence the writing, but also form part of the text in the form of quotations and parodies, and with which the book sustains an ongoing conversation. Part II adds a complication to this already complicated relationship with other texts by introducing a published Part I within the fiction of Part II. So Part II relates not only to the books that Part I related to, but also to itself, in the form of Part I. It happened, however, that during Cervantes's writing of Part II, Avellaneda's book appeared. Cervantes was incensed. He changed the text of Part II in order to make several unfavorable references to Avellaneda and his "false" Don Quijote and Sancho. He purposefully altered the route of Don Quijote, sending him to Barcelona, which was not mentioned in Part I, instead of sending him to Zaragoza, a destination which had been announced in Part I and had been used by Avellaneda. He paid Avellaneda back by appropriating one of the characters in Avellaneda's book, don Álvaro Tarfe. He made Tarfe sign a document in which this Avellaneda character asserts, testifies, and swears to the falsity of the Don Quijote and Sancho in Avellaneda's book and the truthfulness of the Don Quijote and Sancho whom Tarfe has just met in Part II of Cervantes's *Don Quijote* (in chapter lxxii, where Don Quijote calls Avellaneda a "usurper of my name" twice in the same paragraph). And in the process, Cervantes showed what a superior writer he was by making a far more interesting use of Tarfe than Tarfe's author had.

Cervantes culminated his relentless attack on the thief by writing a Prologue to Part II that centers on Avellaneda's stealing of Cervantes's immortal creation (though Cervantes avows that his anger is motivated also by Avellaneda's having called him a cripple and an old man). In this prologue, a masterpiece of subtle and not so subtle literary vituperation, Cervantes destroys Avellaneda.

So Part II's complicated relationship with books is further complicated by its combat with a writer who had stolen the product of Cervantes's mind. Part II interacts with the books included in Part I, with Part I, and with Avellaneda's book. Therefore, the greater complexity of Part II, its very structure, hinges on the question of property rights: the characteristic openness of chivalric books, which *Don Quijote* takes to an extreme by using the reader as participant in the creation of the work, Cervantes decides to bring to a close, as a result of Avellaneda's robbery.[27] This visceral anger against someone who violated the integrity of Cervantes's creation nullifies all of Don Quijote's mad destructions of property as well as his famous Golden Age speech against private property in the novel.

At the end of *Don Quijote*, the authorial voice of Cide Hamete Benengeli, the most conspicuous narrator in the book, reaffirms Cervantes's intention to protect once and for all his intellectual property:

> And said the most prudent Cide Hamete to his pen:
>
> Here you shall rest, hanging from this rack by this copper wire, my quill. Whether you are well cut or badly pointed here you shall live long ages, unless presumptuous and unworthy historians take you down to profane you. But before they touch you, warn them in as strong terms as you are able:
>
> > Beware, beware, all petty knaves,
> > I may be touched by none:
> > This enterprise, my worthy king,
> > Is kept for me alone.
>
> For me alone Don Quijote was born, and I for him. He knew how to act, and I knew how to write. We two alone are as one, despite that fictitious and Tordesillescan scribe who has dared, and may dare again with his coarse and ill-trimmed ostrich quill, to write

[27]Darío Fernández-Morera, "Cervantes and the Aesthetics of Reception," *Comparative Literature Studies 18* (1981): 405–19; reprinted in James Person, ed., *Literature Criticism: from 1400 to 1800* (Detroit: Gale, 1994), vol. 23.

> the exploits of my valorous knight. This is no burden for his shoulders, no subject for his frost-bound muse; and should you by chance get to know him, do warn him to let Don Quijote's weary and moldering bones rest in the grave, and not seek, against all canons of death, to carry him off to Old Castile, compelling him to leave the tomb where he really and truly lies stretched out full length, powerless to make a third expedition and new sally. Surely his two, which have met with approval and have delighted all the people who knew about them, both here and abroad, are enough to make a mockery of all the innumerable sallies undertaken by all the countless knights-errant. Thus, you will comply with your Christian profession by offering good advice to one who wishes you ill, and I shall be proud to be the first author who ever enjoyed witnessing the full effect of his writing. For my sole aim has been to arouse men's scorn for the false and absurd stories of knight-errantry, whose prestige has been shaken by this tale of my true Don Quijote, and which will, without any doubt, soon crumble in ruin. Vale.[28]

In this speech, "Cide Hamete" hangs up his pen much as a knight hangs up his sword, which in chivalric lore could be used, like Cide Hamete's pen, only by the "chosen" or best knight; and this address to the pen, which suddenly metamorphoses into a speech by the pen itself, is almost a conjuration to stop any future Avellaneda-like authors from stealing Don Quijote ever again.

Therefore, the final fate of Cervantes's main character goes back to the problem of property rights. For in order to make it impossible for anyone else to steal Don Quijote again, the writer Cervantes kills his creation. So Don Quijote in effect dies in defense of Cervantes's private property rights.[29]

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[28]Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, Walter Starkie, trans. (New York: Signet, 1964), pp. 1049–50. Unless, as indicated here, all translations are mine.

[29]These rights, then, become unquestioned when their violation happens to affect Cervantes, the real, flesh and blood author of the book *Don Quijote*. One is reminded of deconstructionist literary critics like Jacques Derrida, who in their academic or "theoretical" writings reject the existence of real authors in literature, but determinedly resort to legal means when they think that their own real-life property rights are threatened. Nor do

Cervantes's authorial consciousness is remarkable even at a time, the Renaissance, when writers and artists were breaking away from the relative anonymity customary among producers in the Middle Ages.[30] It is true that in Spain one finds instances of an earlier consciousness of individual authorship. An example is the Infante Don Juan Manuel. Writing in the 1330s, he notoriously includes himself in his works and shows pride in his authorship and concern regarding the fate of his works and the quality of their future reproduction.[31] The great Arcipreste de Hita, too, shows an awareness of his uniqueness as an author.[32] But nothing can compare to Cervantes's lyrical singing of himself and his creative powers in some of the tercets in chapter IV of his *Viaje del Parnaso*, which contains some of his most evocative and

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these critics who deny the author and prefer to speak of, say, the "lyric voice," rather than the author's voice, ever pass on their own authorial royalties. For Derrida's fierce protection of his property rights as an author, see Richard Wolin, ed., *The Heidegger Controversy* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), pp. ix–x. Wolin's savaging comments summarize my point: "To begin with, there are the ironies of engaging Derrida in a dispute about the prerogatives of 'authorship.' Who, after all, has done more to call into question our inherited conception of integral authorial authority than Jacques Derrida? But in this case [Derrida's prohibition to have reproduced in Wolin's book his article defending Heidegger against attacks for having favored National Socialism] he invoked the entitlements of authorship in the most conventional and, one is tempted to say, 'pre-critical' fashion. Is Derrida himself the only one left to whom the notion of unimpeachable authorial prerogative still applies?"

[30]Darío Fernández-Morera, "Cervantes' Theory and Practice of the Modern Novel," *CIEFL Bulletin* Double Issue 15, no. 2 (December 2005) and 16, no. 1 (June 2006): 49–65.

[31]The first sentence of his most enduring work, *El conde Lucanor*, declares proudly that the book was *made by don Juan, son of the Prince don Manuel*. For his worries about the correct transmission of his works and his penchant for including himself in his writings, see José Manuel Blecua, *Don Juan Manuel: El conde Lucanor* (Madrid: Castalia, 1969), pp. 16, 45.

[32]The Arcipreste, also writing in the 1330s, emphasizes in the introduction to his *Libro de Buen Amor* that what he writes is not only a *new book* (*este nuevo libro*), but also his book and no one else's. See the repetition of the possessives *mi* and *suyo* in the title, "*Libro de Buen Amor, Oración qu'el Açipreste fizo á Dios, quando començó este libro suyo*," and later in the introduction (*por ende comencé mi libro en el nobre de Dios*).

heart-rending verses, and where the self, the proud Renaissance I, becomes a recurrent motif:

> Yo corté con mi ingenio aquel vestido
> con que al mundo la hermosa *Galatea*
> salió para librarse del olvido.
> (I tailored with my wit that dress
> with which the beautiful *Galatea*
> went out into the world to live forever.)
>
> Yo con estilo en parte razonable
> he compuesto *Comedias* que en su tiempo
> tuvieron de lo grave y de lo afable.
> (I, with a proper style,
> have composed plays that in their time
> were both grave and light.)
>
> Yo he dado en *Don Quijote* pasatiempo
> al pecho melancólico y mohino
> en cualquiera sazón, en todo tiempo.
> (I have given in *Don Quijote* entertainment
> to the melancholy and sad
> in any time or season.)
>
> Yo he abierto en mis *Novelas* un camino
> por do la lengua castellana puede
> mostrar con propiedad un desatino.[33]
> (I have opened with my *Novels* a path
> through which the Castilian language can
> show with propriety men's folly.)

[33]It contains this magnificent, touching tercet:

> Y en dulces varias rimas se llevaron
> mis esperanzas los ligeros vientos,
> que en ellos y en la arena se sembraron.

This consciousness of his literary genius is echoed in Cervantes's great play *Pedro de Urdemalas*, in the praise bestowed on Pedro de Urdemalas's Protean creativity by other characters and by Pedro himself in verses redolent of those in the *Viaje del Parnaso*:

> Bien logrado iré del mundo
> cuando Dios me lleve de él,
> pues podré decir que en él
> un Proteo fui segundo. (*Jornada* III)

The Avellaneda affair shows how Cervantes as "a producer of a good" was "powerfully affected by the existence of competition," as Menger observed in his classic work on the foundations of economics.[34] The entire direction and structure of Cervantes's greatest novel was changed by another writer's book, in an exemplary case of a producer responding to competition. For as the Marxist-feminist-deconstructionist professor in David Lodge's novel *Nice Work* laments, a professional writer in a market economy is an entrepreneur of the mind. He "invents a product which consumers didn't know they wanted until it was made available." He manufactures his product "with the assistance of purveyors of risk capital known as publishers." And he then sells his product "in competition with makers of marginally differentiated products of the same kind," namely other writers.[35]

Unfortunately for Cervantes as producer of an intellectual article of consumption, in the seventeenth century there was only limited protection of property rights, especially intellectual property. Moreover, these rights had not become internationally protected. The Spanish School of economics was an exception in its determined defense of property rights, but its influence on public policy was practically nonexistent because of the greed of the Spanish government.

So authors like Cervantes, and the businessmen who printed his books, were exposed to seeing the product of their minds and labors copied almost immediately by another printer, or stolen by another author. The only way to try to prevent this from happening was to get from the State (the King) a permit (the *privilegio*, or publishing right, but literally a "privilege" granted by the State rather than something inalienable to the producer and

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[34]Carl Menger, *Principles of Economics* (Grove City, Penn.: Libertarian Press, 1994), p. 224. This is a translation by James Dingwall and Bert F. Hoselitz of Menger's 1871 work, with a valuable introduction by F.A. Hayek written for the reprint of Menger's book by the London School of Economics.

[35]This character does not believe in character in fiction, loyal as she is to deconstructionist and post-structuralist theory. So she would not believe in herself, one may assume. She calls herself a "semiotic materialist." See David Lodge, *Nice Work* (New York: Penguin, 1989), p. 21.

owner), so that for a certain number of years and within a certain geographical area, no one else could legally print the work. But the enforcement of this right was not consistent or thorough, and of course beyond the presumably "guaranteed" geographical area books were subject to piracy. Within a few weeks of *Don Quijote*'s publication, three pirated editions appeared in Portugal. Since under the Hapsburgs Spain was still divided into various former kingdoms, *privilegios* granted, say, in Castile, were not necessarily recognized in, say, Asturias. Moreover, nothing protected an author's character from being used by another writer. The situation is different today, when property rights include preventing the piracy of one's literary characters. Witness, for example, the legal suit filed by English author J.K. Rowling against the author and publishers of a Russian series of books that very loosely imitate her *Harry Potter* novels and that present a female version of her main character.

Cervantes's impotence in preventing another writer from stealing Don Quijote and Sancho illustrates not only the institutional, but also the philosophical precariousness of property rights in the Spain of his time. A great deal of grazing and agricultural land was "public property" in a number of bewildering forms and uses, such as *baldíos*, commons, community property, crown lands, municipal property, and the practice of *presura*.[36] Naturally, not everyone received equal treatment. Those with government connections, such as municipal officials and the lord of the place, benefitted the most, receiving a greater share in the use of these "public" lands.[37] All sorts of other problems and complications existed, typical of what modern economics calls "the problem of the commons," which arise from the lack of

[36]Or squatters' rights. See Alejandro Nieto, *Bienes comunales* (Madrid: Revista de Derecho Privado, 1964), pp. 124–32; and Fray Justo Pérez de Urbel, *La reconquista española y la repoblación del país* (Zaragoza: CSIC, 1951), pp. 127–62. One may suspect that the right of *presura* would have an impact on the mentality of poor Spaniards facing vast empty and unused land during the Conquest of America. Squatting played a part, too, in the colonizing of the American West by the white man.

[37]Antonio Domínguez Ortiz, *The Golden Age of Spain, 1516–1659*, James Casey, trans. (New York: Basic Books, 1971), p. 157.

enforced property rights and clear boundaries of ownership, and which have a bearing on environmental issues.[38]

The well-known statements in favor of liberty throughout Cervantes's works are connected to his defense of property rights and his thematic critique of Spain's absolute monarchy and government bureaucrats. As Locke proposes, property functions as an instrument against the absolute power of the state (in Locke's and Cervantes's time, against the absolute power of the sovereign) because it limits the state's (the sovereign's) power and frees the subjects from the "obligation to obey edicts which endangered their property."[39] And, as Locke proposed, too, one's property is the extension of one's property over oneself. One cannot help but be reminded of this viewpoint when in *Don Quijote*[40] one reads Maese Pedro's lament over the destruction of his property, the puppets: "*cúyos eran sus cuerpos sino míos?*" (whose were their bodies, but mine?). Afterwards, the destroyer of the property, Don Quijote, reimburses Pedro for all damages, as he does later in the case of the Enchanted Ship adventure.[41]

One can say, then, that the strength of property rights at a given time and place is a measure of the strength of political liberty at that time and place. If the product of one's mind or labor (the *Quijote* in Cervantes's time) can be taken by others (Avellaneda in Cervantes's time) without one's consent, then one's liberty is necessarily curtailed. The connection between property rights and liberty becomes even clearer if one remembers that

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[38]Murray Rothbard, *Man, Economy, and State* (Auburn, Ala.: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1993), pp. 828–829; Hoppe, *A Theory of Socialism and Capitalism*, pp.188–210; Terry Anderson and Donald R. Leal, *Free Market Environmentalism* (San Francisco: Pacific Research Institute, 1991), pp. 3, 7, 20–34, 61–81, 122–125, 147–150, 165–167; Arthur Seldon, *Capitalism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), pp. 86, 126, 129–33, 237–38, 327; and Hernando de Soto, *The Other Path: The Invisible Revolution in the Third World*, June Abbott, trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1989).

[39]For this and the following, see Judith Richards, Lotte Mulligan, and John K. Graham, "'Property' and 'People': Political Usages of Locke and Some Contemporaries," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 42 (January-March 1981): 29–51.

[40]*Don Quijote*, pt. II, chap. xxvi.

[41]Ibid., chap. xxix.

Locke thought of property not only as property that a subject owns, but also as the subject's own body, which is the subject's property as well. One *owns* one's body, and since property earned is but an extension of one's body, respect for property rights is therefore essential to one's ownership of one's body and therefore to one's liberty. The State (or the sovereign) can no more take a subject's property without his consent than it can take his body and therefore his liberty without his consent: or, more clearly, the State (the sovereign) cannot take a subject's liberty, *tout court*, without his consent. Private property is therefore liberty.

CERVANTES'S CRITIQUE OF THE REDISTRIBUTIVE STATE

Cervantes's understanding of the market place can be better grasped in conjunction with his fictional critique of the State in one of his Exemplary Novels, *Rinconete and Cortadillo*. Upon arriving in Seville, the two boys, Rinconete and Cortadillo, encounter and are forced to join a carefully constructed organization of thieves, enforcers, and other assorted low-lives run by a grotesque, yet oddly paternal man named Monipodio. Scholars have traditionally seen Monipodio and his group as many things, such as a satire of the Church or organized crime, but, perhaps not surprisingly in view of the statism of many academicians, they have not seen it as a satire and parody of governmental activities and structures. And yet, having been a member of the government's bureaucracy, Cervantes had a unique perspective on the inner workings of the redistributive State, which at best takes from the productive and redistributes to the less productive or unproductive (as taught in Marx's parasitic teaching: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need"), while in the process feeding a vast machinery of bureaucrats who are essential to the redistribution process and who therefore have a stake not merely in the maintenance of the machinery of redistribution, but also in its continuous expansion.[42] Cervantes knew first hand a government's desperate need

[42]Mises, *Bureaucracy* (Spring Mills, Penn.: Libertarian Press, 1983); and de Jouvenel, *Ethics of Redistribution*.

for revenue, its ingeniousness and ruthlessness in obtaining that revenue, and the damage such greed causes to the productive people in society.

As Charles Adams has pointed out, onerous taxation was probably the single most decisive cause of the decline of Cervantes's Golden Age Spain.[43] It was, in turn, largely the consequences of foreign involvements and wars that drained the Spanish treasury and stimulated government greed for revenue. The value-added tax, or *alcabala*, lamented by Cortadillo in Cervantes's novel, was particularly damaging to the economy, as this sort of tax always is. Cervantes was for a time an *alcabalero*, a collector of this tax. Though a formidable revenue machine, it reduces the incentive to produce because it lowers profits and, in addition, makes every product more expensive for the citizenry. As each successive producer in the manufacturing and commercial line adds to the price to compensate for the growing expense created by the value-added tax, the cost of production goes up—and the final price of items goes up for the consuming citizens as well, affecting those with lesser means the most.[44] In Spain, "The same materials, as they changed hands in the course of commerce and manufacture, paid the 10 per cent tax many times, and thus placed Castilian producers at a hopeless disadvantage as compared with their foreign competitors."[45]

The Moslems invented the value-added tax, which they called *alcabala* and brought along when they invaded the Iberian Peninsula in 711 A.D. In Spain it became known under its Arabic name and was adopted by Christian monarchs, who appreciated its effectiveness as a source of revenue. The government of Charles V relied on it heavily. Realizing its damaging effects on commerce and living standards, however, Queen Isabella in her 1504 will recommended the abolition of the *alcabala*. Cardinal

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[43]See "The Collapse of the Hercules of Europe" in Charles Adams's eye-opening masterpiece *For Good and Evil: The Impact of Taxes on the Course of Civilization* (New York: Madison Books, 1993), pp. 185–98.

[44]One can see these effects still at work today in Europe, where even a lower value-added tax rate than that of Golden Age Spain makes the cost of living higher than in the U.S. and general business competitiveness lower.

[45]Davies, *The Golden Century of Spain*, p. 79.

Ximenez, minister of Charles V, tried to end it. But as in the case of today's U.S. Income Tax, the State had gotten used, like a drug addict, to the large revenue generated by the *alcabala*. It was "the most lucrative of taxes . . . hence the tenacity with which many generations of Castilian kings clung to this disastrous import."[46] It was desirable, too, because inescapable for most citizens, including the nobility (which many historians have erroneously said were exempt from every tax).[47] The only ones not directly affected were the very poor, who ate bread and wheat imported from abroad and therefore not subject to the *alcabala*. This tax was therefore expanded to include the chain of production of food, and the rates of taxation were increased.

The *alcabala* was not enough for the insatiable needs of the State. The Church was enlisted in the search for revenue, and papal indulgences were pushed on the population so that part of the income they generated would go to the royal coffers (this is a neglected factor in the episode of the *bulero* in the sixteenth-century picaresque novel *Lazarillo de Tormes*).[48] A personal income tax called *servicio* was imposed on commoners, the clergy and the nobility being exempted. Another tax called *millones* was imposed on agricultural producers—not only peasants but also those members of the lower nobility who "had to work by the sweat of their brow to keep from starving," for, contrary to what is commonly believed, not all noblemen in Spain were idle, and contrary to what the Marxist reductionist categories suggest, the nobility was not a homogeneous group.[49] There were other taxes, as well as tariffs.[50]

This weight of taxation, combined with the need for revenue, created all sorts of corrupt practices. For instance,

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[46]Ibid.

[47]Tax rolls from Extremadura, for example, include the cream of the local nobility. See David A. Vassberg, *Land and Society in Golden Age Castile* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 222.

[48]Davies, *The Golden Century of Spain*, p. 80.

[49]Vassberg, *Land and Society in Golden Age Spain*, p. 91. The *millones* also taxed the church.

[50]Ibid., pp. 225ff.

> the councils of many towns, reluctant to impose new direct taxes on an already overburdened population, resorted to the expedient of exploiting the various types of municipal property available to them . . . they rented common pastures to the highest bidder for plowing, they sold common forests for firewood, and they speculated with the resource of public granaries.[51]

Anyone familiar with municipalities, state governments, and household utilities receipts in the U.S. will recognize this governmental desperation for obtaining revenue in every possible and surreptitious way—such as state revenue tax, utility fund tax, municipal tax, environmental tax, service tax, regulatory cost recovery tax, universal service fund tax, excise tax, 911 tax, town public parking sticker fees, town dog permit fees, lotteries, selling of public space to advertising, and even local taxes on taxes.[52]

The *alcabala* discouraged the creation of industrial and trade businesses, and led therefore to stagnation in the creation of new jobs and therefore to unemployment. Why take up a trade and start a business when onerous taxation made both unprofitable? This, and not just the vaunted "Spanish pride" or mistaken sense of honor, explains why so many Spaniards chose to be idle: "Any no good wretch," explains the Spanish narrator in *Lazarillo de Tormes*, "would die of hunger before he would take up a trade [and pay taxes, one might add, that made taking up a trade unprofitable if one looked at the effort and risk involved and the rewards one would get]." A modern scholar observes that "Spanish industry was strangled by the most burdensome and complicated system of taxation that human folly can devise."[53]

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[51]Ibid., pp. 224–25.

[52]In Evanston, Illinois, until a few years ago, the city added the total of a household's expenses on, say, electricity, plus the usual taxes and fees, and then taxed this total, which already included taxes.

[53]Davies, *The Golden Century of Spain*, cited in Adams, *For Good and Evil,* p. 196.

Foreign goods, which were cheaper because not subject to the *alcabala*, were smuggled into Spain to violate import limitations and tariffs, and they underpriced Spanish goods in the local markets. So gold and silver flowed out of the country as fast as it arrived from America, and not only because the government used it to pay foreign loans, but also because importers used it to pay for foreign goods, and because Spaniards in general were reluctant to invest in Spain itself in view of the anti-business economic situation.

Since the ancient liberties and customs of the old Spanish kingdoms made it very difficult to tax them for the government's overseas wars, Charles V had to look to Castile for his tax base. In Castile, taxation required the approval of the Cortes, a representative body analogous to the English Parliament or the French Estates General. But in fact, by the sixteenth century, the Castilian Cortes usually granted the King's wishes. Taxpayers, however, would take only so much.

In 1520, before Charles V had consolidated his rule as king, a revolt of taxpayers asking for true representation in and accountability of the Castilian Cortes turned into an ugly social and political uprising, the so-called *Comuneros* revolt. The acts of violence committed by the angry taxpayers dwarfed anything done by the rebellion of American taxpayers in 1776. In one of them, the rioters killed a member of the Cortes while ignoring his request for an opportunity to get last rites before dying. Charles V defeated the rebels with difficulty and ruthlessness. But the revolt showed the Emperor the limits of what the citizens would accept. So instead of relying exclusively on new taxes, he resorted to a more strict application of existing taxes and to a corrupt use of the banking system in which bankers were willing participants—an early example of collusion between government and influential sectors of the business world that illustrates how such a combination undermines a market economy.[54]

Most of the taxpayers flying from the government's despoliation went to America. "The galleons left on the 28th of last

[54]Huerta de Soto, "New Light," pp. 60ff. Huerta de Soto shows the complicity in fraudulent practices between the bankers and Charles V.

month," writes a contemporary French observer, "I am assured that in addition to the persons who sailed for business reasons, more than 6,000 Spaniards have passed over to America for the simple reason that they cannot live in Spain."[55] The decline caused by the exodus was the reason the German chancellor Bismarck did not want colonies for Germany: he used the example of Spain to illustrate how the flight of its most productive people might hurt a nation.[56] This most important reason has been glossed over or mentioned only *en passant* by historians of Spain, most of them statists, who prefer instead to attribute the decline to the expulsion of the Moslems, or the Jews.

The size of the Spanish government grew out of the need to create bureaucracy to handle the extraction, administration, and redistribution of the revenue, as well as the government's foreign adventures, the army, and the navy. Government became the largest employer in Spain. Taxpayers jostled for the available public service jobs, which were tax-free and, as is always the case with the public sector at any time or place, did not produce revenue—they could only distribute it.[57] Cervantes and other Golden Age writers made a literary theme out of this desperate search for state employment.[58] As government as employer grew, the private sector shrank. In the bureaucracy "There are a

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[55]Trevor Davies, *Spain in Decline: 1621–1700* (London: Macmillan, 1957), p. 159.

[56]He of course used the expression "best blood." See Adams, *For Good and Evil*, p. 189.

[57]For the inherent lack of productivity of the public sector see Rothbard, *Man, Economy, and State,* pp. 791–807. This is true of the public sector as an economic whole but also of the individual public employees:

> government bureaucrats do not pay taxes; they *consume* the tax proceeds. If a private citizen earning $10,000 income pays $2000 in taxes, the bureaucrat earning $10,000 does not *really* pay $2000 in taxes also; that he supposedly does is only a bookkeeping fiction. He is actually acquiring an income of $8000 and paying no taxes at all. (ibid., p. 791)

[58]Thus, in Cervantes's Exemplary Novel, *El licenciado Vidriera*, the main character makes an unsuccessful effort to gain employment in the government (the royal Cortes') bureaucracy.

thousand employees," writes a contemporary, "where 40 could suffice if they were kept at work; the rest could be set to some useful labor."[59] Anyone familiar with the over-employment and lack of efficiency of government bureaucracies at any time and place will recognize the situation.

It is true that some historians point out a short period of prosperity after the beginning of Charles V's reign and attribute it to the rise in prices, which presumably stimulated the production of goods.[60] From the point of view of modern economic theory, however, this could not be true prosperity, but an artificial boom created by the inflationary pressures that originated in the huge deficit spending of the state's budget, the influx of gold from America, the demands of war, and the expenses of the conquest, colonization, and defense of America—an artificial boom which distorted the functioning of the market and which when added to onerous taxation eventually led to what economists of the Austrian School call an "inflationary depression."[61]

The Spanish School of economics was aware of these problems. Though Domingo de Soto conceded that some taxation is needed to support the essential needs of government, such as national defense, the justice system, and so forth, he warned that "Great dangers for the republic spring from financial exhaustion, the population suffers privations and is greatly oppressed by daily increases in taxes."[62] Diego de Saavedra Fajardo (1584–1648), who was not a Scholastic, but a lay writer like Cervantes, warned that "power is mad and has to be restrained by economic prudence. Without prudence, empires decline. The Roman Empire declined due to the emperors' excessive spending, which consumed all its treasures."[63] Mariana condemned the

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[59]Adams, *For Good and Evil*, p. 189.

[60]Davies, *The Golden Century of Spain*, pp. 66–70; Bartolomé Bennassar, *La España del Siglo de Oro* (Barcelona: Editorial Crítica, 1983), p. 209.

[61]I apply to Spain the ideas on so-called business cycles and economic depressions of Austrian School economists like Rothbard in *Man, Economy, and State* and Mises in *Human Action*.

[62]*De Iustitia et Iure*, bk. III, qu. VI, art. VII, fol. 98.

[63]Diego de Saavedra Fajardo, *Idea de un Príncipe Político-Cristiano* in *Biblioteca de Autores Españoles* (Madrid: Editions Atlas, 1947), vol. 25, p. 191.

bellicosity of tyrants and their penchant for engaging in one war after another and going after "the rich and the good" to get their revenue.[64] Pedro Fernández de Navarrete, Chaplain and Secretary to Charles V, wrote that Spain's major problem was emigration prompted by the high taxes people had to pay to finance public spending and, to no avail, urged the Emperor to reduce spending.[65] Thinking as a modern economist, Navarrete rejected the idea that abundance of money in a nation is a sign of prosperity, and instead defined wealth as productivity. "The origin of poverty," he added, "is high taxes. In continual fear of collectors [the farmers] prefer to abandon their land, so they can avoid their vexations. As king Teodorico [a Visigoth king] said, the only agreeable country is one where no man is afraid of the tax collectors."[66] He also understood the modern governmental problem of killing with high tax rates the goose that lays the golden egg: "he who imposes high taxes receives from very few" and since the number of productive people consequently declines, "the backs of those few who are left to bear the burden grow weaker."[67]

As a one-time tax-collector, Cervantes was familiar with both sides of the process of taxation. On the one hand the government desperately looks for ways to extract more and more wealth from the productive citizens in order just to keep operating. On the other hand the productive citizens desperately try to keep the results of their productivity. Cervantes would have known of the Spanish taxpayers' revolts and flight and witnessed the taxpayers' ingenious efforts to hide the fruits of their productivity, that is to say, their income—ingenious ways of tax evasion which in turn made the government clamp down with further regulations to stop the evasion, thereby further hampering job creation, and so on in a spiral well described by modern day market economics.[68]

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[64]Mariana, *Del Rey*, p. 469.

[65]Pedro Fernández de Navarrete, *Conservación de Monarquías* (Madrid, 1619), cited in Chafuén, *Christians for Freedom*, p. 66, n. 19.

[66]Chafuén, *Christians for Freedom*, p. 67.

[67]Ibid.

[68]See Mises, *Human Action*; "Middle-of-the-Road Policy Leads to Socialism," in *Planning for Freedom* (Spring Mills, Penn.: Libertarian Press, 1980), pp. 18–35; and *Bureaucracy*.

"The [Spanish] taxpayer," writes Golden Age scholar Trevor Davies, "overburdened with imposts, was entangled with a network of regulations to prevent evasion. . . . He was thus crippled at every step by the deadly influence of the anomalous and incongruous accumulation of exactions."[69]

Cervantes's critique of the distributive state in *Rinconete and Cortadillo* begins with a humorous parody of government attempts to control entrepreneurship and of government mooching on producers, as Rinconete and Cortadillo learn to their astonishment that their "work," stealing, is both regulated and taxed by Monipodio's "government." Refusal to pay the government for the right to work, that is to say, the refusal to get a "license" to exercise their "trade," and any attempt to avoid paying taxes on their profits, will be severely punished: "it will cost you dearly" (*les costará caro*), the two boys are told. In addition, they must pass through the *aduana* (customs) of Mr. Monipodio.

Cortadillo's response to the government's threat is a classic libertarian statement on the right any producer has to work without having to pay production taxes or buy a "license" in order to work: "*Yo pensé que el hurtar era oficio libre, horro de pecho y alcabala, y que si se paga, es por junto, dando por fiadores a la garganta y a las espaldas*" ("I thought that stealing was a free enterprise on which neither duty nor *alcabala* was levied, and that if payment was required, it was in a lump sum, with neck or back as security"). He wonders if thieves in that part of the country have to pay "duty" and is told that at the very least thieves must "register" with the government authority, that is, with Monipodio, who is the thieves' "father, mentor, and protector." Since the Spanish government did not in fact tax thieves, Cervantes must be mocking a system run amuck, a system that he found it safer to criticize by means of the humorous presentation of a band of thieves who act as a respectable government.

In Cervantes's *Rinconete and Cortadillo*, government, in effect, is a bunch of thieves. When at one point in the novel money

[69]Davies, *The Golden Century of Spain*, cited in Adams, *For Good and Evil*, p. 196.

taken out of the citizens of Seville victimized by the thieves cannot be accounted for in Monipodio's society, the government's chief executive (Monipodio) is incensed not about taking money from those who have earned it, but about the violation of the government's rules. Thus, his government's "taxation," based from the start on immorality (taking by force from the innocent and productive) is doubly immoral because it cannot even keep to its own rules on stealing. Angry about this stolen money that appears to have been further stolen, or stolen to the second degree, Monipodio's anger explodes:

> "!*Nadie se burle con quebrantar la más mínima cosa de nuestra orden, que le costará la vida! Manifiéstese la cica, y si se encubre por no pagar los derechos, yo le daré enteramente lo que le toca, y pondré lo demás de mi casa, porque en todas maneras ha de ir contento el alguacil*" ("Let no one play fast and loose with the slightest regulation of our order, for it will cost him his life. The purse must be handed over, and if it is being concealed to avoid the taxation due, I shall give him [the constable] his full share and make up the balance out of my own pocket, for, come what may, the constable must be satisfied").

A side detail contributes to the critique of government: the municipal employee, the Sevillian *alguacil* (constable), is in cahoots with the crooks. Again, anyone familiar with many city and even state governments in the U.S. today will recognize the situation in Seville during the Golden Age.[70]

Behind Cortadillo's response lies an entire theoretical economic edifice. According to economic theory, government needs revenue for all sorts of redistributive and power-exerting actions,

[70]Chicago journalists like John Kass have made a living out of reporting on government corruption at the city and state level. See, for example, Kass's regular columns during 2003 in the *Chicago Tribune* on Chicago Mayor Richard Daley and on George Ryan, ex-governor of Illinois (imprisoned for corruption). Among his many columns one can cite John Kass, "U.S. attorney's independence pays dividends," *Chicago Tribune*, December 21, 2003.

most frequently war.[71] Even economist Joseph A. Schumpeter, not a particularly staunch free market advocate, wrote that

> the state has been living on a revenue which was being produced in the private sphere for private purposes and had to be deflected from these purposes by political force. The theory which construes taxes on the analogy of club dues or of the purchase of the services of, say, a doctor only proves how far removed this part of the social sciences is from scientific habits of mind.[72]

So the state looks constantly for new sources of revenue, the only caveat being that it must not tax the productive so much that the incentive to produce disappears. In the process of stealing the golden eggs, it must not make the goose that lays the eggs unwilling to continue laying the eggs or even too inclined to lay fewer eggs. So in order to increase expendable revenue, and not being content with direct taxation, sales taxation, or the more subtle means of taxation like money-printing (and therefore gradual currency devaluation and inflation), the government creates a monopoly on the right to produce and proceeds to sell that right. Then a producer must get a permit ("license") from the government if he wants to produce. On the one hand individuals have the right to work and produce at their chosen trade without government interference or permission. On the other hand government desperately needs revenue. The two sides cannot coexist. But the state, being the stronger on account of its usual monopoly of force, normally wins. The desperate need for revenue normally masks itself as an effort to secure the quality and safety of what is produced. The areas requiring permission are gradually extended, so that eventually even barbers and hair dressers must get permits. Free market theory counters the safety argument by pointing out that the fear of losing customers and going bankrupt

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[71]Rothbard, *The Ethics of Liberty* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1982); Albert J. Nock, *Our Enemy, the State* (Delevan, N.Y.: Hallberg, 1983); Antony de Jasay, *The State* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1985); and Hoppe, *A Theory of Socialism and Capitalism*.

[72]Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism Socialism, and Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1942), p. 198, 198, n. 11.

along with private seals of quality such as Consumer Reports and UL approvals can do the job as well or better without government interference.

Governmental extensions of the licensing monopoly eventually enter areas of unsavory action not outside the realm of gangsters like Monipodio. Take, for example, gambling. Morally, gambling traditionally falls within a gray area of sinfulness. But it has been turned by government's greed for revenue into an illegal activity. So, for example, in many areas of the U.S. many forms of gambling (betting for money) are legally forbidden. On the other hand, gambling is legally allowed, as long as the gambling is "licensed" by the government in casinos, or government owned, as in state lotteries. Like Monipodio, government turns a presumably undesirable activity, forbidden by government, into an activity that is not only accepted but also enthusiastically promoted and advertised by government as conducive to the people's well being, as happens with state lotteries, where the damages that compulsive gambling may cause to freely acting citizens are ignored as long as the gambling is government-sanctioned and therefore as long as the gambling results in more revenue for the coffers of the State. In some parts of Europe, prostitution is similarly treated. So what used to be activities sponsored and overseen by gangsters become activities sponsored and overseen by government.

CERVANTES'S LIBERTARIANISM AND DON QUIJOTE'S DEFENSE OF PIMPING

As an immensely imaginative novelist, not as a philosopher writing a coherent essay, Cervantes embodied in his characters and narrators the most diverse thoughts and actions. So a given passage may present a particular viewpoint, which Cervantes may or may not have shared at one time or under certain circumstances, while the next passage may present another viewpoint, which, again, he may or may not have shared at one time or under certain circumstances. But what all of Cervantes's pages indubitably prove is that he understood many things; and that he could therefore envisage, even more than his *ingenioso* Don Quijote, many different ways of thinking and acting. So it is with libertarianism.

Don Quijote's expressions glorifying liberty are well-known. But no one seems to have noticed that his most famous speech in defense of liberty occurs in the context of a condemnation of the comforts and protection granted by others because they result in a loss of one's independence and therefore of one's liberty. This is a classic libertarian position, which argues that in exchange for its protection and help, the state inevitably curtails one's liberty and creates a dependence that makes one lose not only liberty but also the love and the understanding of liberty. Or, as Patrick Henry put it, "Give me liberty, or give me death."

> Liberty, Sancho, my friend, is one of the most precious gifts that Heaven has bestowed on mankind; all the treasures the earth contains in its bosom or the ocean within its depths cannot be compared with it. For liberty, as well as for honor, man ought to risk even his life, and he should reckon captivity the greatest evil life can bring. I say this, Sancho, because you were a witness to the luxury and plenty that we enjoyed in the castle we have just left; yet, in the midst of those seasoned banquets and snow-cooled liquors, I suffered, or so it seemed to me, the extremities of hunger, because I did not enjoy them with the same freedom as if they had been my own. The obligations that spring from benefits and kindnesses received are ties that prevent a noble mind from ranging freely. Happy the man to whom Heaven has given a morsel of bread for which he is obliged to thank Heaven alone.[73]

Cervantes could well relate to these words, because the defining fact of his life was not the society of his time, or the distribution of wealth, or the material base, or any of the other things that "materialist" (Marxist) analyses of his life and times offer as "explanations" of his works. The defining fact of his life was his capture by the Moslems of North Africa and his slavery at their hands for five and a half years. Only his participation in the battle of Lepanto (1571), which in the Prologue to Part II the

[73] *Don Quijote*, pt. II, chap. lviii (Starkie translation, p. 935).

narrator boasts as the greatest occasion of his life, comes close to it.

This slavery, the culminating experience of his action-packed youth, had a lasting impact, affecting the later course of his life not only because he lost precious time and the possible government career he had ahead of him as a result of his earlier heroics at Lepanto and the letters of recommendation he carried with him—but also because from then on he would look at life from the point of view of a passionate lover of liberty, who, having lost independence and freedom once under terrible conditions, sees them as the guiding principles of human life.

Don Quijote is a staunch advocate of the freedom of the will. Therefore, not for him are assumptions and premises according to which social and economic "conditions" make one, or Cervantes, or Don Quijote, do or think something or other.[74] As Don Quijote puts it, no "sorceries in the world . . . can affect and force the will, as some simple people imagine. Our will is free and no herb nor charm can compel it. . . . I maintain that it is impossible to force a man's will."[75] For Don Quijote, then, man is a "volitional" creature.

Unlike Alonso Quijano, who is a common country gentleman easily associated with the social class he is born into, Don Quijote creates himself and becomes a unique, clearly differentiated individual. There were many Alonso Quijano-like gentlemen in Don Quijote's time; but there was only one Don Quijote.

Don Quijote is frequently at odds with the state. He frees people the State has arrested and condemned to serve in the galleys of the state (the king). This episode[76] also shows the lack of proportion between crime and punishment and also the increasingly intrusive existing regulations and proposed regulations that libertarians condemn today. One of the galley slaves has been sent to the galleys for merely stealing some clothes. Another has been sent there because he was not strong enough to resist what today

[74]Cf. Johnson, *Cervantes and the Material World*.

[75]*Don Quijote*, pt. I, chap. xxii (Starkie translation, p. 213).

[76]Ibid.

we would call the police's "third degree," which in the Golden Age was serious business, since it involved torture. Another galley slave complains of the corruption of the justice system and argues that he would not be where he is if only he had possessed the money to sway the justice system in his favor. Again, anyone familiar with the government's justice system no matter what the times will recognize the situation. In another part of the novel,[77] Don Quijote challenges a lion which belongs to the king (the state), an act doubly subversive because lions have traditionally been symbols of royalty. In yet another episode, Don Quijote is captured by Catalonian bandits led by the nobleman Roque Guinart, depicted admiringly despite his rebellion against the state, and as a figure who in his chivalrous actions is reminiscent of Don Quijote.[78] As a Catalonian nobleman at odds with the Castilian crown, Guinart plausibly represents the libertarian desire for local autonomy and political self-determination against the monolithic state.[79]

Characters like Don Quijote and the "shepherdess" Marcela claim an autonomy and independence from social mores and obligations that run against collectivist premises upheld, among others, by those who believe Marcela should return a young man's love, and by the priest at the Duke's palace, who urges Don Quijote to do the accepted thing, which is to take care of his family and house. Don Quijote's independence from the mores of the collective in which he lives and his uniqueness as an individual

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[77]Ibid., pt. II, chap. xvii.

[78]Ibid., chap. lx.

[79]Liberty, in libertarian thought, must be preceded not by more state authority, as Marx, Trotsky and other Marxists proposed—according to them this would be only a temporary increase in authority of course—but by less. The most "poetic" formulation of this brutal Marxist view is probably Leon Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963), p. 170:

> Just as a lamp, before going out, shoots up in a brilliant flame, so the State, before disappearing, assumes the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat, i.e., the most ruthless form of State, which embraces the life of the citizens authoritatively in every direction.

are obviously central to the novel. Marcela's similar views are clearly stated in her long speech[80] where she rejects the collective's desire that she sacrifice herself to society's interests by loving someone she does not love. In this speech she emphasizes the volitional origin of her life-style and its grounding in the natural or intrinsic quality of human freedom: "I was born free, and to be free I chose the solitude of the fields." She emphasizes human volition also in her requirement that love must be voluntary and not imposed by the collective's mores.[81]

Marcela's understanding of the volitional nature of love is echoed by Don Quijote, who vows to protect her at the end of the episode: after the adventure of Altisidora's "death," Don Quijote defends himself by saying that love cannot be forced.[82] And Cervantes's sympathetic treatment in his works, from *Don Quijote* to the Exemplary Novels, of those who live out of the mainstream of the collective (what some scholars call "the marginalized"), such as prostitutes, rogues, and even bandits like Roque Guinart, is well known.

Other characters echo this libertarianism. As we have seen, Cortadillo in *Rinconete and Cortadillo* complains against the *alcabala* and the need to get a permit in order to produce. Sancho is a potential entrepreneur who, at one point in the novel, thinks of the possibility of marketing the seemingly miraculous balm of Fierabrás to sell it at three times its cost of production. Indeed, unlike so many Spaniards of his time, Sancho is even willing to forsake land for a commercial adventure and so he asks Don Quijote for the balm's recipe in exchange for the *insula* that Don Quijote has promised him.[83] This Cervantine awareness of the way

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[80]*Don Quijote*, pt. I, chap. xiv.

[81]One phrase in this speech even calls to one's mind one of the libertarian defenses of the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution when she observes that beauty in an honest woman is like a sharp sword, which does not wound those who do not come close—guns do not kill people, people kill people.

[82]*Don Quijote*, pt. II, chap. lxx: "Nadie se puede obligar a lo imposible" ("no one can force himself to do the impossible"—that is, love someone one does not love).

[83]Ibid., pt. I, chap. x.

the free market functions is reflected also in the narrative voice's observation[84] that his interest in the manuscripts he had discovered in the Toledo flea market was so great that he would have been willing to pay far more for them than what their seller eventually asked.

Anarcho-libertarian economist David Friedman has explored the system of justice of Medieval Iceland as an example of the workability of libertarian ideas in real-life situations.[85] The views on justice of Don Quijote, a Medieval relic in the era of the Renaissance, are also close to anarcho-libertarian positions. He of course upholds the right to keep and bear arms, which the U.S. Constitution secures in its Second Amendment, and the right, if necessary, to use them to achieve justice. He upholds the idea that the individual offended, not the state, is the one who must take action. He advises Sancho to act on this principle when Sancho's property is at stake: "You, Sancho, must be the one to redress the injury done to your ass."[86] And the great Spanish scholar Martín de Riquer has called attention to the fact that Roque Guinart confesses that what led him to his life of banditry was his trying to avenge a personal offense he once received.[87]

Moreover, like Cervantes's famous sympathetic portrait of a Salamanca-educated madman in the Exemplary Novel, *El licenciado Vidriera,* Don Quijote is a magnificent poster boy for the libertarian rejection of many definitions and cases of mental illness.[88]

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[84]Ibid., chap. ix.

[85]David D. Friedman, *The Machinery of Freedom: A Guide to Radical Capitalism* (New York: Open Court, 1989), chap. 44.

[86]*Don Quijote*, pt. II, chap. xi.

[87]Martín de Riquer, *Cervantes en Barcelona* (Barcelona: Sirmio, 1989), p. 95.

[88]Thomas Szasz, *The Meaning of Mind: Language, Morality, and Neuroscience* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1996); *The Myth of Mental Illness: Foundations of a Theory of Personal Conduct* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974). According to libertarian Szasz,

> Mental illness is a metaphor (metaphorical disease). The word "disease" denotes a demonstrable biological process that affects the bodies of living organisms (plants,

True, Don Quijote, Sancho, and the other characters are literary creations, fictional beings. Attributing a writer's views to one

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> animals, and humans). The term "mental illness" refers to the undesirable thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of persons. Classifying thoughts, feelings, and behaviors as diseases is a logical and semantic error, like classifying the whale as a fish. As the whale is not a fish, mental illness is not a disease. Individuals with brain diseases (bad brains) or kidney diseases (bad kidneys) are literally sick. Individuals with mental diseases (bad behaviors), like societies with economic diseases (bad fiscal policies), are metaphorically sick. The classification of (mis)behavior as illness provides an ideological justification for state-sponsored social control as medical treatment.

See http://www. szasz.com/manifesto.html Among other Szaszian libertarian views are the following:

> *Abolition of involuntary mental hospitalization*. Involuntary mental hospitalization is imprisonment under the guise of treatment; it is a covert form of social control that subverts the rule of law. No one ought to be deprived of liberty except for a criminal offense, after a trial by jury guided by legal rules of evidence. No one ought to be detained against his will in a building called "hospital," or in any other medical institution, or on the basis of expert opinion. Medicine ought to be clearly distinguished and separated from penology, treatment from punishment, the hospital from the prison. No person ought to be detained involuntarily for a purpose other than punishment or in an institution other than one formally defined as a part of the state's criminal justice system.
>
> *Abolition of the insanity defense*. Insanity is a legal concept involving the courtroom determination that a person is not capable of forming conscious intent and, therefore, cannot be held responsible for an otherwise criminal act. The opinions of experts about the "mental state" of defendants ought to be inadmissible in court, exactly as the opinions of experts about the "religious state" of defendants are inadmissible. No one ought to be excused of lawbreaking or any other offense on the basis of so-called expert opinion rendered by psychiatric or mental health experts. Excusing a person of responsibility for an otherwise criminal act on the basis of inability to form conscious intent is an act of legal mercy masquerading as an

or more of his characters or narrators can be a naive form of reading that Don Quijote himself illustrates with his belief that the stories he has read in the chivalric books tell of real events—a naive form of reading that perhaps Cervantes, the sophisticated writer and theoretician of literature, is making fun of precisely by means of his novel *Don Quijote*. Moreover, Don Quijote is at times delusional, or at least acts as if he were delusional. Finally, Don Quijote's words, the narrations of his actions, and the narrators' comments on his actions and words and the words of other narrators, are not part of an essay or a book, where a writer usually attempts to express what he claims are his true views on something or other. They are, again, a fiction.

Nonetheless, some parts of *Don Quijote* can be connected to Cervantes himself more plausibly than others. The prologue to Part II is one. The great speech in defense of liberty in Part II, chapter lxviii is another. Yet another one is Don Quijote's speech in defense of pimping.

Spanish literature has an illustrious tradition of using go-betweens as important literary characters. Most famous is perhaps the madam, Celestina, the central figure in Fernando de Rojas's magnificent sixteenth-century novel-play *Tragicomedia de Calisto e Melibea*. In the Middle Ages, the Arcipreste de Hita made another madam, Trotaconventos, one of his memorable creations in the *Libro de Buen Amor*. And other Spanish Golden Age writers, like Lope de Vega and Agustín Moreto—whom Baltasar Gracián called "the Spanish Terence"—wrote humorous defenses of pimping. So Cervantes was writing within a long and respectable Spanish literary tradition.

Nowhere, however, do we find in Spanish literature such a well-reasoned defense of pimping as that found in *Don Quijote*. The speech is inspired by Don Quijote's discovery that one of the

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act of medical science. Being merciful or merciless toward lawbreakers is a moral and legal matter, unrelated to the actual or alleged expertise of medical and mental health professionals.

galley slaves has been sent to the galleys for being a go-between, a sexual facilitator, in short, a pimp. Speaking of one of his fellow galley slaves, another one tells Don Quijote: "the offense for which they gave him this punishment was for having been an ear broker, and a body broker too. What I mean to say is that this gentleman goes for pimping and for fancying himself as a bit of a wizard." To this Don Quijote answers:

> If it had been merely for pimping, he certainly did not deserve to go rowing in the galleys, but rather to command them and be their captain. For the profession of pimp is no ordinary office, but one requiring wisdom and most necessary in any well-governed state. None but wellborn persons should practice it. In fact, it should have its overseers and inspectors, as there are of other offices, limited to a certain appointed number, like exchange brokers. If this were done, many evils would be prevented, which now take place because this profession is practiced only by foolish and ignorant persons such as silly women, page boys, and mountebanks of few years' standing and less experience, who, in moments of difficulty, when the utmost skill is needed, allow the tidbit to freeze between their fingers and their mouth and scarcely know which is their right hand. I should like to go on and give reasons why it is right to make special choice of those who have to fill such an important office in the state, but this is not the place to do it. Someday I will tell my views to those who may provide a remedy.[89]

This witty yet mind-stretching speech, written in the early seventeenth-century, is the sort of thing that libertarians like economist Walter Block have written in the late twentieth century. Block in fact dedicates a chapter of his witty yet mind-stretching book *Defending the Undefendable* to a defense of pimping.[90] Like Don Quijote, Block argues that pimping is a necessary,

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[89]*Don Quijote*, pt. I, chap. xxii (Starkie translation, p. 212).

[90]Walter Block, *Defending the Undefendable: The Pimp, Prostitute, Scab, Slumlord, Libeler, Moneylender, and Other Scapegoats in the Rogue's Gallery of American Society* (San Francisco: Fox & Wilkes, 1991), pp. 19–21.

socially useful occupation. He compares pimps to practitioners of other trades, such as bricklayers, physicians, and lawyers, all of whom can be good or bad at their chosen profession and can therefore, be guilty of foul play (cheating the customer, doing a poor job, imperiling the health of the customer, or his future, or his financial situation), just as a pimp can (physically hurting the prostitute). But in neither case is foul play necessarily part of the trade. Bricklayers, physicians and lawyers do not necessarily have to cheat, do a poor job, or imperil the health or future or financial situation of a customer, though they are potentially capable of doing so. It is the same with the pimp. A pimp does not necessarily have to hurt a prostitute because it is not a necessary part of his job. The reason for this is that the pimp's defining function is that of a broker.

Some individuals want sex and are willing to pay for it, and some others are willing to sell it and accept cash for it instead of, say, a big house, designer clothes, mink coats, diamonds, leisure, babies, and the prestige of a well-off spouse.[91] Hence, the existence of the pimp as a broker of sex. Or, as Block puts it,

> The prostitute is no more exploited by the pimp than is the manufacturer exploited by the salesman who drums up business for him, or the actress who pays an agent a percentage of her earnings to find new roles for her. In these examples, the employer, by means of the employee's services, earns more than the cost of hiring the employee. If this were not so, the employer-employee relationship would not take place. The relationship of the prostitute to the pimp (employer to employee) contains the same mutual advantages.[92]

Indeed, argues Block, "assignations arranged by the pimp afford the prostitute additional physical security over street walking or bar hopping." And of course the pimp gives the prostitute protection against undesirable or violent customers, or those who

[91]Borrowing George Bernard Shaw's witticism, the difference would be one of price, not of kind.

[92]Block, *Defending the Undefendable*, p. 21.

refuse to pay, and even policemen. So the result for the prostitute and also for the customer is that the pimp, as broker, brings her to her customer and the customer to her under conditions that ultimately are of less cost to the prostitute and also to the customer than would exist without the pimp's brokering services. "Each party to a transaction served by a broker gains from the brokerage, otherwise they would not patronize him." The prostitute can benefit from the pimp and therefore as long as there is an uncoerced exchange of products between the two—money from the prostitute and protection, advertising, and especially facilitation or brokering on the part of the pimp—there is no reason for violence. The pimp gets what he wants, money from the prostitute; and the prostitute gets from him what she wants, namely brokering, protection, advertising, and perhaps other things.

Cervantes saw in the Spanish Golden Age what Block sees today, that pimping is a form of brokerage. Notice, of course, that Don Quijote, unlike libertarians like Block, would enlist the state to supervise the brokerage function of the pimp. Don Quijote suggests that pimping should be regulated or licensed as other trades were at the time. That presumably would stop so many incompetents from trying to enter pimping, which is, after all, a demanding and indeed delicate occupation. In writing this, Cervantes may be satirizing, as a libertarian would, the licensing of all sorts of professions that do not need licensing; he has Don Quijote accept the fact of licensing, so that pimping can be recognized as a profession like any other, but in the process Don Quijote tries to find benefits in licensing that modern libertarians would argue do not justify it. Instead, the market place, a modern libertarian would say, will eliminate the majority of bad or incompetent pimps, whereas the good or competent ones will attract enough customers to succeed.

Like Block's, Cervantes's arguments in Don Quijote's speech are ultimately Smithian. And like Block, by using humorously an extreme example, Cervantes illustrates the workability and morality of the free market when extended into things normally considered outside its parameters. From the libertarian viewpoint, the free market approach to pimping is no different from a

free market approach to the administration of justice, police, roads, parks, and other such areas.[93]

Unlike Block, however, Cervantes may have had more than a mere theoretical or literary investment in such matters as pimping and prostitution, which he touches upon with curious insistence in several fictional and stage works. During his years in Valladolid, he lived in a two-floor house above a tavern. Cervantes occupied one part of the house with his wife, daughter, two sisters, a niece, and a young woman servant. Other parts of the house were occupied by other women, two little girls, a twelve year old boy, and one man. Altogether, at least seventeen women ranging in age from eighteen to fifty lived in the place.[94] Several men visited it at various hours. One of them was a dissolute gentleman who was mortally wounded nearby on 27 June 1605. He was taken inside and nursed by one of Cervantes's sisters before he died on 29 June. The authorities suspected that the gentleman's murder could be related to his visits to the women. Cervantes, several of the women, and a male visitor were arrested and jailed for a couple of days. A neighbor made some accusations regarding the activities of Cervantes's daughter. Having no visible means of support, and being about the only man in a house full of women and frequented by men, Cervantes was perhaps suspected of being a facilitator. Nonetheless, everyone was freed for lack of evidence, though Cervantes's daughter was forbidden to see the male visitor. The murder remained unsolved.

This public suspicion over Cervantes's behavior may be alluded to in one contemporary literary work that has come down to us. A Spanish short play (an *entremés*) written by Gabriel de Barrionuevo includes a minor character who makes only a brief appearance looking for a younger woman to marry so he

[93]Rothbard, *For a New Liberty: The Libertarian Manifesto* (New York: Libertarian Review Foundation, 1973). Heavily influenced by Rothbard, see Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974).

[94]For this and the following, see *Documentos cervantinos hasta ahora inéditos*, D. Cristóbal Pérez Pastor, ed. (Madrid: Real Academia de la Historia, 1902), vol. II, pp. 453–537.

can prostitute her and make some money. The character's name is Cervantes.[95]

So, at one point in his life Cervantes had been suspected of being a pimp, and therefore his main character's speech defending pimping has the same personal ring to it as the narrative voice's defense of Cervantes's intellectual property in the prologue to Part II of Cervantes's novel. A high-minded "knight" like Don Quijote, so ardently defending pimps rather than, say, prostitutes, and with so modern-sounding and logical free market arguments, might indicate that our author not only had a personal stake in pimping, but also, more importantly, a good grasp of and a great deal of sympathy towards a market economy.

CERVANTES'S APPRECIATION OF BUSINESSMEN

In his Exemplary Novel, *The Dialogue of the Dogs*, one of the two speakers, the dog Berganza, shows great admiration for the businessmen of Seville. The master he speaks of most favorably is a merchant. Berganza also notices how frugally his master and the other merchants live, and how much they care about their families, especially their children, whom they pamper and send to the Jesuits' school, the best in Seville. And to his fellow dog's malicious comments against the businessmen's "ambition," Berganza replies after the manner of Adam Smith: yes, the merchants have ambition, but it is of the best kind, the one that "attempts to better itself without doing harm to others."[96] And could it be, too,

[95]Martín de Riquer, *Cervantes, Passamonte y Avellaneda* (Barcelona: Sermio, 1988), pp. 131–32. The play was written in Naples, then under Spanish control, and within the literary circle of the Argensola brothers, literary enemies of Cervantes. The real Cervantes married a woman more than ten years younger. It seems the marriage was not a happy one. In one of his Exemplary Novels, *El celoso extremeño*, Cervantes describes the problems of a very jealous old man who marries a much younger woman. In his *entremés El viejo celoso*, Cervantes again portrays the humorous problems of a very old man who marries a very young woman.

[96]Miguel de Cervantes, *Novelas ejemplares* (Madrid: Juventud, 2000), p. 457.

that Cervantes remembered that he owed his rescue from slavery under the Moslems in North Africa not only to his family and the Catholic Church (Trinitarian friars went to Algiers to pay his ransom and eventually succeeded in freeing him), but also to the Christian businessmen in Algiers who put up part of the ransom money?

It is not easy trying to distinguish between what are more likely Cervantes's personal views and what are more likely the views of his characters and narrative voices motivated by thematic and stylistic reasons. We do not have from Cervantes family letters, or essays, or other strictly non-fictional or non-poetic writings in which an author takes a position regarding some issue. In *Don Quijote* the distinction is especially difficult to make because of the subtleties and ironies of the text, the multiplicity of narrative voices that periodically correct each others' versions of events and even the assertions of the characters, and the madness or perhaps feigned madness of Don Quijote. Thus, the sympathetic presentation of wealthy, entrepreneurial commoners like Camacho,[97] or the neutral presentation of other wealthy and entrepreneurial commoners like the fathers of Marcela and Dorotea are not completely reliable. And they are balanced by Cervantes's presentation of Andrés's master, who beats the boy because he keeps losing the sheep.[98] Cervantes's "prologues" to the novel might do, except that, utilizing fictional techniques later imitated by the likes of Fielding and Stendhal, Cervantes makes his prologues part of the fiction, so they are also unreliable. One exception is the prologue to Part II, where the subject matter, as we have seen, lends itself to a more personal interpretation because of the Avellaneda affair. There autobiographical issues come out through the seams of the prologue's structure. Another exception is his long poem *Viaje del Parnaso*, where he comments on contemporary literature and authors as well as his own works. Apart from the *Viaje* and the prologue to Part II of the *Quijote*, the more plausible illustrations of Cervantes's own views can be found probably in the *Exemplary Novels*, which lack

[97] *Don Quijote*, pt. II, chaps. xx–xxi.

[98] Ibid., pt. I, chap. iv.

the multiplicity of narrative voices, the narrative corrections and critiques, and, in general, the misdirection, complexity, and ambiguity of the *Quijote*. Nonetheless, sooner or later one must come back to Cervantes's most important work.

In the *Quijote*, the knight's visit to the printing business in Barcelona illustrates Cervantes's grasp of business ethics. He prints books, the printer tells Don Quijote, because "I want profit."[99] So books, which people read and enjoy, and the knowledge and pleasure they communicate, are not the result of an altruistic effort on the part of this businessman, but of his desire to improve his condition in life by making a profit. Here Cervantes anticipates the famous dictum of Adam Smith: "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves not to their humanity but their self love."[100]

It is fitting that Cervantes locates the encounter between the knight-errant and this businessman in Barcelona (a city chosen to spite Avellaneda, the thief of Cervantes's intellectual property), because Catalonia was at the time and still is a more entrepreneurial region than Don Quijote's Castile. Cervantes's printer is not unlike Johann Gutenberg, a great benefactor of the world with his invention of mobile characters for the printing press, who was, however, no selfless benefactor: he was an entrepreneur, the owner of a printing business, someone who made money by being a producer, and who gave value that he created in a free and voluntary exchange for other producers' value (one may say the same of the great entrepreneurs who in the 1970s and 1980s accomplished in the U.S. a cultural revolution—the computer revolution—as momentous as that started by Gutenberg in 1440).[101]

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[99]Ibid., chap. lxii.

[100]Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, vol. I, bk. II, chap. ii.

[101]One might go further and posit a certain affinity between Don Quijote and the Barcelona printer, who are otherwise different men—one in a daring pursuit of glory and the other in a daring pursuit of profit, who nonetheless share an adventurous, enterprising spirit alien to both country gentlemen

Cervantes's appreciation for the qualities of businessmen is particularly noticeable in a country like Spain where early capitalism was weak compared to that of England, the Netherlands, or France, and where commerce, finance, and, in general, the desire to make a profit, were looked down upon and associated with the Jews. In Spain the development of a middle class (the so-called "bourgeoisie") and its accompanying commercial and entrepreneurial spirit had been thwarted. The aristocratic preference for wealth obtained through the sword in heroic and courageous actions rather than through business activities had been developed and cultivated through centuries of war against the Moslem invaders during the long Christian Reconquista of the Iberian Peninsula. It became therefore part of everyone's ethos, from noblemen to peasants. After the Reconquista was completed in 1492, this preference continued and was reinforced by the Conquistadors' bold military feats. And the medieval trust in land rather than commerce as a sign and source of wealth lingered on, reinforced by the territorial expansion of the Reconquista. In addition, the Conquest of America contributed to the idea that wealth was not to be created, but found otherwise, in the earth, in the mines of America (gold, silver), much as today the oil-producing countries of the Middle East are commercially stunted by the idea that wealth is not to be created, but found in the earth (oil). Gold in the case of Spain and oil in the case of the Middle East have been disastrous for the growth of a business mentality. In Castile people with capital also tended to invest in land rather

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and un-businesslike city people—an affinity between, on the one hand, the Alonso Quijano who decides to stop being a timid country squire to become a bold knight and go out into the world and do things, and on the other hand the printer in Barcelona, who has gone out into the world and made a risky investment and created a business to improve his condition and that of his family and, in the process, that of the world he lives in. For as Smith, who had read *Don Quijote*, also points out, there is a palpable difference between the temper and disposition of a country gentleman and that of a businessman: "A merchant is commonly a bold, a country gentleman a timid undertaker." (*Wealth*, vol. I, bk. III, chap. iv. Smith mentions Don Quijote and Sancho in several places, though not in relation to economics. See Adam Smith, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, J.C. Bryce, ed. [Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Classics, 1985], pp. 34, 124, 132).

than commerce because land was considered not only more prestigious but also safer, though less potentially profitable; and the change in ownership of land did not result in an increase in productivity because the new owners kept the same methods of production.[102] There were still other factors working against capitalism in Spain: the expulsion in 1492 of large numbers of enterprising Jews who refused to convert to Christianity; the continued hostility against those Jews who chose to convert in order to remain in Spain, the so-called *conversos* or *marranos*; and the expulsion between 1609 and 1615 of the agriculturally enterprising Moors who had remained in Spain (the *moriscos*).

Given this widespread anti-business mentality and the policies of the Spanish crown, the ideas of the Spanish School of economics had little chance of success. So it was of no use that thinkers like de Soto, after considering and rejecting arguments in favor of utopian alternatives to money, commerce, and profit, such as barter (a Communist ideal even in the twentieth-century), concluded that "buying and selling are very necessary contracts for the republic," or that, long before David Ricardo, de Soto established the law of comparative advantage and pointed out how businessmen only in a free market can respond rationally and efficiently to relative scarcity to the benefit of all, a law and a process that even today many politicians do not understand:

> Not all the provinces have the goods that they need in abundance. And what we say of different places can be said also of different times. . . . Without people to respond appropriately to such circumstances the republic could not do without harm.[103]

Being a many-sided man, Cervantes could understand better than most the hard-nosed business approach to life. He could draw both on his writer's detailed observations and on his personal experience. He was not only a man of fantasy. He was also

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[102]Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, Sian Reynolds, trans. (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), pp. 729–34.

[103]*De Iustitia et Iure*, bk. VI, chap. ii, sec. 2, p. 194.

a producer of an article of consumption and therefore an entrepreneur of the imagination. He had to deal with the business world and other businessmen. He, not some literary agent, had to make arrangements with publishers whom he had to convince of investing in his product. He certainly wrote books in order to try to make a living and improve his situation in life. He was a professional writer. In addition, he had been a commissary in charge of supplies for the navy (the Invincible Armada) and a tax collector. He had therefore dealt with the hard facts of accounting, consumption, supply, demand, and deficits, and he had actually suffered the consequences of failing to take all this into account properly, or making the wrong calculation, or the wrong assessment of things.[104] He had also been a soldier. As a soldier he had dealt with reality at its most brutal. In some ways, the occupation of soldier is no different from that of businessman, as the popularity among some businessmen of such classics as Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* and Miyamoto Musashi's *The Book of Five Rings* suggests. A soldier has to plan, think ahead, look at means, be aware of facts, and accurately assess the competition. But for a soldier the stakes are much higher. He must know that a dull sword will not cut, that wet powder will not fire, that mere wishing will not make it so, and that one's very life is at risk in all this. The hero of Lepanto, and the seasoned veteran of Navarino, Tunez, and La Goleta knew that there is nothing theoretical or unreal about being a good soldier.[105] Wishful thinking and faith alone will not do. A soldier must know the enemy's resources and execute the plan based not on fancy but on facts. Cervantes must have been more than familiar with the need to use one's reason (act rationally) if one wants to be "productive" and win on the battle field. He makes this clear in his great tragedy *Numancia*, where the ultimately victorious Scipio repeatedly

[104]During his time as a tax collector, irregularities in his handling of funds and bookkeeping landed him in jail temporarily.

[105]Cervantes's bravery at Lepanto is attested by witnesses who confirm he was sick with fever, but went on deck saying he would rather fight for God and King than stay in bed and received several wounds. See, for example, Angel Valbuena Prat, ed., *Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra: Obras Completas* (Madrid: Aguilar, 1967), p. 11.

emphasizes rational and methodical control (*cordura*, *reglada*, *concierto*: judgment, prudence, temperate agreement) as a prerequisite for winning.[106]

Cervantes's understanding of the businessman's no-nonsense view of life is also shown in the scene where the knight meets some merchants and asks them to swear to the supreme beauty of Dulcinea.[107] One of the businessmen kindly answers that they will gladly do so if only Don Quijote will show them at least a portrait of his beloved. In other words, they want empirical proof. Don Quijote, however, wants them to swear based merely on faith. What merit would there be, he asks, in affirming her beauty upon seeing her face? The whole point is to affirm her beauty without having ever seen her. Conflict is inevitable between these completely opposed epistemological camps. Don Quijote attacks the businessmen, who are saved from injury only because Don Quijote's horse, Rocinante, trips and both horse and rider end up on the ground. Like so many other scenes in the novel, this encounter is an encapsulation of two very different epistemologies: the empirical approach to knowledge, and the faith-based approach. Cervantes is familiar with each, and his knowledge of the businessman's way of facing the world is evident in the merchant's answer to Don Quijote. Men have the

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[106]In this play, much admired by Goethe, Schlegel, and Shelley, Scipio tells his officers first and his assembled army later that

> El esfuerzo regido con *cordura*/allana al suelo las más altas sierras/. . . . Si el esfuerzo y *cordura* no se halla/ que todo lo previene y lo barrunta,/poco aprovechan muchos escuadrones,/ y menos infinitas municiones./ Si a militar *concierto* se reduce/cualquier pequeño ejército que sea,/ veréis que como al sol clare reluce/ y alcanza las victorias que desea;/pero si a flojedad él se conduce,/ aunque abreviado el mundo en él se vea,/ en un momento quedará deshecho,/ por más *reglada* mano y fuerte pecho. (act I, ll. 13–14, 101–12)

Notice the words *cordura* (judgment, prudence), *concierto* (concert), and *reglada* (ruled), my emphasis. Later in the play Cervantes again has Scipio insist on the need for reason in war.

[107]*Don Quijote*, pt. I, chap. vi.

capacity to act one way or the other, and sometimes one finds both manners of behavior in the same person. But the merchant who asks for proof is a particularly good example of the volitional and rational approach to life characteristic of the businessman.

The rational selection of ends and means is characteristic not only of *homo economicus*, as the enemies of business are fond of proclaiming, but also of anyone, including a writer, who desires to achieve certain ends, material or not. People tend to be productive when they are rational and self-interested. They have to think, plan, and finally produce something that other people may be willing to trade for what they in turn produce. The businessman in particular must act in a self-interested way; otherwise his business will flounder; and this thinking, planning, and self-interested producing must take place according to the requirements of reality. But the businessman must also be imaginative. Without imagination a business cannot be first conceived, and then executed. As a matter of fact, many a businessman has been, like Don Quijote, regarded as crazy by others when they learned of his visionary plans.[108] The businessman's imaginative activity, however, must be exerted within a framework of reality. In this sense the businessman is a supreme realist, the opposite of Don Quijote. One may notice some of these characteristics in the businessman who faces Don Quijote: rationality (notice the rational construction of his speech), realism (he wants proof), and calm, peaceful self-interest (he is willing to accommodate Don Quijote and thus avoid conflict).

[108]See, among others, Burton W. Fulson, *Entrepreneurs Against the State: A New Look at the Rise of Big Business in America, 1840–1920* (Reston, Va.: Young America Foundation, 1987). Anyone familiar with the cultural revolution that took place in Silicon Valley, California in the late 1970s and early 1980s will recognize this type of "madman." The Computer Revolution, as momentous as what Gutenberg accomplished five hundred years before, was the result of self-interested entrepreneurs.

DON QUIJOTE'S GOLDEN AGE, SANCHO'S GOVERNORSHIP, AND ECONOMIC LAW

Don Quijote's great speech on the Golden Age has frequently been cited as an example of Cervantes's reservations against private property and the growing capitalism of his time. Don Quijote, prompted by his being treated by some rustics, the goatherds, to a simple meal of roasted acorns, launches a long tirade that the narrative voice describes as a "*larga arenga, que se pudiera muy bien excusar*" ("a long harangue that could very well have been omitted").[109]

In the more relevant part of the speech, Don Quijote praises a time, the Golden Age, when humanity was in harmony with nature, ignored the idea of *mine* and *yours*, and therefore lived peacefully and happily:

> Happy times and fortunate ages were those that our ancestors called golden, not because gold (so prized in this our Iron Age) was gotten in that happy era without any labors, but because those who lived then knew not those two words *thine* and *mine*. In that holy age all things were in common, and to provide his daily sustenance all a man needed to do was to lift up his hand and pluck his food from the sturdy oaks that generously invited him to gather their sweet, ripe fruit. The clear fountains and running brooks offered him bountifully their refreshing waters. In the clefts of the rocks and in the hollow of trees the busy, provident bees fashioned their republic, offering without interest the fertile harvest of their fragrant toil to every hand. The robust cork trees, inspired by their own courtesy alone, divested themselves of their broad light barks, with which men began to cover their houses built on rough stakes, using them only as a defense against the inclemencies of heaven. All there was peace, all friendship, all concord. The heavy share of the curved plow had not dared to open and expose the compassionate bowels of our first mother, for she without compulsion offered through all the parts of her fertile and spacious

[109] *Don Quijote*, pt. I, chap. xi.

> bosom whatever could nourish, sustain, and delight the children who possessed her. Then did the innocent and beauteous young maidens trip from dale to dale and hill to hill with braided locks or flowing tresses, wearing just enough clothing to conceal modestly what modesty seeks and has always sought to hide.[110]

Even if one overlooks that it is Don Quijote, not Cervantes, who speaks here, or that the ideas in the speech on the Golden Age conflict with other passages, such as the second prologue's implicit defense of property rights and Cervantes's decision to kill his creation to protect his property from further theft, or Alonso Quijano's attention to his property in his will at the end of the novel, there are two other problems with the anti-capitalist interpretation of the speech. One is literary, structural, and contextual. The other is economic.

The speech is a set piece where Cervantes displays his knowledge of a theme quite popular during the Renaissance. In this respect it is no different from other set pieces in the novel, such as the great speech on Arms and Letters. In Greek literature, Hesiod gave the Myth of the Golden Age its most memorable formulation. Virgil made it Roman, and through him it was preserved by the Middle Ages until it received new life as part of the renovated interest in the classics during the Renaissance. But it is a myth that transcends Greco-Latin and European civilization because it can be found in somewhat different form in other contexts, such as Judeo-Christian thought, where it takes the name of Eden. Other civilizations have equivalent narratives of a place, no one knows where, and a time long ago when human beings were happier, in harmony with each other and with nature, and enjoyed a life with few material needs. When Europeans arrived in the Americas in the sixteenth century, some of the better educated among them saw in the new land and in the simple natives they met early on in the Caribbean that Golden Age they had read about. And a myth that necessarily accompanies the Golden Age, the Myth of the Noble Savage, was also superimposed by the more literate Europeans upon the seemingly innocent yet noble Amerindians.

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[110]Ibid. (Starkie translation, pp. 117–18).

The two myths, the Golden Age and the Noble Savage, have continued to live on, cherished by intellectuals tired of or at odds with their own presumably too civilized civilization. Michel de Montaigne used the cannibals of America, his Noble Savages, as weapons to criticize the Europeans of his time. In his educational thought, Rousseau cherished the Noble Savage ideal, which he called l*'homme natural*. In later centuries, socialist and ecological movements have given life to the twin myths, in a persistent search for a world and a humanity simpler and closer to nature. The two myths still influence our culture, even generating movies about the Inuit, or about "white" people who come to appreciate the superior life of "savages" and end up dancing with wolves.

But the context of Don Quijote's speech provided by its listeners, that is to say, the speech's "reception" within the fiction of Cervantes's book, undermines taking it as anything other than a literary set piece with satirical overtones. The context of the speech subverts its ideological assertions. The listeners are the goatherds and Sancho Panza. The goatherds in particular function as the Cervantine equivalent of the natural men of the Golden Age and it is they and their simple fare that prompt Don Quijote's tirade.

But the inhabitants of the presumably "natural" world of Don Quijote's Golden Age are different from these "natural" men who listen to Don Quijote's speech. In the Golden Age speech they are shepherds, not goatherds. Sheep and shepherds have positive literary and spiritual connotations that goats and goatherds do not have. Goats are anything but cuddly and "nice," and these goatherds who listen to Don Quijote are real country folk, perhaps preoccupied with where the next rain is coming from, or with too much rain, or the harshness of the winter, or too much heat, or fleas and dung. They are also far from the peaceful, sensitive men of the Golden Age: in other parts of the novel, they are shown as quarrelsome and uncouth folk who fight with Don Quijote and Sancho.[111] The recipients of the speech are antithetical to what it portrays.

[111]Ibid., chap. lii.

Their reactions to Don Quijote's tirade also undermine taking seriously the ideological message of the Golden Age speech. These goatherds simply do not understand what Don Quijote is talking about and eat and stare uncomprehending: "They listened to him in wide-eyed astonishment without answering a word." Sancho, the other "natural" man, acts in a similar way, as he stops his steady eating only to drink, and not the natural water of the Golden Age, but human-manufactured wine: "Sancho, too, was silent, munching acorns and frequently paying visits to the second large wineskin that was hanging from a tree to cool." Not only do they not understand the speech that presumably talks about men such as they, but they also cannot even recognize themselves in the people depicted in the speech. The dissociation between the real natural men of Don Quijote's world and the "natural" men of the Golden Age is not unlike the dissociation between Don Quijote and the handsome, young, princely, and immensely strong knights of the chivalric books.

This dissociation, so perceptively thematized by Cervantes, continues to accompany more recent incarnations of the Myth of the Golden Age, so that today many of those who actually live off the land, such as hunters, cattlemen, and farmers are frequently at odds over how to relate to nature with modern day versions of the lovers of nature and the simple life, such as today's ecologists, who are by and large educated city folk looking at nature with eyes and expectations different from those of men and women in everyday contact with nature and, most importantly, in everyday contact with it not just for pleasure, or getting away from it all, or theoretical or philosophical musings, but in order to make a living.

There are other literary, structural reasons that undermine the speech's ideological seriousness. Both the speech and the "natural" scene with the goatherds that frames it serve as an introduction or bridge to the next episode, where Cervantes, in the Marcela adventure, treats the reader to a Cervantine mini-version of a pastoral novel, a type of fiction that was set in a "natural" environment and had as protagonists shepherds and shepherdesses in, out of, or, more rarely, indifferent to love. These novels were nearly as popular in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as the chivalric novels that Cervantes makes the ostensible target of satire in *Don Quijote*.

So the speech is part of a series of chapters in which Cervantes, who had already and not terribly successfully tried his hand at a "regular" pastoral novel, the *Galatea*, does for this literary form what he did for the chivalric novel, placing it under a critical eye, uncovering its mechanisms, and having fun while rewriting it *a la* Cervantes. Thus, Marcela the shepherdess is not actually a shepherdess, but the daughter of a wealthy farmer. She merely chooses to become a shepherdess by means of a volitional act, much as Don Quijote chooses to become a knight. And while one imitates his chivalric books' readings, the other likely imitates her readings of pastoral novels. Neither Don Quijote "the knight" nor Marcela "the shepherdess" is the real thing. In addition, they have enough wealth to allow them to "find themselves": Don Quijote has enough land to pawn some of it to buy books and pay a squire, and Marcela's wealthy father has enough sheep for Marcela to play the shepherdess. Finally, neither one must support a family—a lack of responsibility that allows them to go and do what they want to please themselves, the one living by herself in the woods to commune with nature, the other roaming the paths of Spain in search of adventure, without worrying about how to pay for their children's schooling, or fixing the roof, or caring for aging parents. One can even speculate that Marcela may have been prompted to choose her way of life by reading pastoral novels, much as Don Quijote was prompted to choose his by reading chivalric ones. These connections would explain the affinity between Marcela and Don Quijote, who takes her side and bars any love-stricken young man from following her, only to follow her himself; and it would explain, too, the affinity between their two "books," that is, between Don Quijote's adventures and Marcela's episode. The speech on the Golden Age, then, would be no different from other instances in which Don Quijote thinks and speaks through literary texts.

The other problem of interpreting the speech as an attack against private property is economic. Many economists have long known that only in a world without scarcity can a society exist without private property and a marketplace.[112] The Spanish

[112]Already in the nineteenth century, F. von Wieser recognized that private property is necessary in a world where scarcity is a fact. See *Economic Thought*, James A. Gherity, ed. (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 315. For

scholastics of Cervantes's time also recognized the fact of scarcity as a validation of the need for private property.[113] This necessity has forced socialist theoreticians to assume cheerfully that under perfect communism there would be abundance: "There is in the vast flood of Marxian literature," writes Mises, "not the slightest allusion to the possibility that a communist society in its 'higher phase' might have to face a scarcity of natural factors of production."[114] Not surprisingly, in the Golden Age of Don Quijote's speech there is a sufficiency of goods, which nature provides freely, along with an absence of counterproductive natural forces such as droughts, torrential rains, winters, plagues, volcanoes, and earthquakes. Instead, in the utopian world of the Golden Age, there reigns an undisturbed, eternal, and bounteous spring. But this is not the case in the real world, where productive resources are by and large limited: therefore the lack of yours and mine postulated in Don Quijote's speech is irrelevant to the conditions of Cervantes's time no less than ours.

The famous episode of Sancho's governorship may similarly be read as a defense rather than an attack on the market place. Literary scholars have often interpreted positions favored by Sancho that they find undesirable as subtle Cervantine critiques, that is to say, as positions that Cervantes himself finds undesirable. A good example is the Spanish government's expulsion of the *moriscos*, which Sancho appears to favor after listening to the *morisco* Ricote's praise of the expulsion.[115] To Ricote's invitation to help him get the money the *morisco* hid from the government's inventory of his possessions, Sancho answers that helping Ricote

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modern explanations of the problem, see Mises, *Human Action*, pp. 93, 236–37, 525; Rothbard, *Man, Economy, and State*, pp. 28, 280–84, 568, 848; and Hoppe, *A Theory of Socialism and Capitalism*, pp. 189–210.

[113]Chafuén, *Christians*, pp. 96, 155, 174. This is the reason why Marx paired abundance with perfect communism and therefore without private property: he realized one cannot have one without the other; and his reasoning is echoed in Trotsky's now melancholy-sounding but once optimistic observations on the future of compulsory *because* socialist labor. See Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism*, p. 144.

[114]Mises, *Human Action*, p. 236.

[115]*Don Quijote*, pt. II, chaps. liv, lxv.

would mean helping the enemies of Sancho's king, and this he cannot do: "it would be treason to the king to help his enemies [and] I will not go with you even if you offered me twice as much cash down." Literary scholars almost unanimously deplore the expulsion of the *moriscos* and are reluctant to accept that Cervantes, so kind, so liberal thinking and sympathetic to the marginalized and the oppressed, might have actually favored the expulsion. Therefore, in spite of Sancho's words, they have seen this entire episode as Cervantes's sly way of criticizing government policy against the *moriscos*.[116] Ricote's sadness and his expressions of love for a land where his kind lived for generations, would indicate Cervantes's sympathy for the plight of the *moriscos*; and placing this critique within the context of Ricote's praise for government policies, his all too excessive condemnation of his own kind, and Sancho's rejection of his offer, would be simply Cervantes's way of protecting himself against government retaliation. Nevertheless, in the case of Sancho's governorship of his *insula Barataria*,[117] scholars have not followed this hermeneutic procedure, accepting instead Sancho's economic policies as being not in disagreement with, but in consonance with Cervantes's thought, and on a par with Sancho's quasi-Solomonic judgments as governor.

But at least some aspects of Sancho's governorship could be seen as a satire on government's wrong-headed interventions in the market place. The name of Sancho's *insula*, *Barataria*, may be a derivation from "*barato*," cheap, and it would make Sancho's governorship a "Cheap Island," in the sense of an "unimportant island"; but it could also make it the "Low-Cost Island," an island that Sancho got cheaply, and this meaning would charge the episode with obvious economic associations.[118]

Even more relevant to a market interpretation of the episode is the historical context. During Cervantes's time, government

[116]This basically uncontested interpretation started at least as early as Castro's *El pensamiento de Cervantes*, pp. 280–89.

[117]*Don Quijote*, pt. II, chaps. xlv, xlvii, xlix, li, liii.

[118]In old Spanish *barato* also meant "joke."

intervention in the marketplace was ubiquitous and harmful. In fact, examining what was happening in the Spanish Golden Age is like taking a short course on anti-market government policy.

Although Sancho seems to understand the market in other episodes, when he becomes governor of Barataria he makes a number of anti-market decisions. But if Cervantes wanted to criticize government practices, he would have felt the need to protect himself, as he may have done in the case of the expulsion of the *moriscos*. This need would explain why he places Sancho's economic decrees within a context of actions that elicit admiration for Sancho's government, such as Sancho's judgments and his declared intention to defend the privileges of *hidalgos* and be respectful of both religion and the members of the Church.[119] This defensive procedure could parallel Cervantes's placing of Ricote's pathetic words in a context of praise for the government of Philip II.

From the point of view of economic analysis, Sancho's decisions adversely affect the quantity and quality of goods and hamper manufacturing innovation. He orders that wine from outside can be sold in Barataria, a measure that, in market terms, means opening the realm to foreign goods, but then undermines this pro-market decision by reserving for his government the pricing of the wine.[120] This contradiction illustrates inconsistent government trade policies that favor the market with one hand while harming it with the other. Sancho also mandates the price of footwear, especially shoes, because it seems to him that the price is too high.[121] These decisions are received by Baratarians as indication that the new governor cares about them, or, in modern terms, "feels their pain." Sancho's decrees, however, echo the demagogic and harmful government controls of Cervantes's time:

> [Prices] on the local level were subjected to a type of economic control that could be described as municipal

[119] *Don Quijote*, pt. II, chap. xlix.

[120] Ibid., chap. li.

[121] Ibid.

mercantilism. Throughout Castile it was considered normal for municipal governments to enact regulations fixing prices and restricting the movement of goods. . . . For example, we find that in Cieza (Murcia), the ordinances of 1523 forbade the importation of outside wine as long as the *vecinos* of the town still had some of their own to sell. . . . [Outside wine could not be sold] without the permission of the town council, which was to establish a "reasonable" price. . . . [In cases where selling was allowed], the municipal authorities set such a high price on this outside wine that only the rich could afford to buy it, and most Segovians had to continue to endure the miserable local stock. . . . The councils of every city, town, and village had the power to fix the price of fruit, vegetables, grain, meat, cheese, oil, or any other merchandise. . . . They granted monopoly rights to tavern keepers, butchers, and other officially designated victualers for the locality . . . they established detailed price schedules from which no one could deviate without the special permission of the council. The official prices were in force even on market days, when peasants were permitted to bring in their crops for sale. Such price controls (as always throughout history) caused problems. The legal price was likely to be too low in the eyes of the producer, because the idea behind municipal price fixing was usually to protect the consumer rather than the producer. The 1583 ordinance of Los Santos de Maimona (Badajoz) went so far as to require any *vecino* who had fish, game, vegetables, or fruit for sale to offer his wares in the market of the town before removing them from the municipal jurisdiction for sale elsewhere. And the council reserved for itself the right to determine how much could be "exported" . . . the ordinances of Los Santos made it illegal for anyone to offer anything for sale in the town marketplace without notifying the council a day in advance. . . . Castilian municipalities also undertook to regulate the operation of grain and oil mills, and other processing establishments related to agriculture. . . . [T]he council of Arjona (Jaén) . . . tried to regulate everything: milling procedures, working hours, measurements, salaries, and prices. All of this was designed to protect olive growers and olive oil

> buyers from unscrupulous mill operators . . . but it also . . . discouraged innovation and experimentation, and by ossifying existing structures and techniques it made it difficult (in fact, actually illegal) to adjust to changing circumstances.[122]

These policies were also implemented at the national level, where government regulated the maximum price of many commodities. This brought about consequences familiar to today's economists, from discouraging production to disruptions in the producers' ability to make economic calculations to criminal activity—as people tried to get around the regulations, but in doing so put themselves outside the law, the price they paid for helping ameliorate somewhat the harmful effects of the policies (these last two results are characteristic of "black market" activities in any time or place, the black market being the absolutely free market). The marketplace, as usual, often got around such government interventions, but the market's effectiveness was much diminished in the process.

Although these policies were defended by many contemporaries, their bad effects were obvious to others. In 1539 the chronicler Florián de Ocampo wrote that price controls caused producers to lose money and that this in turn led to shortages.[123] The Spanish School of economics was aware of the problems. Martín de Azpilcueta opposed all price controls.[124] He declared that, "according to the opinion of all the Doctors, an unjust official price 'does not oblige'."[125] Others, such as the Jesuit Luis de Molina, thought that the authorities certainly had the right to set "just" prices, but that it was not a good idea because of both its practical results and its immorality. On the one hand, this policy hurt the poor, and on the other hand it was unjust to place the burden of the "common good" on the producers alone since in

[122]Vassberg, *Land and Society*, pp. 188–191.

[123]Ibid., p. 192.

[124]Raymond de Roover, "The Concept of the Just Price: Theory and Economic Policy," *Journal of Economic History* 18 (December 1958): 418–34; Chafuén, *Christians*, p. 106.

[125]Chafuén, *Christians*, p. 109.

times of scarcity the producer has to undergo larger expenditures, and a "legal" price does not allow him to recover his costs and make a profit for his labor.[126] Indeed, modern economics knows that price fixing hurts everyone but especially the poor because it makes products disappear or become scarce, which in turn leads to black market violations, bribing of government officials, delinquency, government brutality enforcing laws that are increasingly disregarded, and, ultimately, general social degradation.[127]

Henrique de Villalobos (d. 1637), who used many ideas from the Spanish School of economics, also understood with surprising lucidity some of these problems:

> I think it would be better not to have an official price (*tasa*) for wheat, as happens in many places without detrimental effects. Reblo says that everyone in Lisbon would have died of hunger if an official wheat price had been established. The reason for what I say, as we can see, is that in cheap years the maximum price is useless. The same is true of average years, because the value [price] of wheat does not reach the maximum price, and the price is reduced or raised according to the existent abundance. In expensive years, despite the fixed price, the price rises for one reason or another, and you will not find a single grain of wheat at the official price . . . and if you do find it, it will be with a thousand cheats and frauds. And also because it seems a harmful thing to oblige the farmers to sell at the official price in a scarce year, when they have to pay high production costs and when common estimation grants a higher price to wheat.[128]

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[126]Ibid., p. 108.

[127]Anyone who has observed the results of price fixing in, say, gasoline sales, will see the problems without studying economics. For an examination of the results of price fixing in production and wages see, among others, Rothbard, *Man, Economy, and State*, pp. 778–796. Good fictional descriptions of the resulting social disintegration are Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* and Zinoviev's *The Radiant Future*.

[128]Henrique de Villalobos, *Suma de la teología moral y canónica* (Barcelona: 1632), p. 344; Chafuén, *Christians*, pp. 109–10.

Another of Sancho's decrees puts a ceiling on the wages of servants because he thinks that these wages are rising too fast.[129] This echoes the Spanish government's efforts to control labor and wages. Some municipal ordinances "established low wage rates, which had to be observed under pain of severe penalties."[130] Inter-municipal unions also imposed labor regulations: in Tierra Segovia in 1514 the unions specified that the workday for salaried rural laborers should start an hour after sunrise and last until sundown.[131]

These wage controls were more successfully enforced than price controls, but the normal market pricing of labor was, of course, disrupted, so that at times there were serious shortages of workers.[132] Some Spanish ordinances were so specific that they can serve as illustrations of the interventionist extremes to which government bureaucrats can go in drafting their laws. In 1599 the Council of Cifuentes (Guadalajara) mandated a wage ceiling of 34 maravedís for plowmen and pruners in February, 57 in March, 60 in April, and 68 in May and June.[133]

It is probably fortunate that Sancho's tenure as governor did not last long enough to create serious problems. Otherwise his subjects would have soon begun to suffer from the consequences of his interventionist policies. There would have been shortages of footwear in general and shoes in particular, and their quality would have declined. Shortages and declines in the quality of other goods would eventually have occurred as well because the importation of competing goods would have been priced out, or forbidden, until one day Barataria, now indeed a "cheap island," might have come to resemble Cervantes's Golden Age Spain.

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[129]*Don Quijote*, pt. II, chap. li

[130]Vassberg, *Land and Society*, p. 195.

[131]Ibid.

[132]Davies, *The Golden Century of Spain*, p. 68.

[133]Vassberg, *Land and Society*, p. 195.

Praxeology and the Relationship Between Don Quijote and Sancho

The market, its mechanisms, and its benefits, do not pertain to a particular time or place. They are not historical, but inherent to the relations between human beings. Thousands of years before Christ there were markets in Mesopotamia, as cuneiform tablets show. And there probably were markets long before, anywhere and anytime, as soon as two or more people got together to have better lives. The market is universal, independent of its theorization in later centuries. So what is central to capitalism, namely the exchange of goods, services, and, ultimately, values between human beings, without coercion and in order to improve their conditions, is not characteristic of a given period. What happens is that, at particular times and places the functioning of the market becomes more widely practiced and eventually universalized and theorized. The theory of capitalism as understood by Mises is a universal explanation of human action. If writing, and therefore producing books, falls within the realm of human activity, then of course the theory of capitalism is applicable to the production of texts and therefore to a seventeenth-century novel.

The relationship between Sancho and Don Quijote is a good example of how praxeology can be generally applied to human relations. Transformed into "Don Quijote," early in the novel the *hidalgo* Alonso Quijano reaches a loose verbal agreement with his peasant neighbor, Sancho Panza, whereby Sancho offers his services as squire in exchange for a salary and an *insula*. This relationship is therefore based on material rewards that combine the medieval preferred form of wealth, land, with the increasingly preferred form of wealth and medium for economic transactions, money, although the more abstract desire for adventure, which later in the novel becomes more important, seems also present in Sancho's mind at this early stage. In any event, the relationship is not based, as in the Middle Ages, on a collectively-sanctioned bond of loyalty between a man of noble family, a knight, and another man of noble family, a squire.

Sancho's choice of joining and staying with Don Quijote is possible only in a market system and illustrates its functioning most distinctly. In a collectivist system, Sancho's decision would

be largely determined by the State, or the Party, or the town, or the clan, or the family, not by Sancho. In the Middle Ages, collective norms pushed a nobleman into becoming a squire and eventually a knight. Exceptionally, a young man would rebel against his family's compulsion, and perhaps become a monk, as happened with Thomas Aquinas. It is true that a collectivist system that basically dictates one's direction in life may be more desirable because it lessens people's responsibility for choosing. The many options of a market economy, like its affluence, can make some people unhappy.[134] But whether or not one prefers collectivism, at least it is clear that within it Sancho would not have much individual free choice.

At the fictional juncture when Sancho decides to join Don Quijote, however, he operates in a market system and could decline Don Quijote's offer. Therefore, his freely made decision is momentous for the unfolding and cultural significance of Cervantes's novel: by setting it up as Sancho's decision, Cervantes not only triggers much of what follows in terms of the narrative, but also strikes a blow for that freedom which obviously was to him one of the most important things in life.[135]

Eventually, the purely "commercial" or "material" relationship between Don Quijote and Sancho evolves into a friendship. Could one say that at this point there is no longer a free exchange? No, because the exchange continues in a different form, but with the same purpose of maintaining or improving Sancho's, and Don Quijote's conditions. It has merely been transformed from a purely material exchange into an exchange of values. Sancho has come to appreciate certain values in Don Quijote

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[134]As some psychologists and political scientists assert. See psychologist Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less* (New York: Ecco, 2004), who also cites the work of psychologists like David G. Myers and political scientist Robert E. Lane, who argue that increased affluence leads to lesser well-being! "The more we are allowed to be masters of our fate, the more we expect to be" (Schwartz, "When It's All Too Much," *Parade*, January 4, 2004, p. 5).

[135]In his otherwise frequently cloudy rambling in his terrifying book *Terrorism and Communism*, Leon Trotsky got at least this right: "For the Liberal, freedom in the long run means the market" (p. 140).

that Sancho is willing to exchange for what Sancho has to offer; and Sancho has values that Don Quijote appreciates and is willing to exchange for what Don Quijote has to offer. Thus, they establish a friendship. This relationship is not coerced. It is a voluntary exchange. It is not unilateral. It is mutual, dialectical. Don Quijote gives to Sancho and Sancho gives to Don Quijote, though neither "does it for money." They do it for other things.

Sancho stays with Don Quijote even when it is evident that the *insula* is not rewarding, that the money is not enough, and that perhaps his master is mad, because Sancho still believes that his life will be better with Don Quijote than without him. But Sancho does not continue to stay for money or the *insula*. He has found things in Don Quijote that he has come to value more, such as his courage, knowledge, increasing liking of and kindness towards Sancho. And no less important, he has developed a taste for the free, adventuresome, and exciting life that Don Quijote creates for both, a life which at the end of the novel he tries in vain to coax Alonso Quijano to take up again. Though more abstract than the *insula* or the money, these reasons are to Sancho just as decisive, if not more so. Therefore, he sees all the vicissitudes and the blows and the other sufferings as more than compensated for by what Don Quijote's friendship entails.[136]

[136]How this relationship and Sancho's feelings compare to the often (certainly not always) unconditional love of a father towards a son is difficult to ascertain. Biological issues that are by their very nature less affected by rational choices come into play in a relationship between parents and children. Nonetheless, it is obvious that parents choose a certain behavior towards a son because it makes them feel better than if they did not. They are therefore choosing what to them at least is best. This "to them," a subjective valuation, is fundamental to Misesian praxeology and Austrian economics, and it takes care of one of the objections frequently made against "economic theory," namely that it only takes into account "rational choices." In Austrian economics and Misesian praxeology, choice is subjectively motivated and therefore not necessarily and certainly not always "rational" in the sense that it can be universally regarded as sound or actually beneficial. But in any choice we make, rationally or irrationally, objectively or subjectively, we are still choosing something that we prefer or value more, over something that we do not prefer or that we value less. Otherwise we would not choose it. The relationship between parents and son, however, is not the kind of relationship that exists between Don Quijote and

At the end of the novel, when Don Quijote is again Alonso Quijano, Sancho will be rewarded for his loyalty, once more with material things, as it was at the beginning, in a perfect circularity that matches the reverse transformation from Don Quijote back to Alonso Quijano. Thus, as he did early in the novel, when Don Quijote exchanged land property for another form of property, books, Cervantes carefully shows that his most significant creation does exercise his property rights. Alonso Quijano makes sure in his testament that Sancho gets all that he is owed by Don Quijote and more; and the dying Alonso Quijano even admits that, were it in his power, he would leave Sancho a kingdom, since he deserves it for the values that both Don Quijote and Alonso Quijano came to appreciate in Sancho, namely the *sencillez de su condición* ("simplicity of his constitution") and his loyalty. Moreover, deeply cognizant of the human condition, Cervantes has one of his narrative voices conclude that, despite the

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Sancho, though one could reasonably argue that this relationship, as it evolves, gradually resembles one between father and son. But in Don Quijote and Sancho the relationship is the result of free choices, not of biology. They are not born father and son. They freely choose each other. Enemies of capitalism think that pointing out that human beings trust each other and are cooperative proves capitalism's meanness and lack of applicability to human relations. Notice these typical statements: "This outcome [an experiment with Game Theory in which the subjects trusted and cooperated with each other] does not just flout proverbial wisdom, it thumbs its nose at economic theory." (Ken Grimes, "To trust is human," *New Scientist* 178, no. 2394 [10 May 2003]: 32). This sort of statement overlooks the fact that capitalism is indeed based on trust and cooperation. Without them it could not exist. Capitalism is a benevolent system that by preconditioning the existence of a free exchange of values, which requires cooperation and productivity, allows human beings to flourish. One of the greatest examples of human trust is what one sees on Wall Street, as brokers make bids and sales based entirely on trusting that what is bid or sold is indeed being bid on or sold and backed by what the bidder or seller says it is backing the bid or sale with. It is all trust, since at the very moment of the bidding or sale there is nothing tangible to be exchanged. It all "will" happen, presumably. The benevolence of capitalism shows in the fact that owning and being free to keep or give away, which are essential to capitalism, are also preconditions for being truly generous and liberal. As I believe Vitoria suggested in the sixteenth century in Spain, liberality ordered by law and therefore coerced is no liberality (see my comments on Vitoria in the text of this essay).

impending death of his friend, Sancho is happy, since "inheriting something erases or moderates a bit the pain that a dear one's death understandably leaves behind."[137] Again, all this is possible only because in Cervantes's fictional world property rights are recognized and an individual can therefore dispose of his property as he sees fit.[138]

[137]*Don Quijote*, pt. II, chap. lxxiv.

[138]In contrast, collectivist approaches to life try to curtail an individual's control over his property by various means, from inheritance taxes to the outright abolition of inheritance rights. I wish to take advantage of this last footnote to thank my dear friend Margaret Schmidt for her insightful comments during my writing of this essay.

3
In Defense of the Marketplace: Spontaneous Order in Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*

Paul A. Cantor

Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?

—Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*

I.

At first glance, Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* may seem to be the *Seinfeld* of the English Renaissance—the original show about nothing. One can imagine the befuddled looks Jonson got when he first pitched the concept to his theater company: "I've written a play about Bartholomew Fair—a bunch of people go to the fair, they mill around, and then they go home." Compared to Jonson's earlier comic masterpieces, *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*, *Bartholomew Fair* seems unfocused and diffuse.[1] The play

[1]T.S. Eliot claimed that the play has "hardly a plot at all." See his "Ben Jonson" in *Selected Essays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1950), p. 134. See also Richard Levin, *The Multiple Plot in English Renaissance Drama* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 202. In his Introduction to *English Renaissance Comedy* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1999), Alexander

just seems to exfoliate, with more and more characters introduced in scene after scene and more plots and counterplots hatched as the action unfolds. *Bartholomew Fair* lacks a pair of central characters around whom the play is organized and who appear to direct its action, such as Volpone and Mosca in *Volpone* or Face and Subtle in *The Alchemist*.[2] With a verbal exuberance unmatched outside of Shakespeare, the play is constantly threatening to veer off into irrelevance, incoherence, and even absurdity, as the characters get wrapped up in word games that fly in the face of normal dramatic logic. As Jonson's stage directions read at one point: "*Here they continue their game of vapours, which is nonsense; every man to oppose the last man that spoke, whether it concerned him or no*."[3] Just as in *Seinfeld*, the characters often appear to be talking merely to fill the time and not because they have anything in particular to say.

But *Bartholomew Fair* only appears to be about nothing. Again like *Seinfeld*, the play tells us something about its characters by showing them engaged in so much meaningless dialogue. And its apparent formlessness and lack of a center reflect a deeper order and sense of form. By liberating the dialogue from the normal constraints of dramatic action, Jonson freed himself to put an unparalleled slice of Renaissance life on the stage. The play may be difficult to follow for the reader, but given a decent performance, it can be a brilliant theatrical success,[4] as figure after figure comes to life on the stage, each characterized by a distinctive mode of speech and each given his or her moment in the spotlight to reveal a distinctive way of life. One has to turn to Chaucer, Shakespeare, or Dickens to find a comparable richness

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Leggatt quotes Terry Hands, who, in connection with his 1969 production of the play for the Royal Shakespeare Company, described it as "an enormous canvas with no particular focus" (p. 138).

[2]See Levin, *Multiple Plot*, p. 208 and Eugene M. Waith, ed., *Ben Jonson, Bartholomew Fair* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1963), p. 2.

[3]Act IV, scene iv, ll. 24ff. All quotations from *Bartholomew Fair* are taken from the edition of Gordon Campbell in Ben Jonson, *The Alchemist and Other Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[4]See Campbell, *Alchemist*, p. xx.

in the kaleidoscopic portrayal of human life. What may at first seem to be a weakness of *Bartholomew Fair*—its lack of focus—turns out to be its great strength—its ability to embrace a wide variety of human types and develop them in their full diversity, without imposing any narrowing artistic or moral conceptions upon them. In that sense *Bartholomew Fair* strikingly anticipates modern drama, resembling at times Brecht, Pirandello, and even Beckett.[5] Like Francis Beaumont's *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, *Bartholomew Fair* even seems at moments postmodern, with its theatrical self-consciousness and its genius in revealing how conventional drama is generated out of the fantasies of its audience.

Jonson's play is thus deeply paradoxical. Although calling attention to the dramatic medium itself, it at times creates the illusion of giving an unmediated glimpse into the lives of its characters. Although a highly artful play, it succeeds in concealing its artifice and may at first seem to be just thrown together on the stage like an improvisation.[6] Although seemingly the most formless of Jonson's plays, it actually obeys the unities of time and place as strictly as any of his other works.[7] In fact, it comes close to unfolding in real time on stage. Remarkably, in *Bartholomew Fair* Jonson found a way to remain within the bounds of his neoclassical conception of dramatic form, while still imparting a feeling of spontaneity to the play. In short, the play obeys Jonson's cherished law of the unities, while appearing to be wholly free and above or beyond any formal law.[8]

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[5]On parallels to Beckett, see Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), p. 136.

[6]Martin Butler says that Jonson manages "to give an illusion of randomness which is carefully and rigorously premeditated." See his *The Selected Plays of Ben Jonson* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1989), vol. 2, p. 147.

[7]See Waith, *Bartholomew Fair*, p. 20.

[8]See Leggatt, *English Renaissance Comedy*, pp. 136–37, E.A. Horsman, ed., *Bartholomew Fair* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1960), p. xi, and Anne Barton, "Shakespeare and Jonson," in *Essays, Mainly Shakespearean* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 294: "[*Bartholomew Fair*] maintains the most delicate balance between order and chaos, between structure and a seemingly undisciplined flow which is like the random, haphazard nature of life itself."

The tension between law and spontaneity evident in the form of *Bartholomew Fair* turns out to be at work in the content as well. In recreating Bartholomew Fair on the stage, the play offers a remarkable portrait of one of the great marketplaces of Renaissance London.[9] Throughout his career, Jonson was fascinated by the emerging market economy in Renaissance Europe. He was intrigued by the new categories of human identity the market was creating (the roles of merchants, bankers, financiers, and entrepreneurs) and he was evidently troubled by the new forms of corruption and vice endemic to proto-capitalist life. *Bartholomew Fair* gave Jonson a chance to anatomize the lawlessness of the marketplace. Through the comments of his Puritan characters, Jonson shows how the fair violates religious law, and he uses Adam Overdo, a Justice of the Peace, to rail against the ways the merchants continually violate the criminal law as well. As Jonson presents it, Bartholomew Fair is the original home and headquarters of all the charlatans, cheaters, and thieves in London.

And yet, for all his criticism of the marketplace in *Bartholomew Fair*, Jonson ends up being more critical of its critics.[10] From the standpoint of traditional religion and politics, the market may look lawless, but Jonson explores the possibility that it may obey laws of its own. In a remarkable anticipation of later

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[9]For information on the actual Bartholomew Fair and Renaissance fairs in general, see Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), especially chapter 1. Stallybrass and White correctly emphasize the modernity of the fair and its role as a harbinger of developing market principles, and they criticize a nostalgic view of the fair as a backward-looking medieval institution. For the role of fairs in the developing market economy of the Renaissance, see Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550–1750* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 17–56, and especially for Bartholomew Fair, p. 47. For more general discussions of the new commercial developments in the Renaissance, see Fernand Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life, 1400–1800*, Miriam Kochan, trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1973) and Lisa Jardine, *Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996).

[10]See Waith, *Bartholomew Fair*, p. 3 and William W.E. Slights, *Ben Jonson and the Art of Secrecy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), pp. 149, 152, 211, n. 34.

economic theory, he appears to sense that the market may be a self-regulating mechanism, capable of bringing peace to a society that seems otherwise to be tearing itself apart in religious and political conflicts.[11] The characters who stand up for religious and political principles in *Bartholomew Fair* turn out to be the divisive forces in the play, while the seemingly lawless participants in the fair work to bring about a kind of civil harmony, based on the satisfaction of fundamental economic needs and natural human desires. Jonson exposes all the faults of an unregulated marketplace, but he more profoundly subjects its would-be regulators to a withering critique. He reveals their self-interested motives for wanting to regulate the fair and, more importantly, he lays bare

[11]Nearly a year and a half after writing the first draft of this essay, I discovered that its central claim had already been advanced by Jean-Christophe Agnew, who writes of *Bartholomew Fair* in his *Worlds Apart*, pp. 120–21:

> There are plenty of plots in the play but no plot to it; no one, villainous or virtuous, appears to be in charge. . . . [T]he fair itself is the engine that precipitates the action of the play . . . Jonson's market operates, in effect, as an "invisible hand," diverting private vices to the public benefit. . . . [T]he forms and conventions that Jonson introduced to achieve his dramatic purposes in the play do adumbrate the solutions that Adam Smith would later propose to those who feared the divisive social consequences of unrestricted competition. Like *The Wealth of Nations*, *Bartholomew Fair* imagined the market as a power capable of generating its own legitimacy through a negotiated process of mutual authorization. By making the fair itself the occasion of countless private calculations and, at the same time, the vehicle of their ultimate public reconciliation, Jonson was taking a step, however tentative, toward a functionalist legitimation of a free and placeless market.

I thank my colleague Katharine Eisaman Maus for calling my attention to this passage and for other help with this essay. My analysis may be regarded as a working out in detail of Agnew's original insight, although, for what it is worth, I did arrive at the point independently, and my use of Austrian economics, rather than Marxist, to analyze Jonson's view of the market leads me to emphasize different aspects of the play.

their sheer incompetence to manage the marketplace successfully.

In contrast to what happens in Jonson's earlier masterpieces, *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*, in *Bartholomew Fair* the apparent forces of disorder triumph at the end and frustrate the efforts of those who try to impose order on their economic activities.[12] As grave as Jonson's doubts about an unregulated market may be, in the end he seems to suggest that a regulated market would be a good deal worse, if only because the regulators are no better than the regulated. For all its faults, the market in Jonson's portrayal answers to deep-seated needs in human nature and he ultimately seems to recognize the value of the freedom it offers, as well as the fact that freedom is compatible with its own kind of order. In short, Jonson seems to have an inkling of the idea of spontaneous order as it was to be developed in the twentieth century by the Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek.[13] Bartholomew Fair offers an example in miniature of a community that is ordered, not by regulations imposed by an outside authority, but by self-regulating principles generated from within, a system of checks and balances that relies on the common material interests of its participants to bring about their harmony. *Bartholomew Fair* may be the first portrait in literary history of how a free market operates.

If Jonson displays unusual sympathy for the nascent free markets of the Renaissance in *Bartholomew Fair*, the reason may be that he recognized that as a professional dramatist and actor he was a participant in a marketplace himself. Bartholomew Fair is the headquarters of charlatans and thieves, but it is also the home of playwrights and actors, and the two groups are not unrelated in Jonson's portrayal. The play culminates in a puppet

[12]See Stallybrass and White, *Transgression*, p. 66, Jonas Barish, *Ben Jonson and the Language of Prose Comedy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 212–13, and Katharine Eisaman Maus, *Ben Jonson and the Roman Frame of Mind* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 132.

[13]For a concise statement of the theory of spontaneous order, see Hayek's essay "The Results of Human Action but not of Human Design" in his *Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics* (New York: Clarion, 1969), pp. 96–105.

show, which seems to stand for the world of drama in general and embodies all that is best and worst in the fair. It reflects everything that is economically unscrupulous in the fair's business practices, and yet it brings a genuine joy to the customers who seek it out. Jonson seems to have come to realize that if marketplaces are regulated, the theater will always be among the first to come under government control and the results will not always be beneficial to the theater and its public.[14] As he shows, particularly in his Puritan characters, Jonson understood that critics of the marketplace inevitably become critics of the theater as an especially conspicuous example of market principles. In *Bartholomew Fair* Jonson seems to allow his professional commitment to the theater to overcome the contempt for the world of commerce he shared with many of his aristocratic patrons. He even seems to have tried to shape a new dramatic form in *Bartholomew Fair* that would mirror the freedom and spontaneity of the marketplace it represents. The apparent formlessness of the play actually answers to an inner law—the spontaneous order of the free market—and its artful artlessness suggests in aesthetic terms how the principles of order and freedom can be reconciled.[15]

II.

At first sight, *Bartholomew Fair* seems to carry on the critique of the nascent market economy of the Renaissance Jonson had developed in earlier plays such as *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*. Like many of his contemporaries, Jonson was particularly disturbed by the way his society was moving from a conception of wealth based on land to one based on money. In *Volpone*, he satirizes the way money begets money in the devious schemes of Volpone and Mosca, who appear to be utterly unproductive and

[14]For examples of government regulation during the Elizabethan period that proved disastrous to the theater companies and to Jonson in particular, see David Riggs, *Ben Jonson: A Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 33–34.

[15]For the structural pattern of *Bartholomew Fair*, see Levin, *Multiple Plot*, pp. 211–12.

living like parasites off the wealth of others. In *The Alchemist*, Jonson images the world of trade and finance as a giant con game, in which greedy and ambitious men on the make are seduced into a variety of get-rich-quick schemes by the charlatans Face and Subtle. To Jonson, the act of market exchange looks like alchemy, the fraudulent promise to create value out of nothing, to change something worthless into something precious, as the alchemists claimed to transmute base metals into gold.

Jonson is thus a good illustration of Hayek's claim that the market economy looks like magic to people who do not understand the complexities of economic transactions. Many fail to recognize the genuine contributions entrepreneurs make to economic life by their ability to ferret out knowledge of market conditions and their willingness to take risks; these people thus picture the businessman as a kind of sorcerer. As Hayek writes:

> Such distrust and fear have, since antiquity and in many parts of the world, led ordinary people as well as socialist thinkers to regard trade not only as distinct from material production, not only as chaotic and superfluous in itself, . . . but also as suspicious, inferior, dishonest, and contemptible. . . . Activities that appear to add to available wealth, "out of nothing," without physical creation and by merely rearranging what already exists, stink of sorcery. . . . That a mere change of hands should lead to a gain in value to all participants, that it need not mean gain to one at the expense of the others (or what has come to be called exploitation), was and is nonetheless intuitively difficult to grasp. . . . As a consequence of all these circumstances, many people continue to find the mental feats associated with trade easy to discount even when they do not attribute them to sorcery, or see them as depending on trick or fraud or cunning deceit.[16]

As Hayek points out, this kind of distrust of the businessman is particularly acute early in economic history. For example, during

[16]Friedrich Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), pp. 90, 91, 93. For similar thoughts on how the new market economy was imaged in terms of sorcery, see Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, pp. 57–59, 70–72.

the Renaissance, when capitalist principles were beginning to dissolve medieval ways of doing business, many people were confused and alienated by the initial results.[17]

Jonson seems to have spent much of his career in reaction to and rebellion against what can be described as his lower middle-class origins.[18] His stepfather was a bricklayer, and by following in his footsteps, Jonson was exposed early in his life to the world of trade. Fortunately he received an excellent education at the famous Westminster School in London, and pursued the typical middle-class path of rising in society by using his wits and learning.[19] Probably in 1594, he entered the world of the professional theater, first as an actor and then as a playwright. The theater was one of the more advanced segments of the Elizabethan economy, employing financial and marketing techniques that were sophisticated for the time (for example, the theaters were early examples of joint-stock companies and were heavily capitalized by Renaissance standards). As the cases of Marlowe and Shakespeare had already shown, the Elizabethan theater offered a marvelous opportunity for a talented young man to make money and a name for himself.[20]

Although Jonson prospered in the theater world, he seems to have resented the source of his income and success. He repeatedly shows signs of believing that the conditions of the commercial theaters forced him to compromise his art to please the

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[17]I do not have the space to deal with the vexed question of exactly when capitalism "began." Arguments have been made that certain basic principles of the market economy can already be observed in the medieval period. See, for example, Henri Pirenne, *Medieval Cities: Their Origins and the Revival of Trade*, Frank D. Halsey, trans. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1952) and Robert S. Lopez, *The Commercial Revolution of the Middle Ages, 950–1350* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1976). See also Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, pp. 27–28, 44. But however "proto-capitalist" the Middle Ages may have been, England was clearly entering upon a new phase of economic life in Jonson's day and he and his contemporaries had trouble coming to terms with these radical changes.

[18]This is one of the main themes of David Riggs's biography of Jonson; see especially *Jonson*, pp. 4–5.

[19]On Jonson's ambition, see Riggs, *Jonson*, pp. 2–3.

[20]See Riggs, *Jonson*, pp. 24–25.

debased taste of the public. He made fun of the way other playwrights (including Shakespeare) catered to their audience and he often got embroiled in controversy as a result. He sought to purge the theater of what he perceived to be its vulgarity, conceiving of himself as the playwright who would restore classical dignity to drama, in part by consciously imitating Roman models in many of his plays. Jonson was the first English playwright to bring out a published edition of his plays (in 1616), no doubt with a view to proving that his works were not the mere ephemeral products of the entertainment marketplace but literature of lasting value.[21]

Throughout his literary career, Jonson did everything he could to escape the commercial theater world, above all turning to aristocratic and royal patronage as an alternative to his bourgeois source of income in the entertainment business. He wrote poetry in quest of aristocratic patrons and even in his dramatic career, he alternated between writing for the public theaters and writing for the royal court.[22] He was the great master of the court masque, and was richly rewarded over the years by James I for his contribution to royal entertainments. Aside from the financial advantages of writing for the court, Jonson seems to have been attracted by the prospect of composing with aristocratic taste in mind, rather than the lower- and middle-class taste that prevailed in the commercial theaters. The stage history of *Bartholomew Fair* encapsulates Jonson's theatrical career in miniature. The play was first staged on October 31, 1614 at one of the public theaters, the Hope, and the following evening it

[21]On Jonson's motives for bringing out the 1616 Folio, see Barish, *Antitheatrical Prejudice*, p. 138, Leggatt, *English Renaissance Comedy*, p. 135, and Stallybras and White, *Transgression*, p. 75.

[22]For the tension running throughout Jonson's theatrical career, see Riggs, *Jonson*, pp. 63–64, 69, 234, Stallybrass and White, *Transgression*, pp. 66–79, Barish, *Antitheatrical Prejudice*, pp. 132–54, and Kate McLuskie, "Making and Buying: Ben Jonson and the Commercial Theater Audience," in Julie Sanders, Kate Chedgzoy, and Susan Wiseman, eds., *Refashioning Ben Jonson: Gender, Politics and the Jonsonian Canon* (London: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 134–54.

was performed at court before James I.[23] In the published version of the play, both the prologue and the epilogue are addressed to James, and Jonson shamelessly flatters the king for having taste superior to the mob's. In this one play, Jonson for once seems to have it both ways.[24] He gives his popular audience the kind of vulgar spectacle it craves and then he repackages the same material for a court audience, presenting it in a condescending fashion and implying that he and his aristocratic patrons are above this sort of foolery.[25]

Bartholomew Fair thus seems to embody everything that was conservative and backward-looking in Jonson's drama. He apparently sides with the aristocracy and its world of feudal privilege against the rising middle class and its world of money and commerce.[26] For critics with socialist leanings, it is tempting

[23]See Waith, *Bartholomew Fair*, p. 205, Butler, *Selected Plays*, p. 148, Leggatt, *English Renaissance Comedy*, p. 136, and Campbell, *Alchemist*, p. 503. As these editors point out, a measure of the "popularity" of the Hope Theater is the fact that it was still being used for the "sport" of bear-baiting. In *The Politics of Mirth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 43–44, Leah Marcus offers an interesting discussion of bear-baiting in connection with *Bartholomew Fair*; she points out that Ursula (the "little bear") is baited several times in the course of the action.

[24]See Horsman, *Bartholomew Fair*, pp. xii–xiv, Butler, *Selected Plays*, p. 149, and Julie Sanders, *Ben Jonson's Theatrical Republics* (London: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 92–93.

[25]See McLuskie, "Making and Buying," pp. 144–45.

[26]This was L.C. Knights's view of Jonson and his "fellows" in his famous book, *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1937). See especially p. 7: "The standards of judgement that they brought to bear were not formed in that new world of industrial enterprise. They belonged to an older world which was still 'normal,' a world of small communities." Knights's view of Jonson is effectively countered by Don E. Wayne in his essay "Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson: An Alternative View," *Renaissance Drama* 13 (1982): 103–29. Wayne points out that Knights's view of Jonson as reactionary depends crucially on the fact that he omits *Bartholomew Fair* from his discussion (p. 104). Wayne goes on to show how Knights's interpretation itself rests on a kind of academic nostalgia (pp. 127–29). Wayne concludes: "despite his classicism and traditionalism, Jonson looked ahead as much as he did backward in time" (p. 129).

to read *Bartholomew Fair* as a proto-Brechtian work, as if Jonson were criticizing the early signs of capitalism from the left.[27] But insofar as the play satirizes the commercial world, it does so from the right. One must remember that even (and especially) in Marxist terms, capitalism was the progressive force in Jonson's day, since it was working to dissolve centuries of antiquated feudal privilege and unleash unprecedentedly productive forces. At first glance, Jonson's view of capitalism in *Bartholomew Fair* thus seems reactionary. Turning his back on his own class origins, and scorning the original source of his theatrical success, he identifies with an aristocracy we now know to have been in decline. *Bartholomew Fair* shows how chaotic and morally dubious the new world of trade and money looked to the old order it was displacing. In Jonson's portrait, the marketplace is basically a den of thieves, and flouts all conventional notions of morality, decency, and fair play. One character, Ezekiel Edgworth, is a professional cutpurse, but Jonson does not present him as the only criminal among a group of honest tradespeople. On the contrary, almost all the fair merchants are directly implicated in the activities of thieves like Edgworth, leading the young fool in the play, Bartholomew Cokes, to conclude: "Would I might . . . never stir, if I think there be anything but thievery and cozening i' this whole Fair."[28] The seemingly honest merchants at the fair work hand in hand with Edgworth, identifying victims for him, setting them up for the actual robberies, and helping him to dispose of the stolen goods.

Even when the merchants of *Bartholomew Fair* are not participating in outright thievery, Jonson presents them as looking to cheat their customers. He makes the familiar charge that the merchants adulterate their products to increase their profits.[29]

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[27]See Jonathan Haynes, *The Social Relations of Jonson's Theater* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 135; he calls *Bartholomew Fair* "this most Brechtian of Renaissance plays."

[28]*Bartholomew Fair*, IV.ii.61–63.

[29]See Haynes, *Social Relations*, p. 123, and for a discussion of adulteration as the central theme in *Bartholomew Fair*, see Douglas Bruster, *Drama and the Market in the Age of Shakespeare* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 90–95.

Jonson's tradespeople themselves accuse each other of lacking business ethics. When one merchant tries to encroach on another's territory, they clash. Leatherhead the hobby-horse seller threatens the gingerbread woman Joan Trash: "Sit farther with your gingerbread-progeny there, and hinder not the prospect of my shop, or I'll ha' it proclaimed in the Fair what stuff they are made on."[30] When Joan protests: "What stuff are they made on. . . ? Nothing but what's wholesome, I assure you," Leatherhead begins to betray her trade secrets: "Yes, stale bread, rotten eggs, musty ginger and dead honey."[31] But the prize for adulteration at the fair goes to Ursula the pig-woman, who also does a thriving business in alcohol and tobacco on the side, and instructs her assistant Mooncalf on how to stretch their supplies and increase their sales:

> But look to't, sirrah, you were best; threepence a pipeful I will ha' made of all my whole pound of tobacco, and a quarter of a pound of coltsfoot mixed with it too, to eke it out. . . . Then six and twenty shillings a barrel I will advance o' my beer, and fifty shillings a hundred o' my bottle-ale; I ha' told you the ways how to raise it. Froth your cans well in the filling, at length, rogue, and jog your bottles o' the buttock, sirrah, then skink out the first glass, ever, and drink with all companies, though you be sure to be drunk; you'll misreckon the better, and be less ashamed on't. But your true trick, rascal, must be to be ever busy, and mis-take away the bottles and cans in haste before they be half drunk off, and never hear anybody call (if they should chance to mark you) till you ha' brought fresh, and be able to forswear 'em.[32]

The density of detail in this passage suggests that Jonson was uncannily familiar with the dark side of Renaissance commerce.

But Jonson is not interested only in aberrations of the market principle, moments when unscrupulous individuals depart from

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[30]*Bartholomew Fair*, II.ii.3–5.

[31]Ibid., II.ii.6–9.

[32]Ibid., II.ii.86–99.

the decent norms of business. His satire goes right to the heart of the market principle itself. He is extremely skeptical about the way products are merchandised, and displays a surprisingly sophisticated understanding of how tradespeople are able to prey upon the desires of potential customers. Jonson's portrait of the fair suggests a world that has gone mad with consumerism, and Cokes is the maddest of them all, Jonson's image of everything that can go wrong when a market liberates the desires of its customers.[33] He is particularly struck by the power of what we would call advertising, which was no doubt still at a primitive stage in his day but was already able to exert its power over consumers. Jonson shows the customers at the fair continuously bombarded by the din of the merchants hawking their wares: "What do you lack? What is't you buy? What do you lack? Rattles, drums, halberts, horses, babies o' the best? Fiddles of the finest?"[34]

Cokes's tutor, Humphrey Wasp, describes him as mesmerized by the power of advertising—the many signs displayed at the fair.[35] As a result of being bombarded with advertising, Cokes has his desires awakened and he cannot control his appetites.[36] In Cokes, Jonson creates an unforgettable portrait of the helpless consumer, caught in the webs of advertising and overwhelmed by the wealth of goods now available in the Renaissance marketplace:

> And the three Jew's trumps; and half a dozen o' birds, and that drum (I have one drum already) and your smiths (I like that device o' your smiths very pretty well) and four halberts—and (le'me see) that fine painted great lady, and her three women for state, I'll have.[37]

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[33]On the stimulation of desire in Renaissance fairs, see Stallybrass and White, *Transgression*, pp. 38–40. For Jonson's negative attitude toward consumer desires, see Bruster, *Drama and the Market*, p. 41.

[34]*Bartholomew Fair*, II.ii.28–32.

[35]Ibid., I.iv.102–06.

[36]Ibid., I.v.100–06.

[37]Ibid., III.iv.67–71.

Wasp sees the logical conclusion of Cokes's infinite desire: "No, the shop; buy the whole shop, it will be best, the shop, the shop!"[38] Cokes finally asks one merchant: "What's the price, at a word, o' thy whole shop, case and all, as it stands."[39] Without skipping a beat, Leatherhead calculates the sum: "Sir, it stands me in six and twenty shillings sevenpence halfpenny, besides three shillings for my ground."[40] Here is the new world of capitalism in a nutshell—everything has its price in money and everything is up for sale. To emphasize the point, Jonson makes prostitution an integral part of the fair, and shows how easily decent women are drawn into the world of pimps and whores. By the time Jonson is through, it is difficult to distinguish the business of the fair in general from the business of prostitution. He presents the marketplace as a deeply confused and confusing realm, a topsy-turvy world in which moral values are inverted and characters lose their bearings. Cokes ends up completely bewildered and disoriented by his experience at the fair: "By this light, I cannot find my gingerbread-wife nor my hobby-horse man in all the Fair, now, to ha' my money again. And I do not know the way out on't, to go home for more. . . . Dost thou know where I dwell?"[41] Assaulted from all sides by thieves, charlatans, and advertisers, Cokes utterly loses his sense of identity: "Friend, do you know who I am?"[42]

III.

Jonson develops a strong case against the market in *Bartholomew Fair*. He shows the amorality, venality, lawlessness, and even the criminality of the unregulated marketplace, thus portraying a world that seems to cry out for some form of economic regulation. And he includes in the play characters who vehemently condemn the fair and call for its regulation. But for once Jonson

[38]Ibid., III.iv.72–73.

[39]Ibid., III.iv.129–30.

[40]Ibid., III.iv.131–32.

[41]Ibid., IV.ii.20–22, 25.

[42]Ibid., IV.ii.71.

asks the follow-up question: are these would-be regulators fit to impose law and order on the sprawling marketplace they profess to despise? This is not a trivial question, and just by posing it, Jonson takes a significant step toward arguments that eventually were to be developed by economists such as Adam Smith in favor of free markets. The fact that an unregulated market may have its faults and disadvantages does not in itself prove that a regulated market will be any better. It may have its own faults and disadvantages, and perhaps end up producing an even worse situation. In *Bartholomew Fair* Jonson finally gets around to scrutinizing the proponents of law and order to see if they really are capable of living up to their promise of improving the world.

The simplest case Jonson examines is Humphrey Wasp, who is devoted to restraining the appetites of his charge Cokes. Given how freely young Bartholomew spends his money, one can sympathize with Humphrey's attempts to be strict with him. But Wasp responds to Cokes's excesses with moral indignation. As his name indicates, Humphrey is waspish, always ready to fly off into fits of anger and quarrel with anyone in sight. It is thus by no means clear that his disposition is preferable to Cokes's or any less passionate and excessive. Bartholomew is a fool but he is a relatively harmless fool, and unlikely to cause much trouble for others. By contrast, Wasp is always provoking conflict and getting himself and others into difficulties. Other characters, such as John Littlewit, feel compelled to caution him: "Be civil, Master Numps."[43] His reply is not promising: "Why, say I have a humour not to be civil; how then? Who shall compel me?"[44] Incivility seems to be fundamental to Wasp's character; his indignation makes it difficult for him to get along with other people. Mistress Overdo views him as an enemy of the "conservation of the peace,"[45] eventually pleading with him: "govern your passions."[46] Here is the irony of Wasp's role in the play: he sets himself up as the governor of his charge's passions, and yet he cannot govern

[43]Ibid., I.iv.53.

[44]Ibid., I.iv.54–55.

[45]Ibid., I.v.12.

[46]Ibid., I.v.21.

his own. He presents himself as the champion of law and order, and yet he is in fact one of the chief forces for disorder in the play.

The game of "vapours" that breaks out in Act IV is very funny and borders on absurdity, but it may reflect a serious threat Jonson sensed in his world. In his image of people contradicting each other merely for the sake of contradicting each other, Jonson offers a comic reflection of Elizabethan and Jacobean society—a community riven by all sorts of competing claims and authorities, political and religious. With the benefit of historical hindsight, we can read *Bartholomew Fair* today and see the forces at work in the London of the play that were in a few decades to plunge Britain into civil war. But Jonson himself evidently saw the Puritan Revolution coming, or at least had an inkling of what might spark it. As the game of vapours gets out of hand and starts to become dangerous, Mistress Overdo once again tries to rein in Wasp and his quarrelsome companions: "conserve the peace."[47] She sees the direction in which his waspishness is leading him: "Are you rebels? Gentlemen? Shall I send out a sergeant-at-arms or a writ o' rebellion against you?"[48] The threat of revolution seems to be hovering in the background of *Bartholomew Fair*, and Jonson traces it not to the childish appetites of a Bartholomew Cokes but to the fiery indignation of a Humphrey Wasp.

In fact, the only way to contain Wasp's rebellious anger turns out to be to place him in the stocks. In another ironic twist, the would-be restrainer ends up in restraint. The irony is not lost even on the dim-witted Bartholomew; learning of his tutor's disgrace, Cokes is no longer disposed to honor his authority: "Hold your peace, Numps; you ha' been i' the stocks, I hear."[49] Wasp immediately recognizes the implications for his continued rule over his charge: "Does he know that? Nay, then the date of my authority is out; I must think no longer to reign, my government is at an end. He that will correct another must want fault in him-

[47]Ibid., IV.iv.101.

[48]Ibid., IV.iv.128–29.

[49]Ibid., V.iv.88.

self."[50] Wasp's last statement may represent Jonson's great discovery in the course of writing *Bartholomew Fair*.[51] The principle that only a superior, indeed a perfect, person has the right to regulate others does not apply just to Wasp in the play. In fact it is the governing principle of Jonson's critique of all the would-be forces of law and order in the play, and especially of Zeal-of-the-Land Busy.[52]

IV.

The fact that a fanatical Puritan is one of the chief critics of the marketplace in *Bartholomew Fair* is a good indication that Jonson may be reconsidering his earlier attacks on the new economic freedom of his era.[53] Jonson's portrayal of Busy makes it clear that arguments against free markets are often ultimately based in religion, not economics. Busy's objections to advertising and to the products displayed at the fair are rooted in his Puritanism and specifically his hatred of idolatry:

> For long hair, it is an ensign of pride, a banner, and the world is full of those banners, very full of banners. And bottle-ale is a drink of Satan's, a diet-drink of

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[50]Ibid., V.iv.90–91.

[51]This point is reinforced by the fact that the Wasp-Cokes story in *Bartholomew Fair* may reflect events that actually happened when Jonson accompanied Sir Walter Raleigh's son Wat as his tutor on a trip to Paris. See Riggs, Jonson, pp. 206–7, Barish, *Prose Comedy*, p. 213, and Butler, *Selected Plays*, p. 137: "during this trip the pupil triumphantly exposed his mentor to public view in a cart while he was prostrated in a bout of drunkenness." See also Luke Wilson, *Theaters of Intention*: *Drama and the Law in Early Modern England* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000), pp. 226, 314, n. 25.

[52]On the parallels between Wasp and Busy, see Levin, *Multiple Plot*, pp. 204–5.

[53]Riggs (*Jonson*, p. 195) suggests that in creating the character of Zeal-of-the-Land Busy, Jonson may have had a personal score to settle with a particular Puritan preacher named Robert Milles. Marcus (*Politics of Mirth*, p. 28) points out that *Bartholomew Fair* appeared during a period of "a fierce concentration of anti-Puritan rhetoric in performances at court, including the revival of works like Ben Jonson's *Alchemist*."

> Satan's, devised to puff us up and make us swell in this latter age of vanity, as the smoke of tobacco to keep us in mist and error. But the fleshly woman which you call Ursula is above all to be avoided, having the marks upon her of the three enemies of man: the world, as being in the Fair; the devil, as being in the fire; and the flesh, as being herself.[54]

Busy is convinced that the economic activity at the fair is not merely disordered and unregulated; it is sinful and evil. For him the fair is "wicked and foul" and "fitter may it be called a foul than a Fair."[55] He claims to know what is good for his fellow human beings and what is bad for them. Indeed, he thinks he knows better than they themselves what is in their interest. Thus, he arrogates to himself the right to tell people what they can and cannot do in the marketplace. Jonson himself had a strong streak of moralism and in many of his plays he sets himself up as the arbiter of good and evil. But his creation of the character of Busy seems to reflect a growing doubt about the social consequences of moralistic attitudes.

Busy is a busy-body, constantly meddling in other people's affairs and trying to reorder their lives. He criticizes pride but he is exceedingly proud himself, and enjoys lording it over others. It surely was not lost on Jonson that it was people like Busy who were attacking the London theaters and constantly trying to shut them down. As we will see, for Jonson the most objectionable aspect of Busy's moralism is his crusade against the theater, but the playwright seems to be aware that this campaign grows out of a more general hostility to the marketplace. Anyone who condemns attempts to please consumers is eventually going to get around to condemning the theater. In short, if the Puritans were enemies of the marketplace, Jonson may have begun to wonder if the marketplace was his ally. As Jonson sets up the terms of *Bartholomew Fair*, economic freedom is pitted against religious tyranny. When Busy starts overthrowing the stalls in the fair, John Littlewit and others contrive to have him arrested and

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[54]*Bartholomew Fair*, III.vi.27–35.

[55]Ibid., III.vi.79–80.

placed in the stocks for disturbing the peace. Littlewit views this victory as the triumph of freedom: "Was not this shilling well ventured, Win, for our liberty? Now we may go play, and see over the Fair, where we list, ourselves."[56]

Jonson portrays Busy as an overreacher, a man who sets himself up as a god over his fellow human beings and fails to live up to his inflated self-image. But he also shows that Busy is a hypocrite. He condemns the money-making activities of the marketplace and yet he is obsessed with money-making himself.[57] In general, as if he were anticipating Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* Jonson shows the Puritans devoting themselves quasi-religiously to the acquisition of wealth. In the fifth act, Dame Purecraft finally reveals that she is "worth six thousand pound"[58]—a huge sum in those days—and she goes on to explain the devious means by which she accumulated the money:[59]

> These seven years I have been a willful holy widow, only to draw feasts and gifts from my entangled suitors. I am also by office an assisting sister of the deacons, and a devourer, instead of a distributor, of the alms. I am a special maker of marriages for our decayed brethren with rich widows, for a third part of their wealth, when they are married, for the relief of the poor elect; as also our poor handsome young virgins with our wealthy bachelors or widowers to make them steal from their husbands when I have confirmed them in the faith, and got all put into their custodies.[60]

Here the Puritan Dame Purecraft begins to sound a good deal like one of Jonson's conmen in his earlier plays.

But Purecraft defers to Busy as the chief money-maker of them all. In his scheming to exploit legacies, he sounds even

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[56]Ibid., III.vi.104–06.

[57]See Slights, *Art of Secrecy*, p. 158.

[58]*Bartholomew Fair*, V.ii.46.

[59]See Slights, *Art of Secrecy*, p. 159.

[60]*Bartholomew Fair*, V.ii.48–57.

more like Volpone: "Our elder, Zeal-of-the-Land, would have had me, but I know him to be the capital knave of the land, making himself rich by being made feoffee in trust to deceased brethren, and cozening their heirs by swearing the absolute gift of their inheritance."[61] Jonson gives Busy mercantile origins; the fact that he began as a baker[62] stresses his kinship to the tradespeople he later condemns. Toward the end of the play, in Busy's debate at the puppet show, the Puppet Dionysius points out that the Puritans are heavily involved in the clothing trade and thus implicated in the very luxuries they rail against.[63]

Jonson further shows that Busy is willing to bend the law to suit his own purposes.[64] Despite their claim to adhere strictly to religious law, the Puritans turn out to be extremely flexible when it comes to interpreting the law in accord with their own desires. When Win Littlewit expresses her deep longing for roast pig at the fair, her mother at first urges her to resist the temptation, but she soon is willing to endorse the desire "if it can be any way made or found lawful."[65] Dame Purecraft enlists her spiritual advisor Busy to find a way of pronouncing Win's appetite lawful. Busy sets to work interpreting the law, but it is a difficult case:

> Verily, for the disease of longing, it is a disease, a carnal disease, or appetite, incident to women; and as it is carnal, and incident, it is natural, very natural. Now pig, it is a meat, and a meat that is nourishing, and may be longed for, and so consequently eaten; it may be eaten; very exceeding well eaten. But in the Fair, and as a Bartholomew pig, it cannot be eaten, for the very calling it a Bartholomew pig, and to eat it so, is a spice of idolatry.[66]

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[61]Ibid., V.ii.59–63.

[62]Ibid., I.iii.107–12.

[63]Ibid., V.v.75–84. See Leggatt, *English Renaissance Comedy*, p. 139.

[64]See Slights, *Art of Secrecy*, pp. 157–58.

[65]*Bartholomew Fair*, I.vi.27–28.

[66]Ibid., I.vi.43–49.

Purecraft urges a liberal understanding of the law on her fellow Puritan: "Good Brother Zeal-of-the-Land, think to make it as lawful as you can."[67] Busy proves equal to the task: "It may be eaten, and in the Fair, I take it, in a booth, the tents of the wicked. The place is not much, not very much, we may be religious in midst of the profane, so it be eaten with a reformed mouth, with sobriety, and humbleness; not gorged in with gluttony or greediness."[68] Busy even finds a way to justify his own indulgence in eating pig at the fair:

> In the way of comfort to the weak, I will go and eat. I will eat exceedingly, and prophesy; there may be a good use made of it, too, now I think on't: by the public eating of swine's flesh, to profess our hate and loathing of Judaism, whereof the brethren stand taxed. I will therefore eat, yea, I will eat exceedingly.[69]

The ease with which Busy is able to interpret the law to permit him to do whatever he desires raises doubts about the status of law in the play. The advocates of the law present it as the moral alternative to the marketplace. The law is supposed to be immutable and incorruptible, as opposed to the mutable and corrupt marketplace, where everyone is on the make and values and prices change from minute to minute. But Jonson shows the Puritan characters making and remaking the law before our eyes. The law loses much of its prestige when it is revealed to be changeable and even pervertible according to the dictates of desire. In the puppet show debate, lawfulness turns out to be a matter of semantics, the product of mere wordplay and not of any fundamental principle. The puppet has an easy answer to Busy's charge that the theater lacks lawfulness:

> BUSY: I mean no vocation, idol, no present lawful calling.
> PUPPET DIONYSIUS: *Is yours a lawful calling*? . . .
> BUSY: Yes, mine is of the spirit.
> PUPPET DIONYSIUS: *Then idol is a lawful calling*.

[67]Ibid., I.vi.54–55.

[68]Ibid., I.vi.63–67.

[69]Ibid., I.vi.83–87.

> LEATHERHEAD: He says, then idol is a lawful calling!
> For you called him idol, and your calling is of the spirit.[70]

By the time Jonson is through ringing changes on the word law in *Bartholomew Fair*, the term has become virtually meaningless.[71] The law no longer appears to stand majestically above the marketplace, fully entitled to regulate it. Rather the law is negotiated and renegotiated just like any other item at the fair.

Jonson's antipathy to the Puritans led him to probe deeper into their hostility to the marketplace and he once again finds a connection between their religious beliefs and their economic attitudes. The gamester Quarlous notes that Busy, as a Puritan, rejects all tradition, and claims to remain true to a purified notion of an original faith: "By his profession, he will ever be i' the state of innocence, though, and childhood; derides all antiquity; defies any other learning than inspiration; and what discretion soever years should afford him, it is all prevented in original ignorance."[72] Busy's hatred for the marketplace grows out of his Puritan hostility to tradition.[73] For Busy the marketplace is the locus of business as usual, where men and women go about satisfying the desires they have always had. By catering to what people want, the market stands in the way of the moral reformation Busy is striving for. Unlike the merchants of Bartholomew Fair, he will not accept human beings as he finds them, but rather wants to remake them in one grand revolutionary effort. That is why Busy images the moral reformation of the world in terms of an apocalyptic abolition of the marketplace. He defines himself as "one that rejoiceth in his affliction, and sitteth here to prophesy the destruction of fairs and May-games, wakes and Whitsun ales, and doth sigh and groan for the reformation of these abuses."[74] This passage embodies a profound insight into Puritan psychology and into the political and economic reformer's mentality in

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[70]Ibid., V.v.49–50, 52–55.

[71]See Marcus, *Politics of Mirth*, pp. 40, 50–51.

[72]*Bartholomew Fair*, I.iii.129–33.

[73]See Marcus, *Politics of Mirth*, pp. 51–52; she argues that Busy "has, in effect, undertaken the disestablishment of history."

[74]*Bartholomew Fair*, IV.vi.78–80.

general. Jonson understands that Busy rejects the world as such and wants to see it fundamentally remade. His hostility to life as usual dictates his hostility to business as usual, and hence demands the overthrow of the marketplace as the center of existing abuses. Jonson saw how deeply revolutionary the Puritan mentality was, and events in a few decades were to prove him right.

The Puritan revolutionary impulse manifests itself even on the level of language. Refusing to accept the common names of things, the Puritans become involved in a ridiculous process of trying to rename everything, including themselves: "O, they have all such names, sir; he was witness for Win here—they will not be called godfathers—and named her Win-the-fight. You thought her name had been Winifred, did you not?"[75] In a play in which signs are often more important than substance, the impulse to rename things is tantamount to the impulse to remake them. Thus, although Busy appears to be an advocate of law and order, like Wasp he turns out to be a force for disorder. He too is guilty of incivility, as Quarlous makes clear in his final summary of the Puritan character: "Away, you are a herd of hypocritical proud ignorants, rather wild than mad, fitter for woods and the society of beasts than houses and the congregation of men. You are. . . outlaws to order and discipline."[76]

In Busy's case, Jonson shows that hostility to the marketplace can reflect hostility to civil society as such. Busy's urge to regulate the fair is rooted in his sense of his superiority to his fellow human beings and his urge to dominate them. Rejecting tradition, common sense, everyday experience, and even the ordinary names for things, Busy is prepared to reorder the world from the ground up and wants to start with the market. For him, the fair is the principal obstacle standing in the way of his creating a perfect world based on his private vision of what is good and evil. Hence in Jonson's view, Busy represents a greater force for disorder than any of the fair's malefactors.[77] Their petty crimes pale

[75]Ibid., I.iii.116–19.

[76]Ibid., V.ii.38–41.

[77]See Brian Gibbons, *Jacobean City Comedy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 186.

by comparison with the dissolution of social order Busy's revolutionary impulses would unleash. Hence, like Wasp, Busy ends up in the stocks. Jonson once again shows that the would-be regulators require regulation more than the people they want to regulate.[78]

V.

Adam Overdo is Jonson's most interesting example of the need to tame the regulatory spirit. Like Wasp and Busy, he claims to devote himself to repressing passions and correcting excesses in others, and yet he is in the grip of passion himself and goes from one excess to another.[79] Like Busy, he is an overreacher and sets himself up as a god in his little world: "Neither is the hour of my severity yet come, to reveal myself, wherein, cloud-like, I will break out in rain and hail, lightning and thunder, upon the head of enormity."[80] Overdo is another busy-body and would be a petty tyrant if he had his way. Although he presents himself as a disinterested servant of "the public good,"[81] Jonson suggests that he may be just a social climber, who uses his office to advance his own cause. Wasp reproaches Mistress Overdo: "Why mistress, I knew Adam, the clerk, your husband, when he was Adam scrivener, and writ for twopence a sheet, as high as he bears his head now, or you your hood, dame."[82] Overdo is a little man who puffs himself up with the thought that he is better than his fellow human beings and seeks to prove it by imposing order on their lives.

Unfortunately for Overdo, he is not equal to the task. He prides himself on his judgment of human nature and his ability to spy into the souls of men. But Jonson shows him making one

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[78]See Barish, *Prose Comedy*, p. 236. Marcus (*Politics of Mirth*, p. 47) says of both Busy and Overdo that they "are not just petulant but genuinely seditious."

[79]See Levin, *Multiple Plot*, pp. 206–07.

[80]*Bartholomew Fair*, V.ii.3–5.

[81]Ibid., II.i.9.

[82]Ibid., IV.iv.141–43.

mistake after another.[83] He thinks that the robber Edgworth is in fact a "civil" young man and tries to become his patron.[84] Overdo is particularly susceptible to anyone who will flatter his ego. This tendency becomes evident in his encounter with Trouble-All, a man who went mad when Overdo dismissed him from his position in the Court of Piepowders at the fair. Now Trouble-All will not do anything without a written warrant from Overdo, a form of madness that initially strikes the Justice as evidence of Trouble-All's wisdom: "What should he be, that doth so esteem and advance my warrant? He seems a sober and discreet person!"[85] Overdo's continuing misjudgment of the other characters in the play makes him a laughing-stock and ultimately undermines his authority. As Quarlous points out to him at the end of the play: "your 'innocent young man' you have ta'en care of all this day, is a cutpurse that hath got all your brother Cokes his things, and helped you to your beating and the stocks."[86] Overdo claims to be able to bring moral order to the world, but he cannot tell good from evil and mistakes criminals and madmen for model citizens. The complete collapse of his regime occurs when he goes to punish a group of prostitutes and discovers that one of them is his own wife in disguise.

When Overdo speaks out against the fair's merchandise, chiefly alcohol and tobacco, one might be tempted to sympathize with his criticism, but Jonson goes out of his way to caricature Overdo's complaints and make them sound foolish. Busy inveighs against the products of the fair because he is trying to save the souls of its customers; Overdo is trying to save their bodies. He cautions against alcoholic beverages: "Thirst not after that frothy liquor, ale; for who knows when he openeth the stopple what may be in the bottle? Hath not a snail, a spider, yea, a newt been found there?"[87] Overdo is also on an anti-smoking crusade:

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[83]See Leggatt, *English Renaissance Comedy*, p. 149, Marcus, *Politics of Mirth*, p. 56, and Slights, *Art of Secrecy*, pp. 154, 169.

[84]*Bartholomew Fair*, II.iv.30.

[85]Ibid., IV.i.23–24.

[86]Ibid., V.vi.72–75.

[87]Ibid., II.vi.11–14.

"Neither do thou lust after that tawny weed, tobacco. . . Whose complexion is like the Indian's that vents it! . . . And who can tell, if, before the gathering and making up thereof, the alligator hath not pissed thereon?"[88] Overdo may be raising slightly different doubts about the safety of alcohol and tobacco products than we hear today, but the basic principle is the same. He distrusts anything exotic and loves to dwell on the worst-case scenario. He goes on to lament the amount of money he thinks is wasted on these luxury products: "Thirty pound a week in bottle-ale! Forty in tobacco! And ten more in ale again."[89] At times Overdo sounds like a contemporary campaign against smoking: "Hence it is that the lungs of the tobacconist are rotted, the liver spotted, the brain smoked like the backside of the pig-woman's booth here."[90]

Overdo thus offers a puritanism of the body to correspond to Busy's puritanism of the soul. In either case, the result is the same: strict government control over the everyday activities of ordinary people, with prohibition as the ultimate goal. If it is not clear from the way Jonson has the Justice characteristically overdo his tirade against alcohol and tobacco that the playwright is making fun of this health-conscious puritanism, one might recall that Overdo's attack on drinking and smoking is identical to Puritan strictures against theater-going ("it's bad for you," "it wastes your money," and so on). Evidently, by the time he wrote *Bartholomew Fair*, Jonson had begun to wonder whether concern for saving souls and bodies would result in the end of the entertainment business as he knew it.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of Jonson's critique of authority in *Bartholomew Fair* is his anticipation of Hayek's theory about the benefits of dispersing knowledge in society. Overdo's scheme to disguise himself and spy out enormities at the fair is an attempt to gain the knowledge he would actually need to regulate the marketplace. Modeling himself on "a worthy worshipful man,"[91] probably "Thomas Middleton, the reforming Lord

[88]Ibid., II.vi.21–26.

[89]Ibid., II.vi.77–78.

[90]Ibid., II.vi.39–41.

[91]Ibid., II.i.11–12.

Mayor of London in 1613–14,"[92] Overdo uses his masquerade to seek out a synoptic, even a panoptical view of the economic world of London:

> Marry, go you into every alehouse, and down into every cellar; measure the length of puddings, take the gauge of black pots and cans, aye, and custards with a stick; and their circumference with a thread; weigh the loaves of bread on his middle finger; then would he send for 'em, home; give the puddings to the poor, the bread to the hungry, the custards to his children; break the pots and burn the cans himself; he would not trust his corrupt officers; he would do't himself.[93]

As Overdo describes the Mayor's procedures, they seem a model of regulating the economy. He oversees all economic activity in the city, down to the last detail, and he uses his comprehensive knowledge to correct all injustices, with a particular care to redistributing goods to the poor and needy. The actions of Overdo's model are in fact what most people have in mind when they talk about correcting the failures of the market.

But *Bartholomew Fair* is a comedy and Overdo is one of the chief targets of its satire, not a model of enlightened rule in Jonson's eyes. There is something absurd about the Justice's conception of a centrally planned economy. Indeed, he inadvertently reveals the impossibility of the task. For the governors to regulate the economy successfully, they would need knowledge of every detail of its working, all the way down to weighing every single loaf of bread to the ounce.[94] But in fact this knowledge in all its

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[92]Gordon Campbell's note in his edition (*Alchemist*, p. 507, line 12). See also Butler, *Selected Plays*, pp. 137, 530. The claim that the mayor referred to was Thomas Hayes can be found in Horsman, *Bartholomew Fair*, pp. xviii–xix and Michael Jamieson, ed., *Ben Jonson: Three Comedies* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin Books, 1966), pp. 481, 483. Slights (*Art of Secrecy*, pp. 153, 209, n. 14) settles the identification in favor of Middleton. For more on the relevance of the Lord Mayor's activities to *Bartholomew Fair*, see Marcus, *Politics of Mirth*, pp. 39, 272, n. 27.

[93]Ibid., II.i.16–24.

[94]For an example of how specific government regulation and supervision of economic activity could be under the mercantilist principles of the

complexity of detail is never available to any one person or centralized authority, as Jonson's example suggests. The mayor's idea of regulating the economy is to do every job himself, a telling image for the ultimate consequences of government intervention in the economy. The mayor violates the principle of the division of labor, which is the foundation of any advanced economy. In fact, the market works precisely by dispersing knowledge of economic phenomena among a myriad of people and using the pricing mechanism to coordinate their efforts.[95] The central thrust of entrepreneurial activity is the creation, or at least the ferreting out, of economic knowledge, and this process works best precisely when it is not centralized, but pits many individuals against each other in active competition (with success rewarded and failure punished in financial terms).

Old Regime in Europe, see Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), especially this description of how the French government under the minister Colbert regulated the printing industry in the 1660s (p. 186):

> Condemning capitalist "hunger for profit," it stressed the importance of maintaining quality standards, which it defined in great detail. The typeface of three "i"s must be exactly the same in width as one "m," and the "m" must conform precisely to a model "m" deposited with the syndics and deputies of the guild, who were to inspect the thirty-six printing shops once every three months in order to make sure that each contained the requisite minimum of four presses and nine fonts of type, both roman and italic, in good condition.

[95]Leggatt, *English Renaissance Comedy*, p. 150, speaks of the "principle of dispersed attention" in *Bartholomew Fair*. In a very different context, Stallybrass and White make an argument similar to Hayek's: the traditional view of the fair "consigns the subordinate classes to contesting state and class power within a problematic which has positioned them as ignorant, vulgar, uninitiated—as low. In fact 'low' knowledge frequently foregrounds not only the actual conditions of production but also the conditions of bodily pleasure" (*Transgression*, p. 43). If I am reading them correctly, Stallybrass and White are in effect making the point that Austrian economists insist on—that consumers are in a better position than government officials to know what their desires are and how best to satisfy them.

Recognizing this point was Hayek's great contribution to the so-called economic calculation debate concerning socialism, inaugurated by his teacher, Ludwig von Mises, in the 1920s.[96] Without going into the details of this debate, one may say that events in the Soviet Union and elsewhere in the formerly communist world would appear to have vindicated the Austrian economists Mises and Hayek in their claim that true economic calculation is impossible in the absence of open markets and the monetary accounting they make possible. The Soviet economy eventually collapsed precisely because its central planning proved unable to coordinate, or even just to ascertain, all the economic data involved in a modern system of production and distribution. As the Russian economist Yuri Maltsev writes: "When the Soviet government set 22 million prices, 460,000 wage rates, and over 90 million work quotas for 110 million government employees, chaos and shortages were the inevitable result."[97] Living long before the age of Marx, Jonson could not have anticipated the economic calculation debate concerning socialism. But he does point ahead to the core of the Mises-Hayek argument, that would-be government regulators are simply inadequate to the task of overseeing the complex division of labor in a modern economy.

Jonson specifically presents the problem of government regulation of the economy as a problem of knowledge. Overdo's

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[96]The socialist calculation debate began with Mises's essay "Die Wirtschaftsrechnung in sozialistischen Gemeinwesen," published in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaften* 47 (1920). For an English translation by S. Adler of this essay, see Ludwig von Mises, *Economic Calculation in the Socialist Commonwealth* (Auburn, Ala.: Praxeology Press, 1990). For Hayek's key contribution on the problem of knowledge, see his "The Use of Knowledge in Society" in his *Individualism and Economic Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948). This volume also contains several other chapters on the socialist calculation debate (chap. 7–9). For further contributions to the debate from the free market side, see Ludwig von Mises, *Socialism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1951) and vol. 10 in *The Collected Works of Friedrich Hayek, Socialism and War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). For overviews of the socialist calculation debate, see Trygve J.B. Hoff, *Economic Calculation in the Socialist Society* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, 1981) and David Ramsay Steele, *From Marx to Mises: Post-Capitalist Society and the Challenge of Economic Calculation* (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1992).

[97]See Maltsev's foreword to Mises, *Economic Calculation*, p. vi.

model mayor has ambitious plans for restructuring the economy, and yet he himself does not "trust his corrupt officers"; hence he gets involved in the hopeless task of doing everything in the economy by himself. Overdo realizes the limitations of his knowledge as a government official:

> For (alas) as we are public persons, what do we know? Nay, what can we know? We hear with other men's ears; we see with other men's eyes; a foolish constable or a sleepy watchman is all our information; he slanders a gentleman by virtue of his place, as he calls it, and we by the vice of ours, must believe him. . . . This we are subject to, that live in high place; all our intelligence is idle, and most of our intelligencers, knaves; and by your leave, ourselves thought little better, if not arrant fools, for believing 'em.[98]

By impeaching his sources of knowledge, Overdo undermines his authority to regulate the marketplace. Realizing the incompetence and unreliability of the officials he depends on, he ought to realize the futility of his plans. He points out all the reasons why government officials are not in a position to know the relevant economic facts, and his scheme to gain access to that knowledge proves to be a complete and humiliating failure for him. Overdo's noble-sounding vision of an all-seeing and all-knowing government turns out to be a fantasy and a farce. Government officials are limited and fallible human beings themselves and just as likely to make mistakes as merchants in the marketplace. The difference between civil servants and private businessmen is that when a central planner makes a mistake, he is likely to disrupt the whole economy and not just a single business.

VI.

In the eyes of government officialdom, the disguised Overdo appears to be a criminal, and, he, like Wasp and Busy, ends up in the stocks. When he himself is charged with "enormity," Overdo sees the irony of the situation: "Mine own words turned upon me

[98] *Bartholomew Fair*, II.i.24–34.

like swords."[99] The would-be regulators in the play are not happy when they themselves fall under the power of government regulation. Wasp objects to the intrusion of strangers into his business: "Cannot a man quarrel in quietness, but he must be put out on't by you?"[100] When he learns that the intruders are "His Majesty's Watch," Wasp is not pleased with the government's panoptical surveillance: "A body would think, an you watched well o'nights, you should be contented to sleep at this time o'day."[101] Wasp would like a respite from the all-seeing eye of the government. One gets the sense from *Bartholomew Fair* that Jonson, several times the victim of government surveillance himself, sympathized with this position.

The madman Trouble-All provides the inverted mirror image of an all-seeing, all-knowing government. He is the perfect subject of a panoptical regime,[102] the man who will not make a move without express warrant from a government official: "he will do nothing but by Justice Overdo's warrant: he will not eat a crust, nor drink a little, nor make him in his apparel ready. His wife, sir-reverence, cannot get him make his water or shift his shirt without his warrant."[103] Here finally is someone who would presumably heed Overdo's invectives against alcohol and tobacco. But Trouble-All provides the *reductio ad absurdum* of the regulatory ideal. In a total command economy, people would insanely and slavishly refuse to do anything without explicit government approval. Even Overdo is appalled at what he has done to transform Trouble-All into a figure wholly dependent on authority for guidance: "If this be true, this is my greatest disaster!"[104]

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[99]Ibid., III.v.203.

[100]Ibid., IV.iv.147–48.

[101]Ibid., IV.iv.149–52.

[102]Leggatt, *English Renaissance Comedy*, describes Trouble-All as a "citizen of an authoritarian state" and "a figure Kafka might have invented" (pp. 150–51). See also Marcus, *Politics of Mirth*, p. 56. For a contrary view of Trouble-All and his obsession with warrants, see Wilson, *Theaters of Intention*, p. 119.

[103]*Bartholomew Fair*, IV.i.51–54. See also IV.ii.4–5, 86–87, 98–99; IV.vi.4, 114–15.

[104]Ibid., IV.i.55.

Overdo's encounter with Trouble-All begins to teach him a lesson: "I will be more tender hereafter. I see compassion may become a Justice, though it be a weakness, I confess, and nearer a vice than a virtue."[105] Overdo still clings to his moralism here, but he has begun to understand the disastrous consequences of his attempt to impose his vision of law and order on the world. Overdo learns a Hayekian lesson, what one might call the law of unintended consequences: "To see what bad events may peep out o' the tail of good purposes!"[106] Jonson seems to measure his characters by the results of their actions, not their motives. The do-gooders in *Bartholomew Fair* cause most of the difficulties in the play and all the near-disasters. And the reason is that, in Jonson's view, life in general and the marketplace in particular are just too complicated for these simplistic and moralistic regulatory schemes to work successfully. Actions have unanticipated consequences and efforts to control events succeed only in producing disorder and eventually chaos. Overdo must learn to accept life for what it is, admit his own limitations, and abandon his plans for perfecting and reforming the world.[107] As Quarlous tells him in the end: "remember you are but Adam, flesh and blood! You have your frailty; forget your other name of Overdo, and invite us all to supper. There you and I will . . . drown the memory of all enormity in your biggest bowl at home."[108] Jonson presents the festive spirit of comedy as the triumph of humanity and freedom over petty moralism and officious government.[109]

With its carnival atmosphere, *Bartholomew Fair* ends up celebrating the libertarian and even libertine spirit of comedy.[110]

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[105]Ibid., IV.i.73–75.

[106]Ibid., III.iii.12–13. On the importance of the "unintended result" in the play, see Levin, *Multiple Plot*, p. 211.

[107]See Horsman, *Bartholomew Fair*, p. xii.

[108]*Bartholomew Fair*, V.vi.93–97.

[109]See Barish, *Prose Comedy*, p. 236 and Maus, *Roman Frame*, p. 134. For a classic study of the festive spirit of comedy, see C. L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1959).

[110]For the importance of carnival elements in *Bartholomew Fair*, and an application of M.M. Bakhtin's influential theory of the carnivalesque to the play, see Stallybrass and White, *Transgression*, pp. 59–79.

Comedies focus on the satisfaction of desire, allowing audiences to see their dreams acted out on stage and thus to indulge in a fantasy of wish fulfillment. In a typical romantic comedy, for example, all the obstacles in the way of the young lovers consummating their passion must be removed.[111] As in *Bartholomew Fair*, the various blocking agents standing in the way of the fulfillment of desire must be defeated, usually by making them look ridiculous. Authority figures like parents, priests, and judges—who claim to represent law and order—must yield to the kaleidoscopic play of desire. From the standpoint of traditional authority, this outcome appears to mark the collapse of order and an outbreak of chaos. But in the world of comedy, the apparently chaotic power of desire turns out to represent the force of life itself, and thus to answer to a deeper form of order, an organic, natural, or spontaneous order. In comedy, the artificial rigidity of law must yield to the natural flexibility of desire, or risk stultifying basic human impulses.

Hence a comedy like *Bartholomew Fair* affirms the comic virtues of flexibility, adaptability, and even pliancy—exactly the virtues of the marketplace, as Jonson discovers. The active participants in the fair are always willing to go with the flow, never letting principles stand in the way of their enjoyment of life. By contrast, the men of principle in the play do wish to interfere with the free satisfaction of basic human desires (which they regard as evil, sinful, or illegal). Busy, with his fanatical devotion to religious dogma, and Overdo, with his obsession with the moral absolute of justice, would be more at home in the world of tragedy, where integrity and uncompromising principles are regarded as the true virtues. But what is celebrated as integrity in tragedy is laughed at as stubborness in comedy. As we have seen, both Busy and Overdo must learn to abandon their strict adherence to their principles for them to be reintegrated into society and for a comic outcome to prevail. They must learn to recognize their own limitations as human beings, and the limitations of their principles, in order to be civil—to get along with their fellow citizens in a peaceful society.

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[111]For a synoptic analysis of comic form, see Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (New York: Atheneum, 1966), pp. 163–86.

In short, in *Bartholomew Fair* the unbending men of principle must learn to bend their principles in the spirit of comedy. Busy and Overdo ultimately prove to be comic figures because, unlike tragic figures, they are unwilling to die for their principles, or even to suffer for them very long. Indeed, they are in the end exposed to be frauds—would-be tragic heroes in a comic world—pretentious overreachers who are not what they claim to be.[112] Far from being raised above the ordinary level of humanity, they turn out to be quite ordinary themselves, sharing the desires and foibles of the people they wished to lord over. In the typical pattern of comedy, *Bartholomew Fair* shows society reassimilating into its ranks the men who initially but falsely claimed to stand above their fellow citizens. What is distinctive about *Bartholomew Fair* is the fact that Jonson portrays this process as specifically a matter of assimilating to a *marketplace*—Busy and Overdo must learn to join in the fun of the fair. Indeed, in this play Jonson presents a marketplace as an epitome of society, and the principle of comedy—the idea that the common element of desire in humanity provides the basis for sociability—turns out to be the principle of the market as well. Insofar as the market, like comedy, is devoted to the satisfaction of desire, one might say that Jonson suggests in *Bartholomew Fair* that the principle of the market is the principle of comedy.[113]

In the spirit of comic flexibility, Jonson develops a thoroughgoing critique of the rigidity of law in *Bartholomew Fair*. The spokesmen for authority in *Bartholomew Fair* want to contrast the ordered and stable world of law with the chaotic and unstable world of the marketplace. But Jonson's satiric view of the would-be regulators suggests a different perspective. He seems to contrast the rigid and stultifying world of law with the fluid and vibrant world of the marketplace. As happens in many comedies,

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[112]For this understanding of the relation of comedy to tragedy, see José Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on Quixote*, Evelyn Rugg and Diego Marín, trans. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961), pp. 156–59.

[113]The principle that unites comedy and the market may appear to be paradoxical—the principle that one should have no principles. To formulate this idea more accurately: one should always be willing to bend one's principles if they stand in the way of the proper enjoyment of life.

in *Bartholomew Fair* Jonson portrays the dead weight of the law as the obstacle standing in the way of the characters satisfying their normal human desires. The law appears in the first speech in the play proper, in stilted legal language: "Here's Master Bartholomew Cokes, of Harrow o'the hill, i'the county of Middlesex, Esquire, takes forth his license to marry Mistress Grace Wellborn of the said place and county."[114] The first manifestation of the power of law in *Bartholomew Fair* significantly takes the form of a marriage license.[115] The law seeks to regulate the free play of erotic desire, to confine it to acceptable and predictable channels. Jonson emphasizes the way the law gives power to some human beings to dispose of the lives of others, with men usually ruling over women, and parents over children. He makes one of the marriage plots turn on the fact that Grace Wellborn is the legal ward of Adam Overdo, and thus his to dispose of in marriage.[116] In Grace's statement of her position, Jonson stresses the arbitrariness of her status and her dissatisfaction with it. When asked how she became Overdo's ward, Grace bitterly replies: "Faith, through a common calamity: he bought me, sir; and now he will marry me to his wife's brother, . . . or else I must pay value o' my land."[117] Evidently, human beings are bought and sold in the legal world just as commodities are bought and sold in the marketplace.[118] Far from providing an alternative to the venality of the market, the law seems to operate according to the same formula. Indeed, in Jonson's presentation, the law seems worse than the market. It gives people the right to buy and sell other human beings, not just commodities.

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[114]*Bartholomew Fair*, I.i.3–5.

[115]On the importance of the marriage license in the play, see Sanders, *Theatrical Republics*, pp. 90–91 and Slights, *Art of Secrecy*, pp. 161–62. On the importance of the word *license* in the play, and its ambiguity, see Ian McAdam, "The Puritan Dialectic of Law and Grace in *Bartholomew Fair*," *Studies in English Literature* 46 (2006): 425.

[116]On the issue of legal wards in the play, see Wilson, *Theaters of Intention*, pp. 131–34.

[117]*Bartholomew Fair*, III.v.260–62.

[118]Leggatt, *English Renaissance Comedy*, p. 145.

Women especially do not fare well in the legal world of *Bartholomew Fair*. In their homes, they seem to be the chattel property of their husbands, fathers, and guardians. That perhaps explains why the women in the play are particularly eager to go to the fair. For them, entering the marketplace represents a kind of liberation. Jonson suggests this point comically when several of the women quite literally enter the marketplace—that is, are enlisted into prostitution. He certainly is not advocating prostitution as a way of life, but he approaches the subject with greater freedom and less moralism than Justice Overdo does. Half jokingly, Jonson has the bawd Captain Whit try to teach Win Littlewit that she ought to prefer the life of a prostitute to that of a married woman: "de honest woman's life is a scurvy dull life."[119] The chief reason Whit offers for his claim is that a wife leads "de leef of a bondwoman," whereas he tells Win: "I vill make tee a freewoman."[120] The cutpurse Edgworth reinforces the point to Win later in the play: "Is not this a finer life, lady, than to be clogged with a husband?"[121] In *Bartholomew Fair*, the legal institution of marriage is presented as a form of slavery, while entering the marketplace as a prostitute appears to be a form of freedom.

Viewed from one perspective, prostitution is one of the chief vices of the fair, but in the full context of the play, it is difficult for the advocates of law and order to use prostitution as an argument against the marketplace. Jonson does everything he can to efface the distinction between prostitutes and married women, as he shows men buying women in marriage.[122] Quarlous thinks of the legal institution as in fact a way to marry money itself:

> Why should not I marry this six thousand pound. . . ? And a good trade too, that she has beside, ha?. . . It is money that I want; why should I not marry the money,

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[119]*Bartholomew Fair*, IV.v.26–27.

[120]Ibid., IV.v.29–30.

[121]Ibid., V.iv.53–54.

[122]See Leggatt, *English Renaissance Comedy*, p. 147, Slights, *Art of Secrecy*, pp. 160, 163, 166, Bruster, *Drama and the Market*, pp. 42–43, 57, and Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, p. 129.

> when 'tis offered me? I have a license and all; it is but razing out one name and putting in another.[123]

Quarlous also reveals the arbitrariness of legal documents: they are supposed to embody the sanctity of the law, but it is an easy matter to doctor them.[124] Depending on how the writing is altered, a legal document can mean almost anything. There are a number of "blank checks" in the form of legal documents circulating in *Bartholomew Fair*,[125] including the open warrant that Overdo thinks he is giving to the madman Trouble-All but that actually falls into the hands of Quarlous. He immediately grasps the possibilities of having the justice's signature on a blank document: "Why should not I ha' the conscience to make this a bond of a thousand pound, now?"[126] But Quarlous finds a better use for this blank document: to certify transferring Grace as a ward from Overdo to himself. Thus, he, not Overdo, becomes the beneficiary when Grace must pay money to her guardian for the right to marry Winwife.

Jonson's criticism of the law is double-edged. On the one hand, the law appears to be too rigid; with its iron hand, it tries to define all human relationships, and keep people confined to the straight and narrow path. But on the other hand, the law appears to be too flexible and arbitrary; with a stroke of a pen, a man can alter a legal document and redefine a human relationship. Ultimately, in Jonson's portrayal the problem with the law is its mindless legalism. The law tries to codify the fluidity of life into binding rules, but as Jonson shows in *Bartholomew Fair*, once a legal document is written down, it can all too easily be rewritten. As Jonson presents it, the law seems to alternate between defining the terms of human life too tightly and defining them too loosely.[127]

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[123]*Bartholomew Fair*, V.ii.69–75.

[124]For good discussions of the dubious status of legal documents in the play, see Slights, *Art of Secrecy*, pp. 154, 170, and Marcus, *Politics of Mirth*, p. 40.

[125]See Leggatt, *English Renaissance Comedy*, p. 140.

[126]*Bartholomew Fair*, V.ii.112–13.

[127]See McAdam, "Puritan Dialectic," especially p. 415: "The play suggests the need, in human social life, for a balance between too much law and too little law."

Indeed, in its effort to be absolute, the law ends up looking arbitrary. Thus, in *Bartholomew Fair* efforts to impose order through law repeatedly have the opposite effect—they create chaos. By interfering with the spontaneous order of the marketplace and the free play of desire, the law ultimately undermines its own authority and threatens to disrupt the foundations of society.

VII.

The fact that Jonson develops such a thoroughgoing critique of the law and its representatives in *Bartholomew Fair* does not mean that he is blind to the failings of the marketplace. On the contrary, as we have seen, he is well-aware of all the shortcomings of the fair and the emerging market economy it represents—if anything, he exaggerates them. But when Jonson compares the would-be regulators of the market with the people they wish to regulate, on balance he seems to side with the latter. On the whole, the apparently unregulated markets of the fair stand for order in the play, while their would-be regulators actually prove to be the motive forces for disorder. Jonson presents the merchants as generally cooperating with one another, if only in schemes to defraud and rob their customers.[128] They are of course not saints, but they are not quite sinners either; at least they are not as evil as Busy and Overdo claim they are. Many of the merchants provide legitimate goods and services to their customers and Jonson presents the fair as a life-enhancing force. After all, people flock to it voluntarily and thus it must be performing some sort of service to the community.

By contrast, the characters who try to shut down the fair are the spoilsports of the play, and must be defeated for the comic ending to be possible. In seeking to please the public, the fair may cater too much for Jonson's taste to the baser appetites of the London populace. And yet all that the opponents of the fair have to set against these natural desires is their anger and their moral indignation, as Wasp, Busy, and Overdo repeatedly prove. And

[128]See Haynes, *Social Relations*, p. 124: "all the crimes are committed by a *team*."

in Jonson's portrayal, this anger turns out to be just as irrational as desire and more socially disruptive. As we have seen, Jonson suggests at several points that religious and moral hostility to the marketplace easily translates into a revolutionary impulse and may in fact tear the fabric of society apart.

In earlier plays such as *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*, Jonson had dwelled upon the ways in which the emerging market economy was itself a revolutionary force, threatening to upset the settled order of society and above all to overthrow the social hierarchy by making poor men rich and rich men poor. But in *Bartholomew Fair*, Jonson appears to rethink his view of the social effects of the market economy, or at least to refine it. He now dwells on the ways in which the market allows people to negotiate their differences and thus actually helps to bring them together. The market provides an image of social harmony in *Bartholomew Fair*, not a harmony without conflict, but one in which the tensions among the characters can be worked out as the participants in the fair come to realize their common economic interests.

Jonson shows the way the market tends to level differences. Bartholomew Fair is a place where people from all walks of life meet and interact freely.[129] The market does a particularly good job of reducing social pretensions. Winwife tries to put on airs when he first comes to the fair and acts as if the commercial world were beneath him: "That these people should be so ignorant to think us chapmen for 'em! Do we look as if we would buy gingerbread? Or hobby-horses?"[130] But Quarlous points out that to enter the fair is to accept it on its own terms and acknowledge

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[129]See Barish, *Prose Comedy*, pp. 189, 231. Horsman (*Bartholomew Fair*, p. 189) quotes a near contemporary description of the fair (1641):

> Hither resort people of all sorts, High and Low, Rich and Poore, from cities, townes, and countrys; of all sects, Papists, Atheists, Anabaptists, and Brownists: and of all conditions, good and bad, vertuous and vitious, Knaves and fooles, Cuckolds and Cuckoldmakers, Bauds, and Whores, Pimpes and Panders, Rogues and Rascalls, the little Loud-one and the witty wanton.

[130]*Bartholomew Fair*, II.v.10–12.

kinship with the rest of the customers: "Why, they know no better ware than they have, nor better customers than come. And our very being here makes us fit to be demanded as well as others."[131] In fact the only people the fair works to exclude are zealots like Busy and Overdo who will not accept its terms and admit their common humanity. Unlike the merchants, they are uncompromising and refuse to negotiate their differences with others.[132] By contrast, in the fair, money provides a common currency by means of which people can settle their accounts, financial and otherwise.

Jonson's new-found sympathy for the marketplace seems to have grown out of his recognition that his theater world was inextricably intertwined with the emerging market economy of his day. *Bartholomew Fair* reflects Jonson's insight that the theater is a kind of marketplace and the marketplace a kind of theater. The impossibility of separating the theater from the marketplace is central to Jonson's conception of *Bartholomew Fair*.[133] The fair itself is highly theatrical, with the merchants hawking their wares in colorful and dramatic ways. Twice Jonson has advertisements for common products like rattles, drums, hobby-horses, mousetraps, pears, and gingerbread blend right into

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[131]Ibid., II.v.13–15.

[132]Slights (*Art of Secrecy*, pp. 160–61) makes a similar point and in support of it quotes the *Table-Talk* of Jonson's friend John Selden:

> Disputes in Religion will never be ended, because there wants a Measure by which the Business would be decided: The Puritan would be judged by the Word of God: If he would speak clearly, he means himself. . . . Ben Johnson Satyrically express'd the vain Disputes of Divines by *Inigo Lanthorne*, disputing with his puppet in a *Bartholomew Fair*. It is so; It is not so: It is so, It is not so, crying thus one to another a quarter of an Hour together.

[133]See Maus, *Roman Frame*, p. 155: "he argues that since theatricality is everywhere it is pointless to object to the stage as if it presented a unique moral threat." See also Marcus, *Politics of Mirth*, p. 43, Wilson, *Theaters of Intention*, p. 140, and Wayne, "Drama and Society," pp. 105–08. The connection between the theater and the marketplace is the central theme of Agnew's *Worlds Apart*; see especially pp. ix–x, 12, 60.

advertisements for ballads,[134] as if to suggest that art is merchandised at the fair like any other commodity. The ballad-singer Nightingale turns out to be in league with the cutpurse Edgworth. According to Edgworth's instructions, Nightingale helps distract potential victims with his songs while the cutpurse robs them, and he also helps dispose of stolen goods.[135] Far from trying to suggest that art stands apart from the marketplace, Jonson shows the artistic figures in the play deeply implicated in even the most dubious commercial activities at the fair.

At the same time, Jonson goes out of his way to describe the criminal activity at the fair in theatrical terms. Quarlous views Edgworth's robberies on the model of a drama: "We had wonderful ill luck to miss this prologue o' the purse, but the best is we shall have five acts of him ere night."[136] Edgworth himself thinks of his thievery in theatrical terms. That is why he insists on having Winwife present to view his pickpocketing of Cokes: "except you would go with me and see't, it's not worth speaking on. The act is nothing without a witness."[137] Edgworth is a curiously artistic pickpocket. Instead of operating in secret as one would expect, he seeks a public for his crimes to put his skill on display. Throughout *Bartholomew Fair*, art seems to blend imperceptibly into crime and crime into art.

Batholomew Fair culminates in the staging of Littlewit's play at the puppet theater, thus firmly bringing the world of drama within the world of the fair. And Jonson does not pull any punches. He portrays the puppet theater operating according to the same questionable business ethic that prevails throughout the fair. Lantern Leatherhead, a hobby-horse seller who doubles as the puppet master, reveals that the entertainment industry advertises as aggressively as anyone at the fair: "Out with the sign of our invention, in the name of wit, and do you beat the drum the while."[138] The theater is in the business of making

[134]*Bartholomew Fair*, II.ii.28–40, II.iv.3–19.

[135]Ibid., II.iv.35–38.

[136]Ibid., III.ii.1–3.

[137]Ibid., IV.iii.98–99.

[138]Ibid., V.i.1–3.

money and the more money the better. When Leatherhead tells his box-office assistant Sharkwell: "An there come any gentlefolks, take twopence a piece," his sidekick ups the ante: "I warrant you, sir, threepence an we can."[139] In the event, Cokes, fool that he is, insists on gentlemanly profligacy and offers to pay "twelvepence" to see the play,[140] which, curiously enough, turns out to be the going rate for prostitutes at the fair as well.[141] Cokes expects to see the same products merchandised at the theater that are available elsewhere in the marketplace: "Ha'you none of your pretty impudent boys now, to bring stools, fill tobacco, fetch ale, and beg money, as they have at other houses?"[142]

While the theater operators at the fair are constantly trying to raise their prices, Jonson also shows them cheapening their product. Jonson has no illusions about the artistic merits of the plays staged at the puppet theater. Since Leatherhead is interested only in making money, his sole consideration is what the public wants to see and he will do anything to avoid a box-office disaster: "All the fowl i' the Fair, I mean all the dirt in Smithfield, . . . will be thrown at our banners today, if the matter does not please the people."[143] Jonson makes it clear that Leatherhead's insistence on catering to the theater-going public keeps his artistic standards low: "*The Gunpowder Plot*, there was a get-penny! I have presented that to an eighteen- or twenty-pence audience nine times in an afternoon. Your home-born projects prove ever the best; they are so easy and familiar. They put too much learning in their things nowadays, and that I fear will be the spoil o' this."[144]

To maximize his profits, Leatherhead targets the lowest common denominator in his potential audience. He wants to give the public something simple and familiar. Thus, when he stages a play about Hero and Leander, he refuses to remain faithful to

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[139]Ibid., V.i.19–21.

[140]Ibid., V.iii.37. See Sanders, *Theatrical Republics*, p. 102 and Wilson, *Theaters of Intention*, pp. 145–46.

[141]Ibid., V.iv.49.

[142]Ibid., V.iii.56–58.

[143]Ibid., V.i.3–5.

[144]Ibid., V.i.10–15.

Christopher Marlowe's elegant version of the story: "that is too learned and poetical for our audience. What do they know what Hellespont is? 'Guilty of true love's blood'? Or what Abydos is? Or 'the other Sestos hight'?"[145] Leatherhead adapts the story to the capacity and interests of his audience: "I have entreated Master Littlewit to take a little pains to reduce it to a more familiar strain for our people."[146] The result is what can best be described as an adulterated version of the Hero and Leander story, as Littlewit explains:

> I have only made it a little easy and modern for the times . . . ; as, for the Hellespont, I imagine our Thames here; and then Leander, I make a dyer's son, about Puddle Wharf; and Hero a wench o' the Bankside, who going over one morning to Old Fish Street, Leander spies her at Trig Stairs, and falls in love with her.[147]

Jonson shows the principle of adulterating products just as much at work in the theater as elsewhere in the fair.[148] By having the classical story of Hero and Leander modernized, Leatherhead cheapens it and corrupts it, solely with a view to box-office receipts and with no regard for aesthetic considerations. It is difficult to imagine how Jonson could have given a portrait of the commercial theater more negative than what he offers in *Bartholomew Fair*. The actual puppet play is as lame as the Pyramus and Thisbe interlude in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, filled with couplets like this:

> *O Leander, Leander, my dear, my dear Leander,*
> *I'll for ever be thy goose, so thou'lt be my gander.*[149]

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[145]Ibid., V.iii.97–100. On Jonson's use of Marlowe, see James Shapiro, *Rival Playwrights: Marlowe, Jonson, Shakespeare* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 68–70.

[146]Ibid., V.iii.102–03.

[147]Ibid., V.iii.106–111.

[148]See Butler, *Selected Plays*, pp. 530–31, Marcus, *Politics of Mirth*, p. 46, Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, p. 118, and Sanders, *Theatrical Republics*, pp. 102–03.

[149]*Bartholomew Fair*, V.iv.275–76.

But despite portraying the theater as negatively as possible in *Bartholomew Fair*, Jonson chooses to defend it against its critics.[150] By portraying what is in effect a worst-case scenario, he is able to make his point clearer—any theater is better than no theater at all. Jonson sees that to come to the defense of the theater, he cannot simply champion good drama; he must defend the theater as such, and that must include the commercial world of bad drama.[151] Of course, he could not forego the opportunity to have some fun at the expense of his fellow playwrights in *Bartholomew Fair*, as he had been doing throughout his dramatic career.[152] As we have seen, for much of his life he tried to distance himself from the commercial theater, and prove that he was above the need to cater to the general public, and hence capable of writing with aristocratic taste in view. The fact that *Bartholomew Fair* was staged at court suggests that Jonson was using the opportunity to continue to mock the popular taste of the commercial theaters.[153] But for once Jonson chooses to moderate and mitigate his critique of the commercial theater, as if he had come to appreciate how much it had contributed to his own success. In fact his greatest plays were written for the commercial theater, and if at times the general public forced him to compromise his aesthetic principles, it also spurred him on to his highest artistic achievements.

Accordingly, for all Jonson's own criticism of the theater in *Bartholomew Fair*, the theater people come off better than do their vocal critics in the play. It is as if Jonson is closing ranks with his fellow dramatists, even the incompetents among them, against the rising opposition to the theater as such, led by the Puritans. As is the case in Jonson's treatment of the marketplace in general,

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[150]See Horsman, *Bartholomew Fair*, p. xvii and Barish, *Prose Comedy*, p. 230.

[151]See Waith, *Bartholomew Fair*, p. 17, Barish, *Prose Comedy*, pp. 234–36, 238–39, and Gibbons, *City Comedy*, p. 190: "it is this whole tradition, from the great Morality play to the crudest Popular farce . . . that Jonson sets out to defend: and if the ballads are banned, it will be only a matter of time before *The Alchemist* is banned too."

[152]For the possibility that Jonson was using the puppet show to make fun specifically of his masque collaborator Inigo Jones, see Riggs, *Jonson*, pp. 193–95.

[153]See Sanders, *Theatrical Republics*, p. 103.

those who try to regulate the theater turn out to be more vicious than the people they are trying to regulate. As Cokes says of the theater people, "they are a civil company."[154] They are just trying to entertain the public, and, even though they are artistically inadequate, they evidently succeed in pleasing their audience. They may in some sense overcharge for their services, but in the end in Jonson's view they harm no one. By contrast, Jonson portrays the anti-theatrical forces in the play in a much more negative light. He presents them as meddlesome and self-important, concerned chiefly with their own ends and not the welfare of the public they claim to be defending. They represent a far greater threat to the integrity of art than the simple incompetence of the puppeteers.

Indeed, Jonson offers the anti-theater arguments in *Bartholomew Fair* as the culmination and the *reductio ad absurdum* of the anti-marketplace arguments, and it is of course Busy's Puritanism that leads the way to absurdity. Distrust of money-making and advertising, of sharp practices and commercial activity in general, eventually leads to condemnation of the theater. For Busy the theater is a "heathenish idol" and the theatrical "profession" is "damnable."[155] He vents all the typical Puritan charges against the theater, but to cut him down to size, Jonson has him make his accusations to a puppet. As Quarlous says: "I know no fitter match than a puppet to commit with an hypocrite!"[156] Busy exchanges arguments with the Puppet Dionysius, building up to his chief charge against the theater: "my main argument against you is that you are an abomination; for the male among you putteth on the apparel of the female, and the female of the male."[157] This accusation proves to be Busy's downfall, for the puppet has an easy answer to it: "*It is your old stale argument against the players, but it will not hold against the puppets,*

[154]*Bartholomew Fair*, V.iii.84.

[155]Ibid., V.v.4–5, 18–19.

[156]Ibid., V.v. 43–44. Other editions, including Waith, Butler, and Jamieson, attribute this line to Grace, but that would make no difference to the point I am making.

[157]Ibid., V.v.86–88.

for we have neither male nor female amongst us."[158] Pulling up his garment, the Puppet Dionysius reveals that he has no sexual organs whatsoever and thus cannot be accused of cross-dressing. As is only appropriate, the Puritan Busy is defeated by his own literalism.[159] Unable to distinguish illusion from reality, he has all along refused to acknowledge that the theater is harmless because it is a make-believe world.[160] Leatherhead had already allayed Cokes's concern that the puppets might be hurting each other: "Between you and I, sir, we do but make show."[161] The Puppet Dionysius finally forces Busy to face the facts; his opposition to the theater suddenly collapses and he is willing to join the ranks of the audience: "Let it go on, for I am changed, and will become a beholder with you!"[162]

But even after Busy gets his comeuppance, Jonson has one more enemy of the theater to expose and defeat. Busy represents the religious opposition to the theater; Overdo represents the political,[163] and as Busy falls, the Justice rises to pronounce sentence on the puppet show as a prime example of "enormity" at the fair.[164] Throughout the play, Overdo has been suspicious of any kind of artistic activity, especially of poetry.[165] Although he mistakenly thinks Edgworth is an honest young man, he is troubled by the fact that he associates with the ballad-singer Nightingale: "I begin shrewdly to suspect their familiarity; and the young man of a terrible taint, poetry! With which idle disease, if he be infected, there's no hope of him in a state-course."[166] Obsessed with his narrow conception of justice, Overdo always allows political considerations to override artistic, and hence

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[158]Ibid., V.v.90–92.

[159]See Slights, *Art of Secrecy*, p. 161.

[160]See Barish, *Prose Comedy*, p. 237 and Maus, *Roman Frame*, p. 154.

[161]*Bartholomew Fair*, V.iv.260.

[162]Ibid., V.v.104–05.

[163]See Barish, *Prose Comedy*, pp. 209–10.

[164]*Bartholomew Fair*, V.v.112.

[165]See Butler, *Selected Plays*, p. 531, and Sanders, *Theatrical Republics*, pp. 97–98.

[166]*Bartholomew Fair*, III.v.4–7.

there is no room for poetry in his life.[167] The only poem he claims to like is Nightingale's "A Caveat against cutpurses," because it seems to aid Overdo's investigation into criminality at the fair: "It doth discover enormity, I'll mark it more; I ha' not liked a paltry piece of poetry so well a good while."[168]

Overdo will accept poetry only when it serves a simple moral purpose. Hence he despises the commercial theater and attacks Leatherhead as a "profane professor of puppetry, little better than poetry."[169] Fortunately for the theater, just as Overdo is about to pass judgment on it, he discovers that the puppeteers are mixed up with the prostitutes at the fair and his own wife is among the prostitutes. Finally recognizing the folly of his position, Overdo is reconciled to the theater and even invites the actors to his home for supper with his last words in the play.[170] Jonson's suspicion of religious and political authority in *Bartholomew Fair* ultimately seems to be rooted in their common hostility to poetry and drama. He is skeptical of anyone who sets himself up to "give the law to all the poets."[171] And he seems to have realized that hostility to poetry and hostility to the marketplace go hand in hand, for the two realms cater to ordinary human desires, and indeed the theater is only a special case of the marketplace.

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[167]See Slights, *Art of Secrecy*, p. 150.

[168]*Bartholomew Fair*, III.v.110–11. Ironically, although Overdo thinks that Nightingale's ballad is a genuine warning against cutpurses, it is in fact part of Edgworth's plan to distract Cokes while his purse is stolen. Even more ironically, earlier in the play it is Overdo's own moralistic sermon against alcohol and tobacco that provides the diversion Edgworth needs to steal Cokes's purse. See Gibbons, *City Comedy*, p. 183 and Slights, *Art of Secrecy*, pp. 164–65.

[169]*Bartholomew Fair*, V.vi.39.

[170]Ibid., V.vi.106–08.

[171]Ibid., I.i.35.

VIII.

Overdo's reconciliation with the theater world seems to reflect Jonson's own. In some respects, Overdo may be a satiric self-portrait on Jonson's part.[172] Like his creator, Overdo is fond of showing off his learning and quoting Latin, especially classical poets such as Horace.[173] Again like his creator, Overdo fancies himself a moral reformer, and perhaps in Jonson's portrayal of the Justice getting carried away with his quest to spy out enormities in the world, he was trying to teach himself a lesson. Like Overdo, Jonson seems to be learning in the course of *Bartholomew Fair* that he should go easier on humanity.[174] Above all, Jonson seems to abandon his longstanding quarrel with the commercial theater and seeks to make his peace with his audience. In a stroke of genius, Jonson chose to image his reconciliation with the commercial theater in the form of a legal contract.

In the induction to *Bartholomew Fair*, the audience learns that the play will not begin until they agree to "certain articles drawn out in haste between our author and you."[175] A scrivener comes out on stage to read the contract to the audience, a document loaded with as much legalese as Jonson could muster:

> Articles of Agreement indented between the spectators or hearers at the Hope on the Bankside in the county of Surrey on the one party; and the author of *Bartholomew Fair* in the said place and county on the other party; the one and thirtieth day of October 1614, and in the twelfth year of the reign of our Sovereign Lord, James, by the grace of God King of England, France, and Ireland, Defender of the Faith. And of Scotland the seven and fortieth.[176]

Here Jonson hits upon a form of law that can work in favor of the marketplace in general and the theater in particular. In the

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[172]See Riggs, *Jonson*, p. 207 and Barish, *Prose Comedy*, pp. 212–13.

[173]See, for example, *Bartholomew Fair*, II.i.5, V.vi.106–07.

[174]Ibid., V.vi.106–07.

[175]Ibid., Ind., ll. 34–35.

[176]Ibid., Ind., ll. 58–64.

statutes of the criminal law, the state stands above its citizens and tells them what they can and cannot do. By contrast, contracts are a matter of civil law and are drawn up between consenting parties, who agree to matters of mutual benefit. In many respects, the contract is the very heart and soul of the marketplace: two parties agreeing to an exchange of goods or services of their own free will and without any government compulsion (except perhaps to enforce the contract).

Living in a commercial society today, we are so used to the power of contracts that it is hard for us to realize that there ever was a time when they represented a new and mysterious force in the world. But in fact, as Sir Henry Sumner Maine argued, the movement from feudalism to capitalism, from the medieval to the modern world, was largely a matter of moving from status to contract, from people having their relations defined for them by their birth to people being able to negotiate and hence change their place in society.[177] One can see the "shock of the new" with regard to contracts at several points in English Renaissance drama, most notably in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, where a contract appears as something mysterious, magical, and downright diabolical.[178] We think contemporary audiences must have been struck by the fact that Faustus makes a contract with the *devil*, but in some respects they may have been more in awe of the fact that the doctor *makes a contract* with the devil. After all, sixteenth-century audiences were familiar with the devil, but a contract was something new to them, and represented a revolutionary force in their day, the power of market exchange to undermine the medieval world. As Jonson does in *Bartholomew Fair*, Marlowe played up his use of legal language on the stage, mesmerizing his audience with what for them was the new hocus-pocus and mumbo-jumbo of contractual relations. Doctor Faustus is a prime

[177]See Sir Henry Sumner Maine, *Ancient Law: Its Connection with the Early History of Society and Its Relation to Modern Ideas* (1861; rpt. Buffalo: William S. Hein, 1983), p. 174.

[178]I develop this point at length in "The Contract from Hell: Corruption in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*," *Private and Public Corruption*, William C. Heffernan and John Kleinig, eds. (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), especially pp. 85–88.

example of the glories and dangers of moving from status to contract. He refuses to accept the status in society into which he was born, and instead contracts with a powerful party to improve his condition and rise in the world. But his new contractual freedom turns out to be the cause of his damnation.

While Marlowe exploits the tragic possibilities created by the new power of contract in the Renaissance, Jonson develops the comic possibilities in his induction to *Bartholomew Fair*.[179] Faustus seeks to rise above his fellow human beings by the power of contract; Jonson as author seeks to effect a reconciliation with his audience by forming a contractual relationship with them.[180] A contract always involves a *quid pro quo*; the audience will give something and Jonson will give something in return:

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[179]On the importance of the issue of contract in Jonson's day, see Wayne, "Drama and Society," pp. 118–20 and the detailed discussion in Wilson, *Theaters of Intention*, pp. 68–113. As Wayne and Wilson show, many of the fundamental legal issues regarding the status of contracts were being adjudicated in the English courts during Jonson's lifetime.

[180]For the importance of this contract in the context of contemporary legal developments, see Wilson, *Theaters of Intention*, pp. 106–13, Craig Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation: The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England* (New York: St. Martin's, 1998), pp. 315–18, and Bruster, *Drama and the Market*, pp. 7–8. For different and more negative interpretations of this contract, see Riggs, *Jonson*, pp. 209–10, Marcus, *Politics of Mirth*, p. 61, Wayne, "Drama and Society," pp. 115–16, McLuskie, "Making and Buying," pp. 137–38, and especially Stallybrass and White, *Transgression*, pp. 69–70. The problem with the Stallybrass and White interpretation is revealed on p. 70, where they confuse the realm of private contracts, freely entered into, with the realm of government warrants, imposed on people from above. For a positive interpretation of the "contract" between Renaissance playwrights and their audience, with regard to *Bartholomew Fair* in particular and Renaissance theater in general, see Agnew, *Worlds Apart*, pp. 110–11, 119–21, and especially p. 11:

> The theater not only mimed new social relations within the visible framework of the old: it improvised—as a matter of its own constitutive conventions—a new social contract between itself and its audience, a new set of conditions for the suspension of disbelief that became over time the preconditions of most modern drama.

> It is covenanted and agreed, by and between the parties abovesaid, that the said spectators and hearers, as well the curious and envious as the favouring and judicious, as also the grounded judgments and understandings, do for themselves severally covenant and agree, to remain in the places their money or friends have put them in, with patience, for the space of two hours and a half, and somewhat more. In which time the author promiseth to present them, by us, with a new sufficient play called *Bartholomew Fair*, merry, and as full of noise as sport; made to delight all, and to offend none, provided they have either the wit or the honesty to think well of themselves.[181]

In short, if the audience behaves and pays for their tickets, Jonson contracts to entertain them. But Jonson being Jonson, he is not quite prepared to meet his audience halfway. As the terms of the contract unfold, he is much more detailed about the audience's obligations than his own as author.[182] The contract is very specific about the audience's financial commitments:

> It is further agreed that every person here have his or their freewill of censure, to like or dislike at their own charge, the author having now departed with his right it shall be lawful for any man to judge his six pen'orth, his twelve pen'orth, so to his eighteen pence, two shillings, half a crown, to the value of his place, provided always his place get not above his wit. And if he pay for half a dozen, he may censure for all them too, so that he will undertake that they shall be silent.[183]

Jonson insists that the audience's right to criticize him shall be in direct proportion to their exact monetary contribution. Even when he is trying to be reconciled with his audience, he cannot help making fun of their bad taste. He ridicules the fickle opinions of the audience and pays them a dubious compliment:

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[181] *Bartholomew Fair*, Ind., ll. 65–75.

[182] See Haynes, *Social Relations*, pp. 131–35 and Paul Yachnin, *Stage-Wrights: Shakespeare, Jonson, Middleton, and the Making of Theatrical Values* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), p. 88.

[183] *Bartholomew Fair*, Ind., ll. 76–83.

> He that will swear, *Jeronimo* or *Andronicus* are the best plays, yet shall pass unexcepted at, here, as a man whose judgement shows it is constant, and hath stood still these five and twenty or thirty years. Though it be an ignorance, it is a virtuous and staid ignorance; and next to truth, a confirmed error does well; such a one the author knows where to find him.[184]

Jonson uses the induction to air his many grievances with the London audience, for example, the fact that their taste is hopelessly out-of-date and they fail to keep up with new developments in drama, such as his own plays.

In a swipe at Shakespeare's recent plays, including *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*,[185] Jonson insists that he is above the absurdities other dramatists use to please the crowd:

> He is loath to make Nature afraid in his plays, like those that beget Tales, Tempests, and such like drolleries, to mix his head with other men's heels, let the concupiscence of jigs and dances reign as strong as it will amongst you; yet if the puppets will please anybody, they shall be entreated to come in.[186]

Even when he is trying to come to terms with his audience, Jonson cannot resist tweaking them and the other playwrights they often prefer to him. But this passage ends on a note of reconciliation, as Jonson promises to please the audience with the lowest form of street entertainment, a puppet show, a promise on which he ultimately delivers. Jonson tries to seal the contract in a spirit of amity with his audience: "In witness whereof, as you have preposterously put to your seals already (which is your money) you will now add the other part of suffrage, your hands."[187] Notice that this contract, in contrast to Faustus', is sealed with money, not blood. By publicly acknowledging his receipt of the audience's money, Jonson clearly if somewhat grudgingly signals his acceptance of the conditions of the commercial theater.

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[184]Ibid., Ind., ll. 94–100.

[185]For the references to Shakespeare here, see Shapiro, *Rival Playwrights*, pp. 154–56.

[186]*Bartholomew Fair*, Ind., ll. 114–19.

[187]Ibid., Ind., ll. 135–38.

But the way Jonson chafes under the yoke of his contract with his audience, even as he is proposing and ratifying it, sets an ominous keynote for *Bartholomew Fair*. And indeed, as we have seen, the play in which Jonson expressed his reconciliation with his audience is still highly critical of the commercial theaters. One can imagine the aristocratic audience at the court performance sniggering at the foolish antics of the middle and lower classes, and especially at their taste in theater as evidenced by the puppet show. And yet, as we have seen, Jonson is more critical of authority in the play than he is of the forces authority seeks to control and suppress. It is in fact hard to believe that Jonson got away with his satire on royal authority in the play. At two points, he associates Overdo with James I: when Overdo attacks tobacco, which James himself had done in his *Counterblast to Tobacco*, published in 1604,[188] and when Overdo quotes Horace at the end of the play. In his edition of *Bartholomew Fair*, Gordon Campbell glosses these lines: "possibly intended as a compliment to the king, who had quoted the same words in a speech to parliament in 1609."[189] But what kind of a compliment is it to James to associate him with an officious fool like Overdo?[190]

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[188]See Campbell's note to ll. 34–35 on p. 509 of his edition.

[189]Campbell, *Alchemist*, p. 515.

[190]On the matter of the connection between Overdo and James I, Barish, *Prose Comedy*, pp. 319–20, n. 23, details a number of parallels between James's *Counterblast* and Overdo's anti-tobacco speech, but Barish "wonders . . . what Jonson's royal patron thought of this scene." Horsman, *Bartholomew Fair*, p. xxi, is even more skeptical: "It is tempting to suspect that the attack on tobacco was added to please James I, whose views were known, at the court performance; but this seems ruled out by the uncomplimentary resemblance between James and the Justice." Sanders, *Theatrical Republics*, pp. 94–95 and Bruster, *Drama and the Market*, pp. 93–94 also discuss the complexities of the parallels between Overdo and James I. See also Wilson, *Theaters of Intention*, p. 133. For an extensive attempt to trace the presence of James I in *Bartholomew Fair*, see Marcus, *Politics of Mirth*, pp. 38–63. Viewing Jonson as hoping to create an alliance with the king against civic authorities in London who were trying to shut down the theaters, Marcus argues that *Bartholomew Fair* is a "lucid and elegant defense of royal prerogative" (p. 40). Although Marcus's interpretation is ingenious, and she is able to offer a good deal of historical evidence for it, it ultimately strikes me as unconvincing. She is too prone to judge James by his words rather than his deeds,

Jonson could have defended himself by saying that in the person of Overdo, he was making fun only of incompetent rulers. But he does not make it clear in what ways Overdo's intrusions in the marketplace differ from the policies of James and other British monarchs. No wonder Jonson added to his contract with the audience a stipulation that no one was to find any political satire in *Bartholomew Fair*[191]:

> In consideration of which, it is finally agreed by the foresaid hearers and spectators that they neither in themselves conceal, nor suffer by them to be concealed, any state-decipherer, or politic picklock of the scene, so solemnly ridiculous as to search out who was meant by the gingerbread-woman, who by the hobby-horse-man, who by the costermonger, nay, who by their wares. Or that will pretend to affirm, on his own inspired ignorance, what Mirror of Magistrates is meant by the Justice, what great lady by the pig-woman, what concealed statesman by the seller of mousetraps, and so of the rest.[192]

As a result of state-decipherers, Jonson had already gone to prison for offending the monarch in *The Isle of Dogs* and *Eastward Ho*.[193] He was not about to make the same mistake again, and thus disingenuously denies any hidden political messages in his play.[194] Nevertheless, *Bartholomew Fair* provides a powerful critique of all those, including the king, who seek to meddle with the free working of the marketplace.

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and I find it hard to believe that Jonson would have agreed with Marcus that James "is the only man in England who is not merely a man, who is able to see from a more than human perspective" (p. 60). Even Marcus is puzzled by the parallels Jonson appears to create between Overdo and James, and her attempt to turn the point in her favor seems forced: "If James did see himself in Jonson's portrayal of Overdo, however, that recognition would help to mitigate the force of the resemblance" (p. 55). I suspect that if "James did see himself in Jonson's portrayal of Overdo," Jonson might have made another one of his periodic trips to jail.

[191]See Slights, *Art of Secrecy*, pp. 145–46.

[192]*Bartholomew Fair*, Ind., ll. 120–29.

[193]See Riggs, *Jonson*, pp. 34, 41 and Slights, *Art of Secrecy*, p. 146.

[194]See Slights, *Art of Secrecy*, pp. 169–70.

Bartholomew Fair is thus a remarkably complex achievement. In many ways, the play is the culmination of Jonson's satire on commercial society in general and the commercial theater in particular. But Jonson uses his satire of the business world to divert the attention of his royal and aristocratic audience away from his more fundamental and pointed political satire. In *Bartholomew Fair* the marketplace comes to stand for freedom, and attempts to regulate it represent oppression.[195] Above all, Jonson seems to celebrate the energy of the marketplace. However chaotic it may appear, however shady the practices of its participants may be, Bartholomew Fair provokes the reaction: "here is life." Ultimately, the fair simply reflects the desires of the consumers who flock to it. Those who try to regulate the fair are trying to restrain desire and in that sense to impoverish life; those who hawk their wares at the fair are only answering to the call of human desire in all its vitality: "What do you lack? What do you buy, pretty mistress? A fine hobby-horse to make your son a tilter? A drum to make him a soldier? A fiddle to make him a reveller? What is't you lack? Little dogs for your daughters? Or babies, male or female?"[196]

Spurred by his recognition that the marketplace cannot be all bad if the theater is part of the marketplace, Jonson develops his understanding of what a free economy can accomplish.[197]

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[195]For a contrary view, see Marcus, *Politics of Mirth*, who, in her unquestioning support for the royal authority of James I, looks at the world of Jonson's play and concludes that it is under-regulated: "*Bartholomew Fair* has suffered from a vacuum of authority" (p. 59).

[196]*Bartholomew Fair*, III.ii.31–34.

[197]Even when Jonson was pointedly criticizing commercial society in *Volpone* and *The Alchemist*, he could not help betraying a secret sympathy for the marketplace. Jonson creates vivid portraits of his comic villains in these plays and pallid portraits of the good characters. The reason is that villains such as Volpone and Mosca or Face and Subtle embody all the comic energy in these plays, whereas the morally good characters, such as Celia and Bonario in *Volpone*, lack the force of desire and become boring by comparison. On this point, see Haynes, *Social Relations*, p. 128 and Charisse Gendron, "The Expanding License of Jonson's Comedies: *Volpone*, *The Alchemist*, and *Bartholomew Fair*," *Jacobean Miscellany* 95, no. 3 (1983): 20–21. In these earlier plays the villains are far more interesting as dramatic conceptions than the good characters, and the plays would fall flat without them. On this

Bartholomew Fair reveals all the forces that were soon to tear Britain apart in the Civil War of the 1640s: class conflict, fanatical religious belief, aristocratic and royal pretension, the overzealous exercise of authority. And yet Jonson shows that the marketplace is capable of containing and even taming all these divisive forces, if only by offering the satisfaction of desire as an alternative to the exercise of moral indignation.[198] The economic dealings that the religious and political figures in the play scorn turn out to supply a broader and more secure foundation for social harmony than any principle offered by church or state. In a remarkable anticipation of later economic thinking and Enlightenment ideas in general, Jonson seems to pin his hopes on the middle class and its devotion to commerce to achieve political stability and above all the moderation of the excesses of religious and royal absolutism. Whatever one may say against it, the marketplace as Jonson presents it is a force for social peace in *Bartholomew Fair* and by bringing people together, the theater contributes to this harmony. No one person runs Bartholomew Fair, and yet like any market it produces an order of its own.

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point, see Barish, *Antitheatrical Prejudice*, pp. 146, 153–54. In *The Alchemist*, Jonson is already moving in the direction of *Bartholomew Fair*; at the end, the ostensibly good character Lovewit is willing to appropriate the ill-gotten gains of Face and Subtle, as if the playwright were already recognizing that the morally questionable energies of the commercial world must somehow be incorporated into polite society. See Riggs, *Jonson*, p. 174 for the controversy over Jonson's attitude toward Lovewit. Gendron in "Expanding License" (pp. 5–31) does a good job of tracing the movement from *The Alchemist* to *Bartholomew Fair*. See also Wayne, "Drama and Society," pp. 111–14. In sum, I am not claiming in this essay to settle the complicated issue of the place of *Bartholomew Fair* within Jonson's whole career. There are signs that Jonson's sympathy for the free market began to surface in his earlier plays; by the same token, I would not claim that *Bartholomew Fair* permanently altered Jonson's attitude toward the marketplace. His doubts resurface in later plays, such as *The Devil Is An Ass*. All I am arguing here is that *Bartholomew Fair* is Jonson's most cogent and thoroughgoing defense of the marketplace.

[198]See Wayne, "Drama and Society," p. 104: "in *Bartholomew Fair* there is an unmistakeable tension between, on the one hand, the traditional moral doctrine of social obligation according to status, and, on the other, the more modern principles of rational self-interest and voluntary contractual obligation." See also pp. 122–23, 126.

With Jonson's brilliant intuition of the principle of spontaneous order, he manages to shape a dramatic form appropriate to the apparent chaos of the market. By normal Renaissance standards, especially by the strict standard of Jonson's earlier neoclassically ordered plays, *Bartholomew Fair* looks formless and disorganized. The play simply sprawls on the stage, like the fair itself, coming to life before our eyes and following no apparent plan. In fact Jonson seems deliberately to resist any centralizing vision of order in the play. Characters who, like Busy and Overdo, seek to direct the action from some kind of central command post are defeated in the course of the play. The action seems to spill over every attempt to contain it, like Ursula the Pig-Woman's ample frame itself: "Did not I bid you should get this chair let out o' the sides for me, that my hips might play?"[199]

Of course, the formlessness of *Bartholomew Fair* is only an illusion. As we have seen, the play in fact obeys the classical unities of time and place as well as any of Jonson's earlier triumphs of neoclassical form. But that is just the point: in *Bartholomew Fair* Jonson creates a dramatic example of order in disorder that mimics the marketplace itself. The play does not appear to follow any central plan, but in the end we see that it forms an ordered whole. Jonson satirizes the attempts of religious and political authorities to impose their laws upon the freedom of the marketplace and the theater. But that does not mean that he portrays the marketplace and the theater as fundamentally lawless. On the contrary, he suggests that the economic and theatrical realms may develop laws of their own and prove to be self-regulating if left alone by outside religious and political forces. Jonson could not have foreseen the full development of the concept of spontaneous order in Austrian economics. And yet in *Bartholomew Fair* he took a major step in that direction with his recognition that both the marketplace and the theater might prove to be lawful in their own ways without careful regulation by church and state.

[199] *Bartholomew Fair*, II.ii.62–64.

4

Shelley's Radicalism: The Poet as Economist

Paul A. Cantor

> *The real difference between Byron and Shelley is this; those who understand and love them rejoice that Byron died at thirty-six, because if he had lived he would have become a reactionary* bourgeois*; they grieve that Shelley died at twenty-nine, because he was essentially a revolutionist and he would always have been one of the advanced guard of socialism.*
>
> —Karl Marx[1]

I.

Was the English Romantic poet, Percy Shelley, a socialist? This question may sound odd, since according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the word *socialist* was not even coined until 1833, that is, 11 years after Shelley died.[2] Yet

[1]The epigraph is taken from Edward Aveling and Eleanor Marx Aveling, *Shelley's Socialism* (1888; rpt. London: Journeyman, 1975), p. 16. There is some debate over the authenticity of this quotation; see Paul Foot, *Red Shelley* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1980), pp. 227–28. After surveying the evidence, Foot concludes: "Eleanor Marx, however, is unlikely to have put her name to a quotation from her father which she knew to be invented" (p. 228).

[2]George Watson, *The Lost Literature of Socialism* (Cambridge, U.K.: Lutterworth, 1998), pp. 62–63, moves the date back but still places it five years after

despite the fact that Shelley could not have been aware of what we normally think of as socialist ideas, later socialists have claimed him for their lineage. Marx himself admired Shelley, and British socialists of the late nineteenth century looked back upon him as a kind of patron saint of their movement.[3] H.G. Wells, for example, rewrote Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* in the form of a science fiction novel called *In the Days of the Comet*. Today, many Shelley scholars regard him as left-wing in his politics, perhaps a proto-socialist, if not a full-fledged member of the movement.[4] In

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Shelley's death; he claims that "socialism was first used as a term by Robert Owen in the *Cooperative Magazine* in 1827."

[3]This development was reflected in the history of the Shelley Society, founded in England in 1886, which was divided, broadly speaking, between those who championed the poet for literary reasons and those who championed him for ideological reasons. The dispute centered on the status of Shelley's early poem, *Queen Mab*, which the first faction thought "should be relegated to Shelley's juvenilia," while the socialists in the society revered "*Queen Mab* as the bible of the new order" (Robert Metcalf Smith, *The Shelley Legend* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1945], p. 268). The dispute culminated in a speech by A.G. Ross, in which he chastised the socialist members of the society, charging that "the blatant and cruel socialism of the street" was trying to "use the lofty and sublime socialism of the study for its own base purposes." Coming to the defense of the socialist view of Shelley, George Bernard Shaw called this speech "the most astonishing one he had heard" (Smith, *Shelley Legend*, p. 271). But note that even Ross makes the concession that Shelley is in some sense a socialist. Michael Henry Scrivener, in his *Radical Shelley: The Philosophical Anarchism and Utopian Thought of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 67, writes that "*Queen Mab* became a part of socialist culture" in Victorian England. For a detailed discussion of Shelley's posthumous reputation among British and other socialists, see Foot, *Red Shelley*, pp. 227–73.

[4]For a serious attempt to present Shelley as a forerunner of Marx, see Terence Allan Hoagwood, *Skepticism & Ideology: Shelley's Political Prose and Its Philosophical Context from Bacon to Marx* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1988), especially pp. 79–138. For other discussions of Shelley as a socialist, see Aveling and Marx, *Shelley's Socialism* and Kenneth Neill Cameron, "Shelley and Marx," *The Wordsworth Circle* 10 (1979): 234–39. In his *Red Shelley*, Foot presents the poet as a left-wing radical, with many affinities to Marx, but ultimately concludes: "Shelley was not a socialist. Shelley was a leveller" (p. 96). Similarly, Scrivener argues that Shelley "anticipates . . . a number of radical tendencies, including the socialism of

both his poetry and his prose, he is constantly championing the poor against the rich, and critics assume that this means he would have been in favor of socialist policies, for example, schemes for redistributing wealth. There is in fact no question that by the standards of his day, Shelley was an economic and political radical. But what did "radicalism" mean in Shelley's day? Studying the case of Shelley gives us a chance to consider whether early nineteenth-century radicalism can be identified with what we think of as socialism today.

Insofar as Shelley's poetry deals with political and economic issues, it is visionary and utopian, offering nightmare images of a world enslaved in the present and dream images of a world liberated in the future. The very poetic quality of Shelley's vision makes it difficult to determine precisely where he stands on concrete issues. Thus, one text among all Shelley's writings is central to an examination of his political and economic views, a prose treatise called *A Philosophical View of Reform*, by far his most sustained and systematic effort to develop his understanding of the problems facing England in the early nineteenth century. He wrote this extended essay early in 1820, in direct response to the political agitation in England in 1819 that culminated in the infamous Peterloo Massacre, agitation that seemed to augur the outbreak of violent revolution. The essay has come down to us in unfinished form; it was never published in Shelley's lifetime; indeed it was deemed so radical in content that it was not published until 1920.[5] As its title indicates, the essay was a response to the ongoing and heated debate in Britain during the nineteenth century concerning parliamentary reform, a dispute that

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Marx," but he also sees a strong "libertarian" element in Shelley (*Radical Shelley*, p. 318), which ultimately leads him to conclude that the poet is best understood as a "philosophical anarchist." In his *The Unacknowledged Legislator: Shelley and Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), P.M.S. Dawson also places Shelley in the tradition of philosophical anarchism. Shelley's personal and philosophical links to William Godwin lend credence to these attempts to place him in the anarchist camp.

[5]I quote *A Philosophical View of Reform* from the Julian edition, Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, eds., *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (London: Ernest Benn, 1930), vol. 7. For the history of and problems with the text of the work, see vol. 7, pp. 332–33.

produced the famous series of Reform Bills that progressively extended the voting franchise and thereby made the British regime more democratic. Before this process began, Shelley offered a powerful argument for why it was not just desirable but also inevitable, claiming that only parliamentary reform could save England from the disaster of armed insurrection and civil war.

But despite Shelley's title, parliamentary reform is not the sole concern of his essay. Shelley presents political reform as necessary ultimately for the sake of economic reform.[6] He argues that the common people of England must seek to be more fully represented in Parliament in order to end the economic oppression they suffer at the hands of the rich and powerful. And what, according to Shelley, is the nature of this oppression? Does he complain about the emerging factory system and the new working conditions it imposed upon English laborers? Does he indict pollution, cutthroat competition, unemployment, dehumanizing mechanization, or any of the other supposed effects of the Industrial Revolution normally cited as having ruined the lives of the English working class in the early nineteenth century? The answer to all these questions is a surprising "no," surprising, that is, if one accepts the standard view of what the Romantics objected to in the Britain of their day.

Shelley attacks one principal target in *A Philosophical View of Reform*: the national debt of Great Britain. He holds the newly created system of deficit financing largely responsible for the economic woes of the English people.[7] In particular, he condemns the

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[6]On this point, see Gerald McNiece, *Shelley and the Revolutionary Idea* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 84.

[7]As we shall see, Shelley was by no means alone in this opinion. For an insightful and comprehensive treatment of the tradition in which Shelley was operating, see Patrick Brantlinger, *Fictions of State: Culture and Credit in Britain, 1694–1994* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), especially the chapter on eighteenth-century critics of the emergence of the Whig financial system, pp. 48–87, and the chapter on Shelley's contemporaries, pp. 88–135, which includes a section on Shelley himself (pp. 114–18). Many of the traditional critics of modern money and banking systems Brantlinger discusses anticipate Austrian views on the subject. Brantlinger seems to be embarrassed to find himself in agreement with Friedrich Hayek at one point, but he makes sure to distance himself from the Austrian by labeling

British government's substitution of paper money for the precious metal currency that had prevailed in the country, a change that caused inflation and thereby impoverished its citizenry. In short, in his one detailed attempt to grapple with the economic problems facing England, Shelley does not in socialist fashion call for increased government intervention in the market. On the contrary, he finds the root of England's problems precisely in a form of government intervention, namely manipulation of the currency in particular and financial policies in general calculated to benefit the government and its cronies at the expense of the population as a whole. In *A Philosophical View of Reform*, Shelley's radicalism takes the form of advocating free market rather than socialist policies.

II.

Shelley's argument begins from the premise that a sound currency is the foundation of a sound economy. Gold and silver have traditionally provided this foundation, and the government's sole responsibility in this area is to certify the weights and measures of a metallic currency:

> The precious metals have been from the earliest records of civilization employed as the signs of labour and the titles to an unequal distribution of its produce. The [Government of] a country is necessarily entrusted with the affixing to certain portions of these metals a stamp, by which to mark their genuineness; no other is considered as current coin, nor can be a legal tender. The reason of this is that no alloyed coin should pass current, and thereby depreciate the genuine, and by augmenting the price of the articles which are the produce of labour defraud the holders of that which is genuine of the advantages legally belonging to them.[8]

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him as "ultraconservative" (p. 25), even though his position on government oppression turns out to be identical to that of the ultraradical Shelley.

[8] *Philosophical View*, pp. 25–26.

From the beginning Shelley views inflation as the chief economic problem. Increasing the amount of currency in circulation by debasing coinage increases the general level of prices and thus deprives people of the amount of wealth to which their money originally entitled them.

Thus, for Shelley a government abrogates its chief financial responsibility to its people when it participates in inflationary manipulation of its coinage:

> If the Government itself abuses the trust reposed in it to debase the coin, in order that it may derive advantage from the unlimited multiplication of the mark entitling the holder to command the labour and property of others, the gradations by which it sinks, as labour rises, to the level of their comparative values, produces public confusion and misery.[9]

As Shelley points out, debasing the coinage was a ruse well-known to governments in the ancient world, and hence one increasingly difficult to get away with in the modern. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the British government gradually developed the modern system of public finance, which Shelley regards as a massive and insidious scheme for defrauding the British people:

> At the epoch adverted to, the device of public credit was first systematically applied as an instrument of government. . . . The rich, no longer being able to rule by force, have invented this scheme that they may rule by fraud. . . . The most despotic governments of antiquity were strangers to this invention, which is a compendious method of extorting from the people far more than praetorian guards, and arbitrary tribunals, . . . could ever wring. Neither the Persian monarchy nor the Roman empire, where the will of one person was acknowledged as unappealable law, ever extorted a twentieth part the proportion now extorted from the property and labour of the inhabitants of Great Britain.[10]

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[9]Ibid., p. 26.

[10]Ibid., p. 25.

Shelley sees that the heart of the British government's new financial policy was the monetization of debt.[11] Once paper claims to gold and silver on deposit began to circulate and be accepted in place of the underlying precious metals, it became possible to substitute a paper currency for a metallic. For Shelley this development began when the British government chartered the Bank of England in 1694.[12] This institution was created for the chief purpose of financing and managing the government's debt, which grew exponentially in the course of the eighteenth century,

[11]One of Shelley's chief sources for his economic information, William Cobbett, does an excellent job of explaining this phenomenon, namely, how banknotes get into circulation. See Cobbett, *Paper Against Gold* (London: Cobbett, 1817), pp. 84–85. For the influence of Cobbett on Shelley's essay, see Kenneth Neill Cameron, "Shelley, Cobbett, and the National Debt," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 42 (1943): 197–209, McNiece, *Shelley*, pp. 84–87, and Brantlinger, *Fictions of State*, pp. 114–16. Shelley mentions Cobbett in his 1819 poem *The Mask of Anarchy* (line 153) and refers his readers to *Paper Against Gold* in a bracketed passage in the manuscript of *A Philosophical View of Reform*, which Ingpen and Peck print in their notes (*The Complete Works*, vol. 7, p. 338). Dawson (*Unacknowledged Legislator*, pp. 47–48) questions Shelley's knowledge of economics: "He lacked however the conceptual equipment to analyse the economic structure of his society, and his distaste for the study of political economy condemned his utterances on the subject to remain on the level of a callow moralism." Dawson blames Shelley's ignorance of economics specifically on his reliance on Cobbett: "The writer on whom Shelley drew most deeply for his economic views was, unfortunately, William Cobbett. Cobbett's no-nonsense analysis of the economic structure of English society was clearly far more congenial to Shelley than the complexities of the political economists" (p. 49). Dawson evidently prefers "nonsense" economics to "no-nonsense" economics. The "political economists" he refers to were the apologists for the Bank of England, many of them in fact Directors of the Bank. In fact, Cobbett had no less a political economist than David Ricardo on his side of the argument, and events soon vindicated his understanding of the British banking system. Although Cobbett expressed his views with journalistic verve, they were in fact quite cogent and insightful economically, and *Paper Against Gold* can be profitably read to this day.

[12]For brief but good summaries of the development of banking and finance in eighteenth-century England, see Elie Halévy, *A History of the English People in 1815* (1924; rpt. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), pp. 296–323 and T.S. Ashton, *An Economic History of England: The 18th Century* (London: Methuen, 1955), pp. 167–200.

chiefly as a result of its wars on the Continent and in America. Bills of exchange that carried the official seal of the Bank of England encouraged people to accept paper instead of gold and silver as money. Shelley understood the enormous potential for abuse inherent in the new credit economy established and fostered by the British government:

> The modern scheme of public credit is a far subtler and more complicated contrivance of misrule. All great transactions of personal property in England are managed by signs and that is by the authority of the possessor expressed upon paper, thus representing in a compendious form his right to so much gold, which represents his right to so much labour. A man may write on a piece of paper what he pleases; he may say he is worth a thousand when he is not worth a hundred pounds. If he can make others believe this, he has credit for the sum to which his name is attached. And so long as this credit lasts, he can enjoy all the advantages which would arise out of the actual possession of the sum he is believed to possess. He can lend two hundred to this man and three to that other, and his bills, among those who believe that he possesses this sum, pass like money.[13]

Shelley grasps how this new financial system made it much easier for the government to inflate the currency:

> The existing government of England in substituting a currency of paper [for] one of gold has had no need to depreciate the currency by alloying the coin of the country; they have merely fabricated pieces of paper on which they promise to pay a certain sum.[14]

Shelley understood the great magic trick the British government had managed to pull off in the course of the eighteenth century. It used the Bank of England and the money market institutions that grew up along with it to finance its increasing debts,

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[13]*Philosophical View*, p. 26.

[14]Ibid., p. 27.

and then monetized the debt, thereby performing the seeming miracle of turning debt into wealth.[15] Banknotes, which are only promises to pay, began to be accepted in Britain as payment for goods and debts—and thus as money substitutes, indeed the forerunner of a paper currency. Shelley dramatizes this process in his satiric play *Oedipus Tyrannus or Swellfoot the Tyrant* (1820), when a character aptly named Mammon proclaims on behalf of the King of Thebes:

> Does money fail?—come to my mint—coin paper,
> Till gold be at a discount, and, ashamed
> To show his bilious face, go purge himself,
> In emulation of her vestal whiteness.[16]

Thus, Shelley shows a tyrannical British government attempting to solve its financial problems by going into debt and in effect printing money. The government's scheme hinged on its unquestioned ability to meet the interest payments on its loans, unquestioned because of its virtually unlimited authority to tax its people. Throughout the essay Shelley complains bitterly about the excessive taxes imposed upon the British public to pay the interest on the ever-increasing national debt, interest payments that had reached the then astronomical figure of £45,000,000 annually.[17] Shelley is already calling for a tax revolt:

> The taxgatherer ought to be compelled in every practicable instance to distrain, whilst the right to impose taxes . . . is formally contested by an overwhelming multitude of defendants before the courts of common law. Confound the subtlety of lawyers with the subtlety of the law.[18]

But as troubled as Shelley is by the open taxation of the British public, he is even more disturbed by the hidden tax they

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[15]See Brantlinger, *Fictions of State*, pp. 3, 22.

[16]Quoted from the text in the Julian edition, vol. 3, p. 327 (Act I, lines 107–10).

[17]*Philosophical View*, p. 40.

[18]Ibid., p. 51.

are forced to pay under the new financial system, what we today would call an inflation tax.[19] Confronted with the new system of public finance, Shelley is a pure monetarist; he has no doubt that the rise in the general level of prices in England is to be traced directly and solely to the increase in the quantity of money in circulation that resulted from the monetization of the enormous and ever-increasing national debt.[20] Shelley knows what happens in a paper currency economy when more money starts chasing fewer goods, rendering nominal increases in wages meaningless, since prices increase just as fast or faster:

> Of course, in the same proportion as bills of this sort, beyond the actual goods or gold and silver possessed by the drawer, pass current, they defraud those who have gold and silver and goods of the advantages legally attached to the possession of them, and they defraud the labourer and artizan of the advantage attached to increasing the nominal price of labour.[21]

For Shelley, the last straw in British financial policy was the government's suspension of the convertibility of Bank of England notes to gold and silver, thus instituting a pure paper currency:[22]

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[19]In his *Classical Economics: An Austrian Perspective on the History of Economic Thought* (Cheltenham, U.K.: Edward Elgar, 1995), vol. 2, p. 182, Murray Rothbard points out that one of Shelley's contemporaries, Lord King, referred to the depreciation of currency as "an indirect tax . . . imposed upon the community."

[20]For this point, Shelley relied heavily on Cobbett; see *Paper Against Gold*, pp. 324–25, 331–32, especially p. 331: "Yes: we talk about *dearness*; we talk of *high prices*; we talk of things *rising in value*; but, the fact is, that the change has been in the *money* and not in the articles bought and sold; the articles remain the same in value, but the money, from its abundance, has *fallen in value*" (Cobbett's italics). For historical support for this claim, see Halévy, *History of the English People*, p. 306 and T.S. Ashton, *The Industrial Revolution 1760–1830* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 103.

[21]*Philosophical View*, p. 26.

[22]For discussions of this important episode in British economic history, which led to the so-called bullionist controversy, see Friedrich Hayek, *The Trend of Economic Thinking: Essays on Political Economists and Economic History*,

> The holders of these papers came for payment in some representation of property universally exchangeable. They [the government] then declared that the persons who hold the office for that payment could not be forced by law to pay. They declared subsequently that these pieces of paper were the legal coin of the country.[23]

Severing the British currency from any link to precious metals further increased the capacity of the government to engineer inflation.[24] In *Swellfoot the Tyrant*, Shelley portrays this process as

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vol. 3 of his *Collected Works* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 177–215; John F. Chown, *A History of Money: From AD 800* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 232–45, and Rothbard, *Classical Economics*, vol. 2, pp. 157–224. For an attempt to relate this economic episode to literary developments, see Kevin Barry, "Paper Money and English Romanticism: Literary side-effects of the last invasion of Britain," *Times Literary Supplement*, Feb. 21, 1997, pp. 13–16.

[23]*Philosophical View*, p. 26.

[24]On this point, see Cobbett, *Paper Against Gold*, pp. 5–8. Shelley's passionate defense of the gold standard as the foundation of a sound monetary system is probably the aspect of his economic thinking that would seem most peculiar to those who try to categorize him as a socialist. The gold standard is supposed to be the obsession of capitalists. And in his early poetry, Shelley does seem to view gold negatively, as in this passage from *Queen Mab*: "Commerce has set the mark of selfishness,/ The signet of its all-enslaving power/ Upon a shining ore, and called it gold" (quoted from the text in Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers, eds., *Shelley's Poetry and Prose* [New York: W.W. Norton, 1977], p. 40 [section V, lines 53–55]). But Shelley is using the word *gold* poetically in this passage—as a metonym for the mad pursuit of wealth and the greed that inspires it. *Queen Mab* is filled with hostile statements about "commerce" and even a sarcastic reference to Adam Smith's concept of "the wealth of nations" (Act 5, l. 80). One has to bear in mind that *Queen Mab* is one of Shelley's earliest poems (written 1812–13) and his reading of Cobbett's *Paper Against Gold* evidently changed his mind about the precious metal as the basis for a currency. Contemporary scholars may find it hard to believe that Cobbett was a populist and yet championed the gold standard against paper currency. With the Free Silver movement in mind, and William Jennings Bryan's famous "Cross of Gold" speech, modern Americans tend to think of opposition to the gold standard as the populist position. But as Cobbett's treatise reminds us, there was a

the height of the British government's perfidiousness. The Arch-Priest of Famine, Mammon, rejects his son, who defends a precious metal currency, and embraces his daughter, who represents the inflationary cause of paper money:

> [I have] Disinherited
> My eldest son Chrysaor, because he
> Attended public meetings, and would always
> Stand prating there of commerce, public faith,
> Economy, and unadulterate coin,
> And other topics, ultra-radical;[25]
> And have entailed my estate, called the Fool's Paradise,
> And funds, in fairy-money, bonds, and bills,
> Upon my accomplished daughter Banknotina,
> And married her to the Gallows.[26]

Shelley portrays paper currency as "fairy-money" and the world of inflation as a "Fool's Paradise." Unlike some economists, he

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time when the gold standard was defended precisely as a way of protecting common people against the currency manipulations of a financial elite. In *A Philosophical View of Reform*, Shelley champions the gold standard because he is championing the common people. For a member of Shelley's circle who continued his polemic against paper money and in favor of gold, see Thomas Love Peacock's *Paper Money Lyrics* (written 1825–26). The spirit of these humorous poems is captured in the opening lines of the first poem:

> The Country banks are breaking:
> The London banks are shaking:
> Suspicion is awaking:
> E'en quakers now are quaking:
> Experience seems to settle,
> That paper is not metal,
> And promises of payment
> Are neither food nor raiment.

Quoted from *The Works of Thomas Love Peacock* (London: Richard Bentley, 1875), vol. 3, p. 222. On Peacock's attack on paper money, see Brantlinger, *Fictions of State*, pp. 118–23. This section also includes four examples of James Gilray's marvelous cartoons satirizing the reign of paper money in Britain.

[25]Notice that Shelley regards a defense of sound money, the gold standard, and government financial retrenchment as "ultra-radical." We see here in fact what the word *radical* meant to Shelley.

[26]Julian edition, vol. 2, pp. 329–30 (Act I, lines 198–207).

does not make the mistake of viewing inflation as having a neutral impact on the economy, as if the rise in prices affects everybody equally. Rather, he sees inflation "benefiting at the expense of the community the speculators in this traffic."[27] Although this brief comment does not reflect a full understanding of how inflation redistributes wealth, Shelley does have an inkling of the importance of the fact that inflated currency necessarily enters the economy at one point and not another. Thus, those who first have access to the money reap the benefits of spending it before it has had time to increase prices for everyone else.[28] In one of his poems responding to the political crisis of 1819, *Peter Bell the Third*, Shelley characterizes the "public debt" as a kind of Robin Hood scheme in reverse, robbing the poor and giving to the rich:

> Which last is a scheme of Paper money,
> And means—being interpreted—
> "Bees, keep your wax—give us the honey
> And we will plant while skies are sunny
> Flowers, which in winter serve instead."[29]

Hence, Shelley views inflation as an unmitigated disaster for the majority of people in England, who see the purchasing power of their money eroded, perhaps even cut in half. As Shelley sarcastically writes:

> One of the vaunted effects of this system is to increase the national industry. That is, to increase the labours of the poor and those luxuries of the rich which they supply. To make a manufacturer [an industrial laborer] work 16 hours where he only worked 8. To

[27] *Philosophical View*, p. 27.

[28] Shelley may have known about this point from reading David Hume's essay "Of Money" in *Essays: Moral, Political and Literary* (1741–42; rpt. London: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 291–92. For Shelley's knowledge of Hume's *Essays*, see Cameron, "Shelley, Cobbett," p. 200. For more on the understanding in Shelley's day of the uneven effects of inflation, see Rothbard, *Classical Economics*, vol. 2, pp. 182, 210.

[29] *Peter Bell the Third*, lines 166–71 (Reiman and Powers, *Shelley's Poetry*, p. 331).

> turn children into lifeless and bloodless machines at an age when otherwise they would be at play before the cottage doors of their parents.[30]

Here Shelley finally begins to talk about the horrors of working conditions in early nineteenth-century England, but contrary to conventional opinion about the economic attitudes of the Romantics, he attributes the problems not to the Industrial Revolution but to the financial policies of the British government and specifically to its suspension of gold and silver convertibility. It is particularly noteworthy that Shelley blames child labor not on the rapacity of English industrialists but on the fraudulent monetary policies of the government. The point is sufficiently important to Shelley for him to repeat it:

> Since the institution of this [system] . . . , they have often worked not ten but twenty hours a day. Not that all the poor have rigidly worked twenty hours, but that the worth of the labour of twenty hours now, in food and clothing, is equivalent to the worth of ten hours then. And because twenty hours' labour cannot, from the nature of the human frame, be exacted from those who before performed ten, the aged and the sickly are compelled either to work or starve. Children who were exempted from labour are put in requisition, and the vigorous promise of the coming generation blighted by premature exertion. For fourteen hours' labour, which they do perform, they receive—no matter in what nominal amount—the price of seven. They eat less bread, wear worse clothes, are more ignorant, immoral, miserable and desperate.[31]

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[30] *Philosophical View*, p. 27.

[31] Ibid., p. 30. Foot (*Red Shelley*, p. 91) cites this passage as an illustration of the Marxist theory of wage exploitation, as if Shelley were talking about workers who perform fourteen hours of labor but are paid for only seven, rather than workers who find that the depreciation of the currency means that the wage for fourteen hours of labor now has the purchasing power that the wage for seven used to have. Foot tries to attribute to capitalist exploiters the harmful effects that Shelley in fact attributes to government engineered inflation.

Thus, in another one of Shelley's 1819 political poems, *The Mask of Anarchy*, he defines the slavery of the British people in terms of their subjection to a paper money system:

> 'Tis to let the Ghost of Gold
> Take from Toil a thousand fold
> More than e'er its substance could
> In the tyrannies of old.
>
> Paper coin—that forgery
> Of the title deeds, which ye
> Hold to something of the worth
> Of the inheritance of Earth.[32]

I am not claiming that Shelley was right in blaming all the economic woes of early nineteenth-century England on the government's monetary policies.[33] There does seem to be something almost monomaniacal about his seizing upon deficit financing as the sole cause of working class poverty, although one should never underestimate the corrosive effects of inflation on any economy, and statistics do bear out Shelley's claims. Prices in England did in fact roughly double between 1790 and 1815.[34] But

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[32]*The Mark of Anarchy*, lines 176–183 (Reiman and Powers, *Shelley's Poetry*, p. 306).

[33]Scrivener, *Radical Shelley*, p. 136, argues that Shelley's fixation on the national debt was merely an example of "rhetorical duplicity," adopted from Cobbett. Scrivener would rather blame the misery Shelley discusses on the "industrial revolution" (p. 215). Although Shelley was perfectly capable of disguising his views, it is difficult to see how following "Cobbett's tactic of concentrating the public wrath on the fundholders" (Scrivener, p. 136) against his better judgment would have aided Shelley's cause. If anything, attacking the public funding system got him in trouble; see McNiece, *Shelley*, p. 8: "Apparently his doctrines were alarming his friends in Italy with money invested in the funds."

[34]See the data in Norman J. Silberling, "British Prices and Business Cycles, 1779–1850," *The Review of Economic Statistics* 5 (1923): 223–47, especially the graphs on pp. 230, 234, and 235. Rothbard, *Classical Economics*, vol. 2, p. 160 points out that during the same period the money supply in England also roughly doubled. As economists like David Ricardo argued at the time, the rise in prices was directly linked to the suspension of the convertibility of banknotes to gold. Brantlinger makes the odd claim: "Even during

I am not using Shelley to make a point about English economic history; I am trying to make a point about *attitudes* toward English economic history. Whether or not Shelley correctly identified the cause of economic misery in his day, we can learn something about the nature of his radicalism by observing what he chose to focus on. And here Shelley could not be more explicit in stating his conclusion: "The cause of this peculiar misery is the unequal distribution which, under the form of the national debt, has been surreptitiously made of the products of their labour and the products of the labour of their ancestors."[35] Shelley is so obsessed with the problem of the national debt that he even argues that had it been solved, the issue of reforming Parliament might not have come up:

> At the peace, the people would have been contented with strict economy and severe retrenchment, and some direct and intelligible plan for producing that equilibrium between the capitalists and the landholders which is delusively styled the payment of the national debt: had this system been adopted, they probably would have refrained from exacting Parliamentary Reform, the only secure guarantee that it would have been pursued.[36]

III.

Shelley focuses on the national debt as the origin of England's economic problems, and he also focuses on it when proposing solutions to those problems. Readers expecting Shelley to suggest socialist remedies will be sorely disappointed by *A Philosophical View of Reform*. Faced with the poverty of the working class, he does not call for the nationalization of industry or the

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the paper money era of 1797–1821, the bank note issues of the Bank of England remained relatively stable and uninflationary" (*Fictions of State*, p. 140). Even by modern standards, a doubling of the money supply and the price level in roughly 20 years is inflationary.

[35]*Philosophical View*, p. 31.

[36]Ibid., p. 45.

expropriation of capital.[37] He does not suggest using the tax system to redistribute wealth.[38] He does not even propose laws to regulate working conditions in factories, to limit hours, for example, or forbid child labor. Far from calling for increased government intervention in the economy, Shelley wants to get the government out of the market as much as possible. Here is the sum total of Shelley's "economic program":

> We would abolish the national debt.
>
> We would disband the standing army.
>
> We would, with every possible regard to the existing interests of the holders, abolish sinecures.
>
> We would, with every possible regard to the existing interests of the holders, abolish tithes, and make all religions, all forms of opinions, respecting the origin and government of the Universe, equal in the eye of the law.

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[37]Shelley does consider the possibility of a one-time tax on capital to liquidate the national debt; the fact that David Ricardo advocated the same policy suggests that this is not a particularly "socialist" position. For the relation between Shelley and Ricardo on this issue, see Cameron, "Shelley, Cobbett," pp. 207–9 and McNiece, *Shelley*, pp. 88–89.

[38]Modern literary critics keep imputing their own economic opinions to Shelley. Cameron feels a need to supplement Shelley's analysis of the economic misery of his day: "For another important reason for the increased hardships on the poor in these years and one which Shelley doubtless had in mind, we must turn to the financial history of the time. This was the abolition of the income tax in 1816" ("Shelley, Cobbett," p. 205). Writing in the wake of the New Deal, Cameron could not understand how any intelligent person could fail to be in favor of progressive income taxation, but in fact Shelley never once complains about the abolition of the income tax; for the reasons why, see Halévy, *History of the English People*, pp. 326–28, who concludes: "the income tax was in universal disfavour" (p. 327). As we have seen, far from lamenting the abolition of the income tax, Shelley was calling in 1820 for a further tax revolt. Shelley's thinking on taxation resembles the position of some modern economists. In *Swellfoot the Tyrant*, Shelley even anticipates the famous Laffer Curve in his criticism of the British tax system: "till at length, by glorious steps,/ All the land's produce will be merged in taxes,/ And the revenue will amount to—nothing!" (Julian edition, vol. 2, p. 337, II.i.15–17)

> We would make justice cheap, certain and speedy, and extend the institution of juries to every possible occasion of jurisprudence.[39]

This is not a pro-socialist but a pro-capitalist program; like a laissez-faire economist, Shelley is chiefly concerned with getting the government out of the way of legitimate and spontaneous economic activity. He wants to simplify the court system and to eliminate any remaining vestiges of feudal privilege in England, including government sinecures and established church benefices. In general, he directs his hostility not at entrepreneurs, who create wealth by their own efforts, but at aristocrats, whose wealth is derived solely from privileges granted them by the government. Indeed, Shelley views capitalism as a genuine advance over the system that preceded it, feudalism and its late incarnation in mercantilism:

> Feudal manners and institutions having become obliterated, monopolies and patents having been abolished, property and personal liberty having been rendered secure, the nation advanced rapidly towards the acquirement of the elements of national prosperity. Population increased, a greater number of hands were employed in the labours of agriculture and commerce, towns arose where villages had been.[40]

Like Adam Smith, Shelley does not object to business as such, but only to the *alliance* between business and government that was at the core of the mercantilist system. Shelley gets angry only when a government grants some businessmen privileges at the expense of others, when, for example, it confers a monopoly on one particular company that has curried its favor.

How does Shelley connect the issue of the national debt with the issue of monopoly? In his view, the Bank of England was the greatest of all government monopolies, gradually given more and more exclusive privileges that allowed it to work to the

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[39] *Philosophical View*, p. 34.

[40] Ibid., p. 22.

financial advantage of the British crown.[41] The way the Bank was set up ensured that banking and finance in England did not develop along laissez-faire lines; rather the state maintained a massive presence in, influence on, and even control over all financial markets. Shelley's deepest insight in *A Philosophical View of Reform* is his understanding of the sinister alliance that developed between government and business interests with the growth of public finance in eighteenth-century England. Indeed, the most brilliant part of the essay is a sociological analysis of the new alignment of economic and political forces in the eighteenth-century British regime.[42]

In analyzing the origins of the national debt, Shelley points out:

> It was employed at the accession of William III less as a resource of meeting the financial exigencies of the state than as a bond to connect those in the possession of property with those who had, by taking advantage of an accident of party, acceded to power.[43]

The British government needed money to finance its wars with France and its rebellious colonies in America. As Shelley writes: "The national debt was chiefly contracted in two liberticide wars, undertaken by the privileged classes of the country."[44] It

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[41]On the monopoly status of the Bank of England, see Halévy, *History of the English People*, p. 302; Ashton, *Economic History*, pp. 178–79, 183; Chown, *History of Money*, p. 234; and Rothbard, *Classical Economics*, vol. 2, pp. 159, 183.

[42]The best analysis I know of the nature of this regime is Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr., "Party Government and the Settlement of 1688," *The American Political Science Review* 58 (1964): 933–46, which does an excellent job of relating the financial policies of the Whigs to their fundamental political program.

[43]*Philosophical View*, p. 25.

[44]Ibid., p. 34. See Cobbett, *Paper Against Gold*, p. 424. For a general historical account of the connection between British war policy and the development of deficit financing, see John Brewer, *The Sinews of Power: War, Money and the English State 1688–1783* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988).

was easier for the British government to borrow money to finance its wars than to raise it by taxation (governments never want their citizens to have a clear idea of what military operations cost). But Shelley suggests a hidden political agenda behind the system of public credit the British developed—it forged a bond between the government and the financial interests in the nation. Bankers and other moneyholders were eager to lend to the government because of the security of such loans. When a banker lends to private businessmen, he is hoping that their businesses will produce sufficient revenue to meet the interest payments on the loans and eventually to repay the principal. But governments are not dependent on the vicissitudes of the market; to make their interest payments, they rely on their ability to raise money by taxes, and if all else fails, in the era of paper currency they can always just print the money to meet their financial obligations. That is why governments have an advantage over private businesses in credit markets and can usually obtain loans at favorable rates of interest. More importantly from Shelley's perspective, once the monied interests began to lend large amounts to the British government, they became tied to its fortunes. They would hardly work for the overthrow of a government heavily indebted to them and a chief source of their steady and secure income.[45] Thus, as Shelley points out, by means of the new public credit system, the landed aristocrats who created and dominated the eighteenth-century British regime gradually cemented support for their rule from the financial interests in the city of London.

Shelley clarifies what is really involved in the complicated and confusing national debt situation:

> The fact is that the national debt is a debt not contracted by the whole nation towards a portion of it, but a debt contracted by the whole mass of the privileged classes towards one particular portion of those classes. . . . As it is, the interest is chiefly paid by those who had no hand in the borrowing, and who are sufferers in

[45]Hume makes this point in his important essay "Of Public Credit" (*Essays*, pp. 359–60). Brantlinger shows that Jonathan Swift argued similarly earlier in the eighteenth century (*Fictions of State*, p. 39).

> other respects from the consequences of those transactions in which the money was spent. The payment of the principal of what is called the national debt, which it is pretended is so difficult a problem, is only difficult to those who do not see who is the creditor, and who the debtor, and who the wretched sufferers from whom they both wring the taxes which under the form of interest is given by the [latter] and accepted by the [former].[46]

Shelley exposes the scam the British government developed that has served as a model to all governments since. The ruling powers in England got the money they needed to finance their enterprises, chiefly war. The monied interests found a profitable and secure way of placing loans, with a virtually guaranteed steady stream of interest income. And all this was paid for by the majority of honest, hard-working Englishmen, either in the form of direct taxation, or in the indirect form of an inflation tax, whenever the government debt was monetized, thus increasing the currency in circulation and raising prices. As Shelley indicates, this system worked only because the interested parties were able to hide the reality of what was going on from the general populace. The intricacies of the banking system mystified the public and obscured the truth about the national debt. Shelley's aim in *A Philosophical View of Reform* was to demystify the public finance system in England and reveal it for what it was—a massive scheme to defraud the people of England, to get the poor to pay for servicing the debt of the rich.[47]

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[46]*Philosophical View*, pp. 35–36.

[47]Shelley learned the need for such demystification from Cobbett; see *Paper Against Gold*, pp. 8–9, and especially p. 421:

> One would really suppose, that the general creed was, that the Bank Directors were the Gods of the country, that they were our Sustainers if not actually our Makers, that from them we derived the breath in our nostrils, that in and through them we lived, moved, and had our being.

On the issue of public credit and mystification, see Brantlinger, *Fictions of State*, pp. 88–89.

Those who still wish to believe in a proto-socialist Shelley might take comfort from the fact that he employs the rhetoric of rich versus poor, as if class warfare were at the center of his economic doctrine. But unfortunately for any Marxist appropriation of Shelley, when he speaks of "the rich," he does not mean what Marxists do by the term. Shelley is in fact careful to explain the restricted range of the term in his vocabulary:

> When I speak of persons of property I mean not every man who possesses any right of property; I mean the rich. Every man whose scope in society has a plebeian and intelligible utility, whose personal exertions are more valuable to him than his capital; every tradesman who is not a monopolist, all surgeons and physicians and those mechanics and editors and literary men and artists, and farmers, all those persons whose profits spring from honourably and honestly exerting their own skill and wisdom or strength in greater abundance than from the employment of money to take advantage of the necessity of the starvation of their fellow-citizens for their profit, are those who pay, as well as those more obviously understood by the labouring classes, the interest of the national debt. It is in the interest of all these persons as well as that of the poor to insist upon the payment of the principal.[48]

This passage is crucial for understanding what is distinctive in Shelley's formulation of England's economic problems. He does not categorize class conflict in England in the terms that Marx and his followers were soon to employ.[49] Shelley does not think

[48] *Philosophical View*, pp. 36–37.

[49] Most people think that the idea of class conflict originates with Marx, and are unaware that he developed his views on the subject in response to the work of prior thinkers, particularly among the French, who categorized classes and class conflict differently. On this important subject, see Ralph Raico, "Classical Liberal Roots of the Marxist Doctrine of Classes," in Yuri N. Maltsev, ed., *Requiem for Marx* (Auburn, Ala.: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1993), pp. 188–220, and especially pp. 202–04 for an analysis of the class interest of government clients similar to Shelley's. See also Rothbard, *Classical Economics*, vol. 2, pp. 385–91 and Watson, *Lost Literature*, pp. 8, 19–28,

in terms of a sharp opposition between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat; that is *not* his definition of rich versus poor. In fact, Shelley argues that a large portion of the middle class should make common cause with the working class over the issue of the national debt; both are being taken advantage of by the aristocracy in alliance with a small portion of the middle class.

Shelley's argument hinges on his distinction between two subsets, as it were, of the middle class. He distinguishes between those who are in effect clients of the government—those who benefit financially from its operation—and those who, through taxes and other forms of government appropriation, are net losers in the system. The latter class includes the majority of what we would call middle-class professionals—doctors, for example—but it also includes businessmen who are not the beneficiaries of government interference in the free market—"every tradesman who is not a monopolist." What defines this subset of the middle class for Shelley is that they are not linked to the government by accepting grants, subsidies, monopolies, or any other form of economic privilege. The other subset of the middle class consists of all those professionals who have sprung up in connection with the new system of public finance—the bankers, the bond traders, the stockbrokers—a new category of men who have become dependent on the government to enrich them. Shelley has such contempt for all who derive their wealth from serving the ruling powers in England that he insists upon calling them aristocrats.[50] As he formulates the point, England is now burdened with *two* aristocracies: the old one, consisting chiefly of the great landowners and long established merchant families,

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and especially p. 22, where he quotes Marx himself saying in a letter to Georg Weydemeyer, March 5, 1852:

> No credit is due me for discovering the existence of classes in modern society or the struggle between them. Long before me bourgeois historians had described the historical development of the class struggle, and bourgeois economists the economic anatomy of the classes.

[50]On the status of the new species of financial professionals, especially the stockbrokers, see Halévy, *History of the English People*, pp. 314–16; Halévy himself refers to them as "aristocrats" (pp. 299, 314).

and a new one, consisting of all the satellites and beneficiaries of the system of public finance.[51] And for Shelley, this new aristocracy is worse than the old, mean-spirited and grasping, whereas the old one at least had a certain nobility and largeness of vision:[52]

> The other is an aristocracy of attornies and excisemen and directors and government pensioners, usurers, stock jobbers, country bankers. . . . These are a set of pelting wretches in whose employment there is nothing to exercise . . . the more majestic faculties of the soul. Though at the bottom it is all trick, there is something frank and magnificent in the chivalrous disdain of infamy connected with a gentleman. . . . But in the habits and lives of this new aristocracy created out of an increase [in] the public calamities . . . there is nothing to qualify our disapprobation. They eat and drink and sleep, and in the interval . . . they cringe and lie.[53]

Shelley negatively characterizes the segment of the middle class that developed to make the system of public finance work, professionals who came to have an interest in seeing the national debt grow (since they in effect earned their living from it) and who therefore wanted to see government activities expand in general.[54] Shelley thus shows how the ruling powers in England

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[51]Cameron, "Shelley, Cobbett," pp. 201–02, claims that Shelley derived the idea of the two aristocracies from Cobbett, but, as Cameron himself admits (p. 209), Shelley's analysis of the situation is considerably more complex and subtle than Cobbett's.

[52]Hume offers a similar analysis of the ignobility of the new class of financial professionals in his "Of Public Credit," *Essays*, p. 363.

[53]*Philosophical View*, pp. 28–29.

[54]The one seemingly "Marxist" aspect of Shelley's essay is his tendency to explain people's opinions in terms of their underlying economic interests. Yet ultimately Shelley is not a Marxist because he does not apply this principle mechanically. In another passage Ingpen and Peck relegate to their notes (p. 336), Shelley explicitly denies the Marxist principle that economic interests strictly determine political opinions: "It is not alledged that every person whose interest is directly or indirectly in the maintaining things as

forged an alliance with a segment of the rising middle class: "the hereditary aristocracy who held the political administration of affairs took the measures which created this other [aristocracy] for purposes peculiarly its own."[55]

The subtle way in which Shelley distinguishes between elements of the middle class provides a good warning against applying Marxist terminology or analysis indiscriminately to authors, especially to authors who wrote before Marx. Whenever someone takes the side of the poor against the rich, it is tempting to classify him as a socialist. But Shelley's case reminds us that there is more than one way to champion the poor or attack the rich.[56] Indeed, as we have seen, Shelley means something quite distinctive, even idiosyncratic, when he uses the term "rich." For Shelley, how much money one has in the end is less important than how one made that money in the first place. He defines the "rich" as only those whose wealth is the result of political privilege, whether based in aristocratic inheritance or monopoly grants from the government. Shelley does not object to wealth when it is derived from the independent operation of the free market, when it results from hard work or entrepreneurial spirit.

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they are, is therefore necessarily interested. There are individuals who can be just judges even against themselves, and by study and self-examination have established a severe tribunal within themselves to which these principles which demand the advantage of the greater number are admitted to appeal." Hoagwood (*Skepticism & Ideology*, pp. 85–86) unaccountably offers this passage as an example of Shelley's Marxist thinking, as if Marxism allowed individuals within a class to be exempt from class consciousness.

[55]*Philosophical View*, p. 29.

[56]Attempts to portray Shelley as a socialist ultimately reduce to a syllogism like this: (1) Shelley was concerned with social justice and helping the poor. (2) The only way to achieve social justice and help the poor is through socialism. (3) Therefore, Shelley must have been a socialist. This logic is most clearly at work in Aveling and Marx, *Shelley's Socialism*, especially pp. 36–38. What essays like this fail to show is that Shelley ever called for identifiably socialist policies to remedy the economic evils he identified in Britain. Critics with socialist leanings themselves cannot imagine that anyone could believe that allowing the market to operate freely could help the poor. And yet that is just what Shelley argues in *A Philosophical View of Reform*.

In this regard, his radicalism resembles that of the original British champions of the free market, such as Adam Smith. Shelley defends the poor not against capitalists but against mercantilists, that is, businessmen in league with the government to defraud and exploit both the poor and a large portion of the middle class.

IV.

When Shelley turns to the issue of equality of property, he is dealing with the heart of socialist doctrine, but in fact rejects it. He does hold up equality of wealth as an ideal, but he also insists that political attempts to achieve such equality are ill-advised, at least under current conditions. Thus, even when Shelley sounds most like a socialist, he explicitly repudiates socialist economic policies:

> The broad principle of political reform is the natural equality of men, not with relation to their property but to their rights. That equality in possessions which Jesus Christ so passionately taught is a moral rather than a political truth and is such as social institutions cannot without mischief inflexibly secure. . . . Equality in possessions must be the last result of the utmost refinements of civilization; it is one of the conditions of that system of society, towards which with whatever hope of ultimate success, it is our duty to tend. We may and ought to advert to it as to the elementary principle, as to the goal, unattainable, perhaps, by us, but which, as it were, we revive in our posterity to pursue. . . . But our present business is with the difficult and unbending realities of actual life, and when we have drawn inspiration from the great object of our hopes it becomes us with patience and resolution to apply ourselves to accommodating our theories to immediate practice.[57]

Shelley presents equality of wealth as a purely utopian principle. It is an ideal we may ultimately aim at, but not one we can

[57] *Philosophical View*, pp. 42–43.

reasonably expect to achieve, certainly under present conditions and possibly never at all. All that Shelley is willing to endorse is the political principle of the equality of rights, which is why he argues for parliamentary reform to extend the voting franchise. But he is not willing to promote the principle of economic equality, and explicitly states that any attempt to bring it about by political means would have pernicious consequences. This passage helps to explain the relation of Shelley's poetic to his prose statements of his principles. Works like *Prometheus Unbound* allow him to present the ideal and utopian vision of which he speaks here, the image of a classless society, based on political and economic equality. But for Shelley, such a poetic vision is not a blueprint for concrete political action; rather it merely provides inspiration for working to improve the human condition in much more practical and limited ways. Shelley's poetry inspires us to make life better; prose works like *A Philosophical View of Reform* show us how it can actually be done.[58] In his poetry, Shelley may seem like a wild-eyed idealist; what is striking about *A Philosophical View of Reform* is how fully grounded Shelley's concrete proposals are in economic reality and, above all, how well he understands the way markets, including financial markets, really work.

Thus, when Shelley analyzes the issue of property, he defends the institution in terms familiar in defenses of the free market. Characteristically, he distinguishes between property acquired as a result of participation in the free market and property obtained only as a result of government intervention in the market. Shelley has no objection to property acquired by honest economic effort, whether it is the result of working class labor or middle-class entrepreneurship:[59]

> Labour, industry, economy, skill, genius, or any similar powers honourably and innocently exerted are the foundations of one description of property, and all

[58]On this point, see McNiece, *Shelley*, pp. 93–94, 265.

[59]Generally regarded as one of the most radical thinkers of his day, Cobbett, *Paper Against Gold*, p. 34, takes, if anything, a more generous view of the right of the middle and upper classes to property:

> true political institutions ought to defend every man in the exercise of his discretion with respect to property so acquired. Of this kind is the principal part of the property enjoyed by those who are but one degree removed from the class which subsists by daily labour.[60]

Once again Shelley claims that the working class and the industrious portion of the middle class share a common interest, this time in maintaining the right to property and thus to enjoy the fruits of their exertions. Shelley does not like the idea that this right includes the right of inheritance, because that confers property on people who did not earn it by their own efforts. But in the end he is willing to defend even inheritance rights:

> Property thus acquired men leave to their children. Absolute right becomes weakened by descent, . . . because it is only to avoid the greater evil of arbitrarily interfering with the discretion of any man in matters of property that the great evil of acknowledging any person to have an exclusive right to property who has not created it by his skill or labour is admitted.[61]

In Shelley's view, one may object to the way in which the right to property in a free market distributes wealth, but before tampering with this system, one must consider carefully whether any alternative system will distribute wealth more justly. In fact, as arbitrary as the distribution of wealth in the free market may

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> Physicians, Parsons, Lawyers, and others of the higher callings in life, do, in fact, labour; and it is right that there should be persons of great estate, and without any profession at all; but then, you will find, that these persons *do not live upon the earnings of others*: they all of them give something in return for what they receive. Those of the learned profession give the *use of their talents and skill*; and the landlord gives *the use of his land or his houses*. (Cobbett's italics)

[60] *Philosophical View*, p. 37.

[61] Ibid.

seem, Shelley suggests that to allow a political authority to substitute its judgment for the market's will only result in greater arbitrariness and hence injustice.[62]

Thus, Shelley is willing to take his chances with the free market. He realizes that the right to acquire property in a free market is inseparably bound up with the "right" to lose it. If the heirs of industrious people are not themselves industrious, their inherited wealth will soon pass into the hands of those who are:

> The privilege of disposing of property by will . . . exerted merely by those who have acquired property by industry or who have preserved it by economy, would never produce any great and invidious inequality of fortune. A thousand accidents would perpetually tend to level the accidental elevation, and the signs of property would perpetually recur to those whose deserving skill might attract or whose labour might create it.[63]

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[62]In this argument, Shelley was following the teaching of his father-in-law, William Godwin. See Book 8, "Of Property," in his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1798; rpt. Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin Books, 1976), especially chapter 2, pp. 711–19, 755:

> we should, at all times, be free to cultivate the individuality, and follow the dictates, of our own judgement. If there be anything in the idea of equality that infringes this principle, the objection ought probably to be conclusive. If the scheme be, as it has often been represented, a scheme of government, constraint and regulation, it is, no doubt, in direct hostility with the principles of this work. But the truth is that a system of equality requires no restrictions or superintendence. There is no need of common labour, meals or magazines.

This clear warning against what have become socialist economic policies is a good indication that, despite the view of many intellectual historians, Godwin, just like his son-in-law, does not belong in the camp of proto-socialists. For the contrary view, see Scrivener, *Radical Shelley*, p. 36: "If Shelley adumbrates Marx, so does Godwin."

[63]*Philosophical View*, p. 38.

Shelley could not be further from Marxism or any socialist doctrine here; he argues that the free market actually works toward equalizing wealth, and above all directs it to the most productive sectors of the economy.[64]

For Shelley, the only force that can produce great inequality of wealth is the government. Hence he condemns all those rights to property conferred solely by government intervention in the economy. It is to this source and this source alone that he traces any massive concentration of wealth:[65]

> They were either grants from the feudal sovereigns whose right to what they granted was founded upon conquest or oppression, both a denial of all right; or they were the lands of the antient Catholic clergy which according to the most acknowledged principles of public justice reverted to the nation at their suppression, or they were the products of patents and monopolies, an exercise of sovereignty most pernicious that [does] direct violence to the interests of a commercial nation; or in later times such property as has been accumulated by dishonourable cunning and the taking advantage of a fictitious paper currency to obtain an unfair power over labour and the fruits of labour.[66]

Having carefully analyzed the objections to the right of property, Shelley in the end comes out unequivocally in favor of it, provided the property results from the operation of the free market:

> Labour and skill and the immediate wages of labour and skill is a property of the most sacred and indisputable right, and the foundation of all other property. And the right of a man [to] property in the exertion of his own bodily and mental faculties, or to the produce

[64]Godwin again makes the same argument; see *Political Justice*, pp. 791–92.

[65]Once again, see Godwin, *Political Justice*, pp. 719–20.

[66]*Philosophical View*, pp. 38–39.

> and free reward from and for that exertion is the most [inalienable of rights].[67]

This spirited defense of the right to private property should put an end to the myth of Shelley the socialist.[68] Shelley even translated his argument for private property and inheritance rights into poetic form in an 1819 fragment:

> What men gain fairly—that they should possess,
> And children may inherit idleness,
> From him who earns it. This is understood;
> Private injustice may be general good.
> But he who gains by base and armèd wrong,
> Or guilty fraud, or base compliances,
> May be despoiled; even as a stolen dress

[67]Ibid., p. 39. In passages such as this, Shelley seems to subscribe to the labor theory of value. He is even more explicit on the point in the notes to *Queen Mab*: "There is no real wealth but the labor of man" (David Lee Clark, ed., *Shelley's Prose or The Trumpet of a Prophecy* [Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1954], p. 113). Shelley's belief in the labor theory of value would seem to be strong evidence for regarding him as a proto-Marxist, and it is cited as such in Aveling and Marx, *Shelley's Socialism*, p. 30 and Cameron, "Shelley and Marx," p. 237. But contrary to a common misconception, Marx did not invent the labor theory of value. It actually can be traced back to the British classical economists, and was developed by Adam Smith and fully elaborated by David Ricardo—from whom Marx directly derived his notions on the subject. Thus, if believing in the labor theory of value *ipso facto* makes one a socialist, we are left with the curious claim that the most famous defenders of the free market in Britain, Smith and Ricardo, were socialists. And notice that in *A Philosophical View of Reform*, Shelley is always careful to offer a much broader definition of "labor" than Marxists usually do—he explicitly includes mental work, such as the efforts of entrepreneurs.

[68]The fact that it should does not of course mean that it will. Foot manages to present Shelley's treatment of the issue of property in *A Philosophical View of Reform* as an example of his socialist thinking. To do so, Foot must treat Shelley's analysis as "rough-and-ready" and "groping," implying strongly that the poet is simply confused; in particular, Foot describes Shelley's clear-cut distinction between earned and unearned property this way: "Shelley's line between the two was vague" (*Red Shelley*, pp. 94–95). Foot's Marxist prejudices repeatedly blind him to the literal meaning of Shelley's prose.

> Is stript from a convicted thief, and he
> Left in the nakedness of infancy.[69]

Once again we see Shelley distinguishing between wealth accumulated by illegitimate means and wealth accumulated by honest effort, whether in labor or in commerce. In claiming that "private injustice may be general good," Shelley is drawing upon a defense of market activity that can be traced back to Bernard Mandeville's *The Fable of the Bees* (1714) and its famous subtitle, "Private Vices, Publick Benefits"—a formula completely at odds with socialism.

V.

Studying carefully what Shelley actually argues in *A Philosophical View of Reform* and the way it has been misread by literary critics over the years provides a cautionary tale. Contemporary critics have a tendency to project their own ideas back into literary history. When they look for the economic position of an earlier author, they often unconsciously assume that to be economically progressive or radical has always meant to lean toward socialism. But even in terms of Marx's system, this understanding must be judged incorrect. For Marx there was a time when capitalism was the *progressive* force in history, namely when it worked to undermine and overthrow feudalism. The socialist tradition in Britain, with its roots in authors like John Ruskin and William Morris, has often been mixed up with a profound nostalgia for the Middle Ages.[70] But Marx would have none of this anti-modern longing for the days of feudalism. For all his passionate criticism of capitalism, he still viewed it as an advance beyond feudalism and, together with his colleague Friedrich Engels, he even celebrates the progressive character of the bourgeoisie in ringing terms in *The Communist Manifesto*:

> The bourgeoisie, historically, has played a most revolutionary part. The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got

[69]Quoted from the text in the Julian edition, vol. 3, pp. 290–91.

[70]On this subject, see Watson, *Lost Literature*, pp. 43–52.

> the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his "natural superiors." . . . The bourgeoisie has disclosed how it came to pass that the brutal display of vigor in the Middle Ages, which reactionists so much admire, found its fitting complement in the most slothful indolence. It has been the first to show what man's activity can bring about. It has accomplished wonders far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals. . . . The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together.[71]

Notice that Marx regards anyone who admires the Middle Ages as reactionary; hence he would have regarded Shelley's arguments for the superiority of capitalism over feudalism as progressive in their historical context. Evidently his hope was that, since Shelley supported capitalism when it was appropriate to do so, had he lived, he would have learned to support socialism when historical circumstances dictated that position. Such a convoluted argument is the only way to salvage the idea of Shelley as "socialist."[72] But even this Marxist reading leaves us with a Shelley who in his own day supported capitalism. For him, the great enemy is not capitalism but feudalism and its late incarnation, mercantilism. Shelley argues that to the extent that the government intervention in the economy characteristic of feudalism and mercantilism was eliminated, and free market forces were allowed to come into play, the welfare of England increased, and the gap between the rich and the poor began to decrease. For Shelley, this progress was thwarted only by mercantilist survivals in the British financial system, and above all a bank given monopoly privileges by the government.

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[71]Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party" (English edition of 1888) in Lewis S. Feuer, ed., *Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1959), pp. 9, 10, 12.

[72]This is in fact how Cameron actually tries to make the argument; see "Shelley and Marx," pp. 238–39.

Thus, reading Shelley's *A Philosophical View of Reform* should force us to rethink the common view that the English Romantic poets were left-wing in the contemporary understanding of the term. Of course, I do not wish to make too much of a single essay by a single author. Shelley does not speak for all the Romantics in any of his writings, and certainly not in *A Philosophical View of Reform*. One cannot conclude from this one work that all the Romantics supported the free market. Nevertheless, Shelley's essay does provide an important test case. He is generally regarded as the most politically committed of the English Romantics and the one with the most radical economic views. As for *A Philosophical View of Reform*, with the possible exception of some of Coleridge's prose works, it is the most significant essay on economic matters produced by any of the English Romantics.[73] Thus, one cannot easily dismiss what we have seen in Shelley's essay. While it does not allow us to generalize about what all the Romantics believed, it does effectively refute the generalization that all the Romantics were anti-capitalist and proto-socialist.[74] It conclusively shows

[73]Hoagwood calls *A Philosophical View of Reform* "one of the most advanced and sophisticated documents of political philosophy in the nineteenth century" (*Skepticism & Ideology*, p. 209). Foot says that "it ranks in style and in content with the most famous radical pamphlets of our history," including those "of Bentham or Robert Owen or Marx and Engels" (*Red Shelley*, pp. 10–11). In his *Literature & the Marketplace: Romantic Writers and Their Audiences in Great Britain and the United States* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), p. 89, William G. Rowland, Jr. calls the essay "the most sustained and impressive political treatise written by a romantic poet."

[74]The case of Shelley suggests that rethinking the standard view of the economic opinions of the Romantic generation is in order. The Industrial Revolution does not appear to have been as much of an issue for them as critics' obsession with the "dark Satanic mills" of the Preface to Blake's *Milton* would suggest (Harold Bloom insists that even these mills "have nothing to do with industrialism"; see his *Blake's Apocalypse: A Study in Poetic Argument* [Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1965], p. 335). Many critics in effect impute Victorian views back into the Romantic era. In the early nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution had not yet broadly transformed the English landscape. It took the development of railroads, beginning in the 1830s, to spread the Industrial Revolution throughout the land. Given the critical focus on Romantic reactions against the Industrial Revolution, it is surprising to discover how seldom the subject actually comes up in Romantic poetry or prose. When the other Romantics criticize economic

that for one Romantic, championing liberty in his day meant supporting the free market and the right to private property, while condemning government intervention in the economy.[75]

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conditions in early nineteenth-century England, they tend to focus, as Shelley does, on the related issues of high taxes and the government's war policy (see, for example, Wordsworth's *The Ruined Cottage*). Like Shelley, the other Romantics tend to rail against the actions of the monarch, the aristocrats, and government officials, rather than those of businessmen and industrialists. Brantlinger is clear on the contrast between Romantic and Victorian economic concerns: "The shared concerns expressed in Cobbett's *Paper Against Gold* and Peacock's *Paper Money Lyrics* suggest a pre-1832 moment when working- and middle-class politics more or less coincided around taxation and monetary issues. The Reform Bill of 1832 marks a parting of the ways" (*Fictions of State*, p. 134). In Joseph Bizup's comprehensive study of nineteenth-century attitudes toward industrialization in Britain, he begins his discussion of the critique of industry with Robert Southey's *Sir Thomas More: or, Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society*, which was not published until 1829—toward the end of the Romantic Era if not after its demise (*Manufacturing Culture: Vindications of Early Victorian Industry* [Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003], p. 1).

[75]Scrivener, *Radical Shelley*, p. 9, grants the point that in the early nineteenth-century laissez-faire capitalism "was a progressive, antiaristocratic position." One Marxist critic, Christopher Caudwell (pseudonym of Christopher St. John Sprigg), recognizes clearly that Shelley was a spokesman for the middle class and the new economic freedom it pursued:

> He speaks for the bourgeoisie who, at this stage of history, feel themselves the dynamic force of society and therefore voice demands not merely for themselves but for the whole of suffering humanity. It seems to them that if only they could realise themselves, that is, bring into being the conditions necessary for their own freedom, this would of itself ensure the freedom of all. . . . The bourgeois trammelled by the restraints of the era of mercantilism is Prometheus, bringer of fire, fit symbol of the machine-wielding capitalist. Free him and the world is free. . . . Shelley is the most revolutionary of the bourgeois poets of this era because *Prometheus Unbound* is not an excursion into the past, but a revolutionary programme for the present. It tallies with Shelley's own intimate participation in the bourgeois-democratic revolutionary movement of his day. (*Illusion and Reality: A Study of the Sources of Poetry* [New York: International Publishers, 1947], pp. 91–92)

But I do not wish to leave the impression that Shelley's argument is historically contingent or limited by the horizons of his era. Shelley makes a powerful case for the right to property under any historical circumstances, and his analysis of the negative effects of deficit financing, monetization of debt, paper currency, and government inflationary policies remains valid, and has been confirmed by subsequent economic history and developments in later economic theory, such as the Austrian theory of money, credit, and the business cycle.[76] Perhaps the most interesting and enduring aspect of Shelley's argument is his distinction between two groups within the middle class, those who make their living independent of the government and those who are crucially dependent on it for their livelihood. With this analysis, Shelley makes an important contribution to our understanding of why governments were able to exert insidious and invidious control over the economy even in the supposedly laissez-faire economic era. More generally, Shelley shows how the forces of feudalism and mercantilism were able to survive into the era of capitalism by hiding behind the system of banking and finance. One of the great failings of classical economics was its inability to understand the phenomena of money and banking. Shelley does not himself supply that understanding, but at least he grasps the fact that the British financial system was not the product of free market evolution. It was instead heavily influenced by government intervention. Even at the height of the so-called laissez-faire era of capitalism, England did not have free banking, but rather in effect a central bank, with all that such an institution implies for government control of currency and finance.

Thus, in criticizing the British financial system, Shelley is condemning, not capitalism, but rather a mercantilist survival into the capitalist era, indeed that greatest of all chartered monopolies, the Bank of England.[77] He shows that the alignment

[76]For the classic exposition of the Austrian theory of the business cycle, see Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1949), pp. 535–83.

[77]In another bracketed passage, which Ingpen and Peck place in their notes (p. 338), Shelley writes: "the present miseries of our country are nothing

of economic forces in the early nineteenth century was not as simply polarized as Marxist and other socialist thought often assumes, and especially that the bourgeoisie did not constitute a homogeneous class with a unified economic interest and hence, in Marxist terms, a unified ideology. Shelley brilliantly analyzes how the old aristocracy in England, in order to maintain its power, played off one part of the middle class against another, effectively splitting the bourgeoisie by giving one element of it reason to support state power.[78] A glance at the legions of middle-class professionals employed by the vast bureaucratic states of today reminds us that Shelley's analysis is, if anything, more valid in our world. Sometimes poets have something to teach economists.

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necessarily inherent in the stage of civilization at which we have arrived." For Shelley the problem is not that England has become capitalist, but that it has not become fully capitalist, that is, elements of the mercantilist system are still in place. As Shelley's analysis reminds us, capitalism is often blamed precisely for the results of anti-capitalist government policies. In particular, literary critics habitually confuse capitalism with mercantilism—the very system it was supposed to replace. For example, Brantlinger twice simply identifies "mercantilism" with "early capitalism" (*Fictions of State*, pp. 31, 75). For a good example of this kind of obfuscation, see Aveling and Marx, *Shelley's Socialism*, p. 31, where they offer as evidence of Shelley's hostility to capitalism a passage from his unfinished play *Charles the First*. Since this play is set in the first half of the seventeenth century, it necessarily portrays the negative effects of mercantilism, not capitalism. This fact is evident in the very passage Aveling and Marx quote (scene I, lines 151–52), in which the Second Citizen talks of "Nobles, and sons of nobles, patentees,/Monopolists, and stewards of this poor farm" (Julian edition, vol. 4, p. 145). Aveling and Marx are evidently attracted by the word *monopolists*, which they anachronistically interpret in the light of the Marxist theory of monopoly capitalism. But Shelley is obviously dwelling on his familiar theme—the evil of monopolies created by royal patents—exactly the sort of mercantilist practices proponents of capitalism like Adam Smith attacked.

[78]For modern supporters of this view, see Brantlinger, *Fictions of State*, pp. 236–37.

5

Capitalist Vistas: Walt Whitman and Spontaneous Order

Thomas Peyser

In his 1959 introduction to the still widely used Riverside Edition of Whitman's poetry and prose, James E. Miller, Jr. sums up some of the contradictory images of Whitman then in circulation by writing, "Walt Whitman was a socialist, a communist, a subversive; Walt Whitman was a snob, an aristocrat, a chauvinist."[1] There is, to be sure, a certain Cold War flavor to these dichotomies, which turn Whitman either into a suspicious fellow traveler or a drum-beater for the American Way, but it is interesting to note that the notion of Whitman as an essentially libertarian figure does not arise in Miller's survey. Indeed, in the past four decades, Whitman has become ever more firmly entrenched as an icon of the American left.

If an official declaration of this fact were needed, Richard Rorty provided one with the publication of his *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*, a book focusing on the role—in his view, the pivotal role—that Whitman and John Dewey played "in creating the image of America which was ubiquitous on

[1]James E. Miller, Jr., "Introduction," in *Walt Whitman, Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, James E. Miller, Jr., ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), p. xix. The texts of Whitman's poems are taken from the so-called "deathbed edition" of 1891–92.

the American Left prior to the Vietnam War."[2] He sees both as the key "prophets" of a "civic religion centered around taking advantage of traditional pride in American citizenship by substituting social justice for individual freedom as our country's principal good."[3] Detecting "little difference in doctrine between Dewey and Whitman,"[4] he enlists them in defense of "the thesis that the state must make itself responsible for [a morally and socially desirable] redistribution [of wealth]."[5] Further attributing to Whitman ideas current on the left, Rorty construes him as a strict social constructionist, someone who disparages the idea that certain political or economic arrangements arise naturally and necessarily, and who thus sees society not as an organic growth resistant to tampering, but rather as a mechanism that can, as it were, be programmed to carry out the tasks we find desirable. "[E]verything around us and within us," he writes, is "one more replaceable social construction," and thus no claims for the naturalness of any set of arrangements can be entertained; orders are to be distinguished only by their capacity to approximate the results we desire from them.[6] "For Whitman and Dewey, a classless and casteless society is neither more natural nor more rational than the cruel societies of feudal Europe or of eighteenth-century Virginia," even if they would not hesitate to find the former infinitely superior, given their ethical convictions.[7]

As I hope to show, each of Rorty's assertions seriously distorts the meaning of Whitman's writings, but Whitman's general availability for the purposes of the left is not difficult to understand. People often tend to project back into the past the constellations of thought that exist in their own day. Certain aspects of Whitman's work, most notably his career-long celebration of

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[2]Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 10.

[3]Ibid., p. 101.

[4]Ibid., p. 24.

[5]Ibid., p. 48.

[6]Ibid., p. 96.

[7]Ibid., p. 30.

eroticism, are undeniably more in keeping with the cultural program currently associated with the left, and the salience of such aspects quite naturally primes readers to find signs, however muted, of Whitman's allegiance to the political and economic views prevalent on the left today. Indeed, I suspect that the current tendency to see Whitman as fundamentally opposed to the capitalist order derives not from an insistence on the part of scholars to recreate anyone whose works they like in their own image, but rather from their failure to imagine that logically unrelated ideas that happen to be bundled together today might have formed themselves into quite different groupings in the past. What I want to argue here is that, although, in cultural matters, Whitman does indeed share many of the views of today's cultural left, when it comes to his political and economic views, he has much more in common with the right. In particular, I will focus on the way that the idea of spontaneous order, the order that arises from the interaction of free individuals in society, appears as a unifying thread in Whitman's chief works, informing both his explicitly stated political views and the very way he fashioned his poems.

Democratic Vistas is widely and rightly regarded as the greatest of Whitman's prose works, and in it we find extensive evidence of his sympathy with ideas broadly in accord with Hayek's vision of social evolution and the kind of order that evolution produces. Later we will focus on the way the very form of Whitman's poetry suggests his affinity for the idea of the spontaneous order present in modern societies, but it is worth noting that even when writing an essay, Whitman was impelled to create something that mirrors the complex, apparently disorderly character of the world he is analyzing. When we think of the essay as a form, it seems the very model of order that comes from above, that is, from an individual who carefully orchestrates all elements appearing within it: the author is usually at pains to make sure that all contradictions are eliminated, and that everything in the essay is there in order to contribute to a specific goal, to prove the validity of an articulated (or at least articulable) thesis. To be sure, Whitman indeed does have a number of clearly stated points to make, but so constitutionally averse is he to authoritarian ordering that it seems he cannot help but try to liberate the

essay from its usual strictures, and to make of it an image of reality itself, refusing to prune away all the mess, noise, and dissonance so evident in the world at large. Preparing his readers for the kind of work that they are about to encounter, Whitman writes,

> First premising that, though the passages of it have been written at widely different times (it is, in fact, a collection of memoranda, perhaps for future designers, comprehenders), and though it may be open to the charge of one part contradicting another—for there are opposite sides to the great question of democracy, as to every great question—I feel the parts harmoniously blended in my own realization and convictions, and present them to be read only in such oneness, each page and each claim and assertion modified and temper'd by the others.[8]

Here Whitman claims to make a virtue of what more traditional essayists would regard as the defects of their enterprise: that (whatever their words on the page may claim) they are not entirely of one mind about the ideas they are promoting, that their thoughts have changed during the course of composition, that not all of their points neatly line up with one another, or that some may flatly contradict others. Rather than attempting to conceal these ambivalences, Whitman embraces them, believing that they somehow cohere in his "realization and convictions"; rather than depend on an abstract logical coherence, Whitman founds his sense that *Democratic Vistas* is a whole on the fact that all of his words are just that, his, that they emerged from a single human mind, and that, however much some parts contradict others, they issue in conviction and action. There is a refreshing honesty at work here, since it is probably true that if we refrained from having a conviction or acting on one until each and every doubt we have about that belief or act were dispatched, we would never do or believe anything at all. Refusing to offer a simplistic picture of the world or of the mind that faces the world, Whitman reveals his belief that order may exist even where disorder seems to reign, and that that order may not have

[8]Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, pp. 455–56.

the smooth lines or polished regularities favored by those who see order only where all parts have been bent to a single purpose.

A certain vagueness, in fact, is called for by the very nature of the topic Whitman takes in hand; his theme is the vistas presented at what he conceives as the very early days of democracy, and like any vistas, they are full of distant obscurities. The dedication that Hayek composed for *The Constitution of Liberty*[9] could serve equally well for *Democratic Vistas*: "To the unknown civilization that is growing in America." This is no mere coincidence, for both men share an essentially evolutionary view of society, believing that human beings and even the institutions that they create are part of a system far more vast and complicated than anything they could contrive, comprehend, or control. Thus, although reflection can apprehend the trends that have brought civilization to its present state, it cannot with any certainty delineate future states towards which civilization is tending, as these will depend on contingencies it is impossible to predict, changes that will bring about corresponding adjustments in other parts of the system in an ever-evolving dynamism.

Whitman announces his evolutionary view this way: "Law is the unshakable order of the universe forever; and the law over all, the law of laws, is the law of successions; that of the superior law, in time, gradually supplanting and overwhelming the inferior one."[10] Averring that "the fruition of democracy, on aught like a grand scale, resides altogether in the future," he describes the future development of society in terms that strikingly parallel the spread of a genotype through the process of natural selection, except, of course, that what is being spread is not genetic information, but new customs, beliefs, and practices that lead to enhanced success among the populations that adopt them. He imagines an epoch, "long ages hence," when

> the democratic principle . . . with imperial power, through amplest time, has dominated mankind—has been the source and test of all the moral, aesthetic,

[9]Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), p. iv.

[10]Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, p. 469.

> social, political, and religious expressions and institutes of the civilized world . . . has sway'd the ages with a breadth and rectitude tallying Nature's own—has fashion'd, systematized, and triumphantly finish'd and carried out, *in its own interest*, and with unparallel'd success, a new earth and a new man.[11]

Comparing social development to natural processes, Whitman even indulges in a rather odd kind of anthropomorphism, imaging "the democratic principle" as an entity with its own interests, standing above the interests of the human beings who, in seeking their own satisfaction, bring into being a whole system of social organization that they themselves do not aim at. Again comparing the system thus established to natural phenomena, especially on the score of its being able to maintain and reproduce itself without the aid of authoritarian management from above, he writes, "as matters now stand in our civilized world, [democracy] is the only scheme worth working from, as warranting results like those of Nature's laws, reliable, when once established, to carry on themselves."[12]

Clearly Whitman would be happy to do away with the period that intervenes between now and the time when "a new earth and a new man" will be born, but his basic orientation precludes him from believing that an instantaneous transition is possible. Consequently, he casts a skeptical eye on attempts to

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[11]Ibid., p. 475, emphasis added.

[12]Ibid., pp. 464–65. Whitman's recourse to evolutionary thinking should not lead us to conclude that he makes common cause with Herbert Spencer and others who advanced "social Darwinism" as a guide to public policy. According to social Darwinists, especially those who rather crassly popularized Spencer's theories, nothing should be done to prevent the weak in society from failing, as their destruction will result in a strengthened polity. This view is more conservative than Whitman's, as it fails to inquire whether individual failures might be caused by structural contradictions in the status quo. By contrast, Whitman argues that a gradual, evolutionary adjustment of the general rules by which society functions will result in a general amelioration of the whole, including those who are disadvantaged by the persistence of ideas or institutions that have not yet adjusted to the emergent triumph of the democratic principle.

direct social evolution—at least in a free society—through what would soon be called "progressive" measures and reforms, and this skepticism is particularly marked when one considers the reforming zeal in America at that time, a zeal heightened by the ultimate success of what only a few decades before the Civil War was often regarded as the product of extremist fantasy: abolitionism. Whitman speaks favorably of the kind of top-down reforms advocated by Progressives only in reference to societies whose members do not accept freedom as a fundamental principle. Perhaps obliquely commenting on the need to continue Reconstruction, then in progress, Whitman states that "until the individual or community show due signs, or be so minor and fractional as not to endanger the State, the condition of authoritative tutelage may continue, and self-government must abide its time."[13]

If Whitman felt that the overarching question of self-rule could be settled only by the passing of time, he also believed that attempts to tinker with institutions in order to produce particular outcomes would fail to reform society as a whole. By the time he died in 1892, Progressivism had entered the mainstream of American political thinking, but although he had withdrawn from active participation in the ideological debates of the day, records of his conversation in his last years, dutifully recorded by his disciple Horace Traubel, suggest that his ideas regarding social evolution did not alter in old age. He disdained special reforms that were presented as panaceas for social ills, arguing instead for what could only be brought about by immense developments beyond human control, reform "for the whole man—the whole corpus—not one member—not a leg, an arm, a belly alone, but the entire corpus." Speaking in particular of Henry George's "Single Tax" on landlords and other "speculators," he said, "I know it is argued for this [reform] that [the Single Tax] will bring about great changes in the social system. . . . But I don't believe it—don't believe it at all." When reflecting even on abolitionism, a movement whose goals he entirely embraced, Whitman was struck by reformers' inability to comprehend the

[13]Ibid., p. 469.

entirety of the field of relations in which human action occurs: "Is that not the attitude of every special reformer? Look at Wendell Phillips—great and grand as he was. . . . He was one-eyed, saw nothing, absolutely nothing, but that single blot of slavery. And if Phillips of old, others today."[14]

In matters of political and social evolution, then, Whitman hewed to an essentially "non-interventionist" position, as indeed one might conclude from his assertion in the very first sentence of *Democratic Vistas* that "the greatest lessons of Nature through the universe are perhaps the lessons of variety and freedom."[15] Given this basic orientation, however, it is necessary to address what might seem a paradox in Whitman's vision, namely the vitally important role he assigns to the poet, whose efforts, he claims, are essential to the fruition of democracy. For *Democratic Vistas*, in addition to surveying contemporary conditions in the United States and the prospects for democratic life, is in many ways fundamentally a literary manifesto, a call for the kind of poetry that Whitman believes has the power to transform civilization and acclimate human beings to the new order. At times, when describing the function of poetry in society, not only does he strain credulity by ascribing to the poet tremendous social influence, but he also seems, at first glance, to make of the poet precisely the kind of godlike lawgiver that democracy has rendered obsolete.

> To the ostent of the senses and eyes, I know, the influences which stamp the world's history are wars, uprisings or downfalls of dynasties, changeful movements of trade, important inventions, navigation, military or civil governments, advent of powerful personalities, conquerors, &c. These of course play their part; yet, it may be, a single new thought, imagination, abstract principle, even literary style, fit for the time, put in shape by some great literatus, and projected among mankind, may duly cause changes, growths, removals, greater than the longest and bloodiest war, or the most

[14]Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), vol. 5, p. 275.

[15]Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, p. 455.

> stupendous merely political, dynastic, or commercial overturn.[16]

Even here, however, when Whitman makes the most extravagant claims about the socially transforming power of a new literary style, he insists that that style must be "fit for the time," suggesting that the "literatus" does not have it in his power to bend the world in whatever direction he wants. Thus there is no call for castigating authors of the distant past for failing to promote democratic principles whose realization lay far in the future. Even Shakespeare, "luxuriant as the sun," cannot for Whitman truly be a poet for all time; he is, rather, very much of an age, "artist and singer of feudalism in its sunset, with all the gorgeous colors, owner therof, and using them at will."[17]

It is certainly tempting to dismiss Whitman's pronouncements about poetic power as an example of any person's inclination to understand his or her labor as absolutely essential to civilization. However, by examining the likely provenance of Whitman's views we can come to an enhanced understanding of the place he assigns literature in the much broader context of the evolution of social arrangements. Moreover, even those who are reluctant to accede to Whitman's ideas about the heroic stature of creative writers can find in Whitman the outlines of a theory about the central role of culture and values in the maintenance of any social order. Indeed, if we replace the word "poetry" with the word "culture" in many of Whitman's statements, we arrive at a far more credible picture of the way beliefs—perhaps even beliefs that are hardly ever articulated—cement the highly complex web of relations present in the spontaneous order.

In the English tradition, the *locus classicus* of the claim that poets create order not only in their poems but also in the world at large is found in Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Defense of Poetry" (1821):

> The most unfailing herald, companion and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial

[16]Ibid., p. 458.

[17]Ibid., p. 487.

> change in opinion or institution, is Poetry. Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration, the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present. . . . Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the World.[18]

This kind of thinking is very much in evidence in earlier essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose works were one of the main conduits through which the currents of European Romanticism reached Whitman as he was preparing to launch himself on his poetic career. In "The American Scholar" (1837), Emerson wrote:

> It is a mischievous notion that we are come late into nature; that the world was finished a long time ago. As the world was plastic and fluid in the hands of God, so it is ever to so much of his attributes as we bring to it. To ignorance and sin, it is flint. They adapt themselves to it as they may; but in proportion as a man has any thing in him divine, the firmament flows before him and takes his signet and form.[19]

Although not focusing specifically on the poet, Emerson here suggests an authoritarian, rather than evolutionary, idea of transformation. Novelty in the world is not the result of a complex dynamic far beyond the power of particular individuals to direct, but rather it comes from those whose divine qualities allow them to impose themselves upon the order that confronts them and to alter it through sheer, overmastering spiritual might. The potentially chilling aspects of this view, with its elevation of the exceptional man over the masses who are incapable of anything save bowing to superior power, crops up from time to time in Emerson's essays, as it seems to do in the closing words of "Experience" (1844), words that might stiffen the resolve of a would-be despot: "the true romance which the world exists to realize, will be the transformation of genius into practical power."[20]

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[18]Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, Donald H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers, eds. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), p. 508.

[19]*Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson*, Stephen E. Whicher, ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), p. 75.

[20]Ibid., p. 274.

In the last years of his active writing career, however, Emerson seems to prune away such authoritarian attitudes, and comes much closer to the ideas that suffuse Whitman's poetry and writings about the function of exceptional innovators—especially poets—in the evolutionary processes that elude orchestration by any individual or institution, entities which, far from standing above events and directing them, gain what efficacy they have from their submission to and alignment with impersonal powers greater than they. Indeed, in his great late essay "Fate" (1860), whose title quite clearly points to limitations on the power of human beings to mold their destiny as they will, Emerson reverses his notion of what makes exceptional people great. No longer are they those who can make the world take their "signet and form." Rather, they are the ones who are most powerfully stamped by their times.

> Certain ideas are in the air. We are all impressionable, for we are made of them; all impressionable, but some more than others, and these first express them. . . . The truth is in the air, and the most impressionable brain will announce it first, but all will announce it a few minutes later. . . . So the great man, that is, the man most imbued with the spirit of the time, is the impressionable man,—of a fibre irritable and delicate, like iodine to light. He feels the infinitesimal attractions. His mind is righter than others, because he yields to a current so feeble as can be felt only by a needle delicately poised.[21]

Whitman voices very similar views in *Democratic Vistas*, where he adjures leaders not to impose their own ideas, but to align themselves with the times: "The master sees greatness and health in being part of the mass; nothing will do as well as common ground. Would you have in yourself the divine, vast, general law? Then merge yourself with it."[22] In *Song of Myself*, Whitman repeatedly disavows the idea that he is a lawgiver standing

[21]Ibid., p. 350.

[22]Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, p. 469.

above the mass, insisting, "It is you talking just as much as myself—I act as the tongue of you;/ Tied in your mouth, in mine it begins to be loosen'd,"[23] and, in a departure from the claims of originality one often expects in Romantic poets, he maintains that his thoughts "are not original with me;/ If they are not yours as much as mine, they are nothing, or next to nothing."[24] He even demands that his thoughts be discarded, as if any attempt to freeze a way of thinking into permanent law were a threat to freedom. "I teach straying from me," he writes, remarking: "He most honors my style who learns under it to destroy the teacher."[25]

It is worth noting that these views take their place in "Fate" within the late Emerson's somewhat Hegelian vision of the course of social evolution, a vision in which democracy is not so much an expedient solution to human problems that, had lawgivers happened to favor different arrangements, could have been solved some other way; democracy, rather, is a necessary, and possibly final, adjustment to the unalterable forces created when large numbers of human beings are brought together in a polity. After noting that inventors like Fulton and Watt had developed the steam engine by accommodating their machines to a force previously regarded only with dread, Emerson casts his eye on the very long term evolution of political forms.

> It has not fared much otherwise with higher kinds of steam. The opinion of the million was the terror of the world, and it was attempted, either to dissipate it, by amusing nations, or to pile it over with strata of society,—a layer of soldiers; over that, a layer of lords; and a king on the top; with clamps and hoops of castles, garrisons, and police. . . . The Fultons and Watts of politics, believing in unity, saw that it was a power, and, by satisfying it, (as justice satisfies everybody,) through a different disposition of society,—grouping it on a level, instead of piling it into a mountain,—they

[23]Ibid., p. 65.

[24]Ibid., p. 17.

[25]Ibid., p. 65.

> have contrived to make of this terror the most harmless and energetic form of a State.[26]

Keeping this Emersonian context in mind, we can better understand just what Whitman feels the "literatus" must accomplish, for Whitman, in spite of his manifest enthusiasm for democratic political institutions, believes that the basic outlook of the American people has not yet really caught up with their free political and economic institutions. He detects a kind of spiritual time lag in America, and asserts that, in cultural matters, the people have not yet successfully disentangled themselves from long entrenched European traditions. He claims that "feudalism, caste, the ecclesiastic traditions, though palpably retreating from political institutions, still hold essentially, by their spirit, even in this country, entire possession of the more important fields, indeed the very subsoil, of education, and of social standards and literature."[27] Consequently, *Democratic Vistas* at times reads like a jeremiad, as Whitman simultaneously celebrates key elements of spontaneous order—especially free political and economic institutions—while castigating the people for clinging to prejudices based on class and religious affiliation ("caste" and "ecclesiastic traditions"). "For my part," he writes,

> I would alarm and caution even the political and business reader, and to the utmost extent, against the prevailing delusion that the establishment of free political institutions, and plentiful intellectual smartness, with general good order, physical plenty, industry, etc. . . . do, of themselves, determine and yield to our experiment of democracy the fruitage of success.[28]

Insisting that "society, in these States, is canker'd, crude, superstitious and rotten,"[29] Whitman repeatedly embraces the tumult, the creative destruction, evident in the United States, while lamenting the people's reluctance to abandon a concept of

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[26]Emerson, *Selections*, p. 345.

[27]Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, pp. 456–57.

[28]Ibid., p. 460.

[29]Ibid., p. 461.

humanity in which race, religion, and status play central roles: "I hail with joy the oceanic, variegated, intense practical energy, the demand for facts, even the business materialism of the current age, our States. But woe to the age and land in which these things, movements, stopping at themselves, do not tend to ideas."[30]

Perhaps because of the frequently noted hostility to capitalism prevailing in the academy, critics have tended to misapprehend Whitman's basic orientation, especially in economic matters. Therefore, instead of seeing Whitman as someone who wants, as it were, to outfit his readers with the spiritual equipment that accords with free institutions, critics have used Whitman's dissatisfaction with America as evidence of his fundamental dislike of capitalism, although people making such claims need to argue away a good deal of countervailing evidence. A representative example is Richard Pascal's essay on "Whitman and the Pursuit of Wealth." Even though *Democratic Vistas* is notably lacking in passages concerning the disparity of incomes evident in free societies, or the plight of the poor, Pascal sees a calculating disingenuousness behind Whitman's professions of enthusiasm for the general material prosperity promoted by capitalism. He acknowledges that, "for all their spiritual shortcomings, Whitman admits, America's myriad worldly interests do function effectively as a complex network and hence serve a unifying purpose. Into the 'Vistas' creeps, from time to time, a modicum of admiration for the 'complicated business genius.'" According to Pascal, however, "such comments have something of the tone of an agnostic paying lip service to the official deities of the state," and Whitman includes them "[r]ealizing, perhaps, that many of the readers he wishes to influence would not respond happily to suggestions that the values exalted by the world of business and industry are less than progressive."[31] To be sure, in Whitman's view, people who think that getting rich is the final, or only, goal of human life are spiritually stunted, but that in itself is not enough to mark Whitman as a closet adversary

[30]Ibid., p. 496.

[31]Richard Pascal, "'Dimes on the Eyes': Walt Whitman and the Pursuit of Wealth in America," *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 44 (1989): 168.

of market forces. One can find more than a modicum of admiration in a passage like this one:

> I perceive clearly that the extreme business energy, and this almost maniacal appetite for wealth prevalent in the United States, are parts of amelioration and progress, indispensably needed to prepare the very results I demand. My theory includes riches, and the getting of riches, and the amplest products, power, activity, inventions, movements, etc.[32]

Indeed, as one might expect in an essay whose first paragraph includes a glowing reference to J.S. Mill's "profound essay on Liberty,"[33] *Democratic Vistas* displays a sophisticated understanding of the order deriving from the protection of private property, and even a certain disdain for people who fail to prosper once they have been unshackled from feudal restraints, and who themselves might have little stake in the maintenance of order.

> [A] great and varied nationality, occupying millions of square miles, were firmest held and knit by the principle of the safety and endurance of the aggregate of its middling property owners. So that, from another point of view, ungracious as it may sound, and a paradox after what we have been saying, democracy looks with suspicion, ill-satisfied eye upon the very poor, the ignorant, and on those out of business.[34]

At the root of Whitman's sense of what remains problematic about modern civilization, then, is not poverty or inequality of incomes, but rather the prejudices, especially those encouraged by organized religions, that encourage both a clannish separation of human beings into mutually suspicious groups and an otherworldliness hostile to happiness here on earth. As Richard Rorty observes, the "most striking feature" of Whitman's "redescription" of America is "its thoroughgoing secularism."[35]

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[32]Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, p. 471, n.

[33]Ibid., p. 455.

[34]Ibid., pp. 470–71.

[35]Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, p. 15.

While this is true insofar as it applies to Whitman's rejection of Christianity, the whole question of Whitman's relation to religion requires a good deal more qualification, as it goes to the heart of his poetic enterprise and of his vision of what the literatus can contribute to social evolution. For Whitman, in spite of his reservations about particular creeds, clearly and repeatedly states that religious impulses are essential to democracy, that they provide a key component of "adhesiveness" in the modern—or indeed any—order. In *Democratic Vistas* he speaks of religion as the "sole worthiest elevator of man or State," "breathing into the proud, material tissues, the breath of life. For I say at the core of democracy, finally, is the religious element. All the religions, old and new, are there."[36] As the ecumenicalism of the preceding sentence suggests, Whitman everywhere strives to engage people's religious yearning with the fulfillment of democratic ideals, while at the same time disengaging it from the sectarian supernaturalism that had been its chief object. In an attempt to temper religious fervor by redirecting the people's veneration away from the otherworldly and towards the things of this world, he argues that

> side by side with the unflagging elements of religion and conscience must henceforth move with equal sway, science, absolute reason, and the general proportionate development of the whole man . . . to prevent fanaticism. For abstract religion, I perceive, is easily led astray, ever credulous, and is capable of devouring, remorseless like fire and flame. . . . We want, for these States, for the general character, a cheerful, religious fervor, endued with the ever-present modifications of the human emotions, friendship, benevolence, with a fair field for scientific inquiry, the right of individual judgment, and always the cooling influences of material Nature.[37]

In his desire to shift the focus of religion away from the supernatural, an eternal realm of fixed values in comparison to which the world must always be found wanting, and to focus instead on

[36]Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, p. 469.

[37]Ibid., p. 494, n.

the particulars of life as actually lived, Whitman partakes in a very widespread enterprise evident in much of Romanticism generally. Although not deeply read in Hegel, Whitman did once remark, "Only Hegel is fit for America—is large enough and free enough,"[38] and the concluding words of Hegel's *The Philosophy of History* suggest the reasons for his affinity.

> That the History of the World, with all the changing scenes which its annals present, is [the] process of development and the realization of Spirit—this is the true Theodicæa, the justification of God in History. Only this insight can reconcile Spirit with the History of the World—viz., that what has happened, and is happening every day, is not only not "without God," but is essentially His Work.[39]

Hegel is not very frequently linked with Hayek, in part because the latter generally accepted the view of Hegel as an advocate of authoritarianism, a view popularized by Karl Popper in *The Open Society and its Enemies*, but Hayek's thoughts on the future of religious veneration and its relation to the workings of spontaneous order not only accord with Hegel's sense of God's immanence in history, but also offer a vantage from which we can understand the religious element of Whitman's poetry. Suggesting that the whole idea of supernatural lawgiver might result from people's failure to understand that order is a spontaneously generated property of human interaction, Hayek writes,

> The conception of a man-like or mind-like acting being appears to me rather the product of an arrogant overestimation of the capacities of a man-like mind. . . . The source of order that religion ascribes to a human-like divinity—the map or guide that will show a part successfully how to move within the whole—we now learn to see to be not outside the physical world but one of its characteristics, one far too complex for any of its parts possibly to form an "image" or "picture" of it. . . . Yet perhaps most people can conceive of abstract

[38]Quoted in Rorty, *Achieving Our Country*, p. 20.

[39]Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, J. Sibree, trans. (New York: Dover, 1956), p. 457.

> tradition only as a personal Will. If so, will they not be inclined to find this will in "society" in an age in which more overt supernaturalisms are ruled out as superstitious?
>
> On that question may rest the survival of our civilisation.[40]

If we turn to Whitman's most explicit dismissal of religious traditions, found in his masterpiece, *Song of Myself*, we can see it as an almost systematic application of such thinking, as the poet attempts to understand all religion ("It is middling well as far as it goes,"[41] he opines) as a symptom of an immature evaluation of the world. Dissatisfied with what creeds tell him, he then undertakes a comically iconoclastic survey of world religions, treating them as if they were only suggestive subjects for more daring and modern works of art, rough guides for the creation of a new way of being in the world.

> Magnifying and applying come I,
> Outbidding at the start the old cautious hucksters,
> Taking myself the exact dimensions of Jehovah,
> Lithographing Kronos, Zeus his son, and Hercules his grandson;
> Buying drafts of Osiris, Isis, Belus, Brahma, Buddha,
> In my portfolio placing Manito loose, Allah on a leaf, the crucifix engraved,
> With Odin, and the hideous-faced Mexitli, and every idol and image;
> Taking them all for what they are worth, and not a cent more;
> Admitting they were alive and did the work of their days;
> (They bore mites, as for unfledg'd birds, who have now to rise and fly and sing for themselves;)
> Accepting the rough deific sketches to fill out better in myself.[42]

[40]F.A. Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism*, vol. 1 of *The Collected Works of F.A. Hayek*, W.W. Bartley III, ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 139–40.

[41]Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, p. 58.

[42]Ibid.

For Whitman, religion has played a role in the education of humanity, providing a fundamental orientation that nerved human beings for their work in a world of whose operations they had no valid theoretical understanding. As earlier religionists could not understand order as one of the inherent characteristics of the physical world, the sages and personal gods the poet claps in his portfolio offered a necessary assurance of some metaphysical source of the order they saw around them, as no other source was conceivable.

That this supernaturalism has now become an encumbrance is evident when Whitman turns away from it to examine the world formerly seen only as evidence of a creative force lying outside it. Veneration of a metaphysical source of order has caused people to undervalue what lies before them, leading Whitman to insist that "[t]he supernatural [is] of no account" and that "The bull and the bug [were] never worship'd half enough;/ Dung and dirt [are] more admirable than was dream'd."[43] Acknowledging that religion once provided sustenance, he himself discovers

> . . . as much, or more, in a framer framing a house;
> Putting higher claims for him there with his roll'd-up sleeves, driving the mallet and chisel;
> Not objecting to special revelations—considering a curl of smoke, or a hair on the back of my hand, just as curious as any revelation.[44]

It is even tempting to see in this section the outlines of an implied theory of the origins of religious thinking, as he compares normal human beings to traditional divinities or applies to them formulae borrowed from Christian teachings. He considers "Lads ahold of fire-engines and hook-and-ladder ropes no less to me than the Gods of the antique wars," and is transfixed by

> . . . the mechanic's wife with her babe at her nipple interceding for every person born;
> Three scythes at harvest whizzing in a row from three

[43]Ibid., p. 58.

[44]Ibid.

> lusty angels with shirts bagg'd out at their waists;
> The snag-tooth'd hostler with red hair redeeming sins
> past and to come,
> Selling all he possesses, traveling on foot to fee
> lawyers for his brother, and sit by him while he is
> tried for forgery.[45]

As Thoreau had done in *Walden* by writing, "In a pleasant spring morning all men's sins are forgiven,"[46] Whitman redescribes the salvation that Christians ascribe to a divinity working for the eventual redemption of humankind as an inherent property of existence and action. It is as if humanity as a whole had perpetually suffered from the ignorance Whitman sees in himself in "Song of the Open Road"—"I am larger, better than I thought,/ I did not know I held so much goodness"[47]—and as a result the magnanimity of which people are capable prompted them to imagine divine beings outside nature to account for it. Turning away from such divinities, Whitman attempts to instill in his readers what he calls "a cheerful, religious fervor," but one that has as its object not a personal god, but rather the natural course of human activity.

Of all the habits of thought that Whitman sees as stemming from traditional religious thinking, perhaps none is more troublesome, in his view, than the idea that the world is moving towards a goal whose character has been already established by scriptural authority. His attack on human beings' inveterate teleological inclinations seems particularly important as we try to situate him within a tradition of thinking about spontaneous order, since his hostility to the idea that human beings must consciously bring their surroundings into conformity with a preexisting plan suggests his belief that society has evolved and will continue to evolve in ways that defy even the most elaborate attempts to impose order from above with particular goals in mind, as his rejection of at least certain strands of Progressivism

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[45]Ibid.

[46]*"Walden" and Other Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, Brooks Atkinson, ed. (New York: Modern Library, 1965), p. 280.

[47]Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, p. 110.

confirms. The problem with Progressivism is that it is not radically progressive enough; by establishing certain standards as a measure of society's approach to a stipulated goal, it neglects unforeseen contingencies and may well discourage novelties whose innovative power is not yet recognized by social planners. Of course not all social planners are Christians, but from the perspective offered in Whitman's work they still exhibit a liking for teleology that marks them as the heirs to religious thinking of which they may think they have divested themselves.

To counter such ingrained tendencies, Whitman frequently puts before his readers the limitlessness of time and the unpredictability of what developments are ahead.

> I tramp a perpetual journey—(come listen all!)
> My signs are a rain-proof coat, good shoes, and a staff
> cut from the woods;
> No friend of mine takes his ease in my chair;
> I have no chair, no church, no philosophy;
> I lead no man to a dinner-table, library, or exchange;
> But each man and each woman of you I lead upon a
> knoll,
> My left hand hooking you round the waist,
> My right hand pointing to landscapes of continents,
> and a plain public road.[48]

"See ever so far," he writes, "there is limitless space outside of that,/ Count ever so much, there is limitless time around that."[49] Even more explicitly disavowing the importance of imagining a resting point at which human arrangements can be judged perfect, and standing up for infinite progress that is nonetheless non-teleological, he writes,

> I have heard what the talkers were talking, the talk of
> the beginning and the end;
> But I do not talk of the beginning or the end.
> There was never any more inception than there is now,
> Nor any more youth or age than there is now;

[48]Ibid., pp. 63–64.

[49]Ibid., p. 63.

> And will never be any more perfection than there is now,
> Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now. 35
>
> Urge, and urge, and urge;
> Always the procreant urge of the world.[50]

Again making clear his antipathy towards the parts of our religious inheritance that compel us to see some foreordained end (heaven or hell) as a standard by which we judge earthly existence, Whitman attempts, like his great teacher Emerson, to turn attention to the here and now. As Emerson writes in "Self-Reliance,"

> These roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones; they are for what they are; they exist with God to-day. . . . But man postpones or remembers; he does not live in the present, but with reverted eye laments the past, or, heedless of the riches that surround him, stands on tiptoe to foresee the future. He cannot be happy and strong until he too lives with nature in the present.[51]

If the goal of Whitman's poetry is to accommodate human beings to the world by imbuing the impersonal, evolutionary forces of the spontaneous order with the grandeur that made personal gods seem fit objects of veneration, perhaps his greatest obstacle is the hankering after stability that the ceaseless dynamism of such an order everywhere frustrates. In addition to the alarming economic realities from which governments often try to protect the people—unpredictable fluctuation in prices, the hardship faced by workers thrown out of outmoded trades and forced to find a place in new ones, sudden reverses in the fortunes of individuals, families, or whole regions—there is what can be seen as an almost aesthetic component to people's suspicion of modernity. Orderliness of a kind whose symmetries and regularities can be defined and enumerated ranks high on many people's list of qualities desirable both in works of art and in societies, and

[50]Ibid., p. 26.

[51]Emerson, *Selections*, p. 157.

those in the grip of such predilections are likely to bestow the word "chaotic" on everything from a painting by Jackson Pollock to the conditions that prevail in free markets.

With such widespread attitudes in mind, we can see in *Song of Myself* Whitman's attempt to offer his readers an aesthetic education that will let them appreciate the apparently disorderly order of modernity, and this education is accomplished above all by the poem's formal qualities. Lyric poetry, with its repertoire of rhyme, meter, and stanza structure, is usually thought of as the most elaborately and precisely patterned of literary forms, and thus might seem the genre least suited to capturing the hubbub evident on the ground of a free society. Indeed, for generations now the novel, with its apparent capacity to absorb all manner of materials and styles, has been viewed by critics as the modern literary genre *par excellence*, and its emergence as a leading form has frequently been tied to the rise of modern capitalist culture. Nevertheless, in *Song of Myself* Whitman fashioned an entirely new kind of poem that brought to the lyric a striking formal elasticity and even wildness that turn it into something roughly analogous to the emergent social forms that are its subject.

To argue that a poem, or indeed any linguistic artifact, mimics the characteristics of a spontaneous order may seem odd. The fact that in order to communicate at all an author must, at a bare minimum, submit to grammar would seem to rule out intelligible texts from the class of items that can be considered spontaneously ordered. *Song of Myself* certainly does not resemble, for example, the computer-generated gibberish designed to foil email filtering systems, such as the following: "fastidious herr flanagan ignominious brandenburg calumniate aitken counteract barney blood conjugal canal implausible indecisive pastime." Indeed, even this nonsense is not truly spontaneous, since the legibility of words themselves relies on preexisting rules ensuring that a particular set of phonemes will represent a particular idea. Moreover, even if we overlook the rule-following inherent in the use of words and syntax, we might be inclined to demand that a text whose order we are willing to call spontaneous be nothing but a chain of randomly juxtaposed sentences whose content need not be regulated by what we know of the world: "The third llama erected in fifty-first-century Manchester was shoe polish.

Apparently the weather turned spatial. However, drywall is good enough. Colorless green ideas sleep furiously." Even if we threw out the obligation to include nonsensical sentences, we would still end up with a text displaying infinitely less order and discernable intent than Whitman's poem does.

Far from scuttling the proposition that *Song of Myself* approximates a spontaneous order, such observations lead us to a more precise analogy between Whitman's poetic form and the social structures described by Hayek and others sharing his general orientation. What we have just seen is that orders may be at one and the same time spontaneous with regard to certain criteria but not with regard to others. After all, even the randomly generated list of words above is not spontaneous all the way down to the ground, as it relies on lexical conventions (to say nothing of the conventions of orthography). Similarly, the sentences about shoe polish llamas and spatial weather follow the rules of syntax, but display a spontaneous disregard for conventional meanings, just as a random list of sentences that stuck to sensible assertions would still be free from rules of rhetoric. Each step on the ladder of intelligibility (from lexicon, to syntax, to semantics, to rhetoric) offers a platform for the creation of texts whose elements have not been coordinated in the way that the higher-level rules demand. Thus, to apply Hayek's description of social structures to this textual model, "it is possible that an order which would still have to be described as spontaneous rests on rules which are entirely the result of deliberate design."[52] Spontaneous orders, in Hayek's sense, are not called upon to reconstitute themselves from the bottom up at every moment of their existence; instead, they may build themselves upon a lower level of rule-abiding behavior. Thus, for Hayek the paradigmatic spontaneous order, the economy, arises from the interaction of planned, goal-driven activity by individuals and organizations. Corporations aim to

[52]F.A. Hayek, *Rules and Order*, vol. 1 of *Law, Legislation and Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 46. Of course the lower-order rules on which the spontaneous order rests need not—and frequently are not—the result of deliberate design; those rules, too, may have been generated spontaneously, as, indeed, it seems grammatical rules themselves were.

achieve particular ends, and are administered so that those ends may be achieved; the economy created by the interaction of corporations, individuals, and other organizations aims at nothing, and no central administration is required for it to function.

To understand *Song of Myself* (or any other text) as an attempt to translate, as it were, the form of a spontaneous order into the language of a literary work, one need not therefore demand that it display spontaneity of every kind at every moment. What is required is that the poem be seen as a compilation of discrete textual units that, while displaying ample signs of organization within themselves, are juxtaposed in a way that defies the strictures of rhetorical or thematic cohesion. Certainly in Whitman's poem those units are not the individual sentences that make up the poem; if they were randomly rearranged, we would have a curiosity on our hands, but not a work of any considerable literary power. Better candidates are the fifty-two chunks of text that Whitman, in later editions of *Song of Myself*, set off as numbered sections (or "chants," as many Whitman scholars refer to them). These sections vary in character—there are narratives, catalogues, meditations, parables—but they each display an internal cohesion lacking in the poem as a whole. Although the very first and very last sections do smack of an introduction and a conclusion, respectively, the sprawling middle consists of units that, like the fifty-two cards of a standard deck, could probably be shuffled about without damaging the integrity of the poem or seriously altering its overall effect.

To be sure, the correspondence between the poem and the spontaneous order cannot be perfect; by definition, a spontaneous order is not designed, and obviously Whitman himself, guided by his characteristic principles of selection, decided what would and would not find its way into his work. Moreover, the poem, unlike a spontaneous order, does appear to have an aim, as I have suggested: to accommodate humanity to a world lacking the hierarchical securities of what Whitman sees as a lingering feudalism. The very fact that Whitman wants us to like his work, and to feel at home in the messy but elusively coherent world it depicts, makes *Song of Myself* something other than truly spontaneous. A spontaneous order has no designs on us; it simply is. Surely these are not negligible qualifications, but they do

not prevent us from seeing the poem as Whitman's attempt to provide a textual model for the kind of world we in fact inhabit, and to offer us a sentimental education that complements the education of the intellect put forward by the likes of Adam Smith, J.S. Mill, and Hayek.

Those approaching *Song of Myself* for the first time, especially if they are used to more traditional kinds of lyric poetry, are likely to feel disoriented. More than 1,300 lines long, it contains no single, overarching narrative, respects neither chronology nor geography, moves freely between concrete particulars and exalted meditation, and exhibits very little in the way of a uniformly logical organization. Whitman even works the reader's likely confusion into the poem, declaring at the end, "You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,/ But I shall be good health to you nevertheless."[53] Early in the poem he gently mocks readers intent on abstracting a theme from the work, which, he suggests, aims not at implanting a lesson in the reader's heart but rather at changing the way the reader views the world.

> Have you practis'd so long to learn to read?
> Have you felt so proud to get at the meaning of poems?
>
> Stop this day and night with me, and you shall possess
> the origin of all poems;
> You shall possess the good of the earth and sun—
> (there are millions of suns left;)
> You shall no longer take things at second or third
> hand, nor look through the eyes of the dead, nor
> feed on the spectres in books;
> You shall not look through my eyes either, nor take
> things from me:
> You shall listen to all sides, and filter them from yourself.[54]

He asks us to imagine the poem, then, not as a message that we need to decode in order to arrive at its meaning, but rather as almost a kind of economy, a vast interlacing of elements that, without yielding an articulable theme, do form a system that

[53]Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, p. 68.

[54]Ibid., p. 26.

somehow coheres, and that can be held in the mind, as in a solution, as a satisfying aesthetic whole. There is, then, a latent hostility in the poem to the idea of engineering parts to make a specific contribution towards some foreordained conclusion, and for this reason the poem accords with the notion that the world is an ever-evolving network of relations that is not aimed towards a particular goal, and whose "meaning," if it makes sense to talk of one, consists only of its ceaseless, unpredictable development.

It is hardly surprising that many of Whitman's commentators have been unable to resist imposing a kind of plan or outline on the apparent chaos of the poem. James E. Miller, Jr., for example, asserts

> it is useful, if one does not attempt too rigid an application, to outline the poem in terms of the traditional mystical experience:
>
> | | | |
> |---|---|---|
> | I. | Sections 1–5: | Entry into the mystical state |
> | II. | Sections 6–16: | Awakening of self |
> | III. | Sections 17–32: | Purification of self |
> | IV. | Sections 33–37: | Illumination and the dark night of the soul |
> | V. | Sections 38–43: | Union (emphasis on faith and love) |
> | VI. | Sections 44–49: | Union (emphasis on perception) |
> | VII. | Sections 50–52: | Emergence from the mystical state[55] |

Even if we accept as valid Miller's structure of the mystical experience, and take into account his own admission that this plan cannot accommodate every particular, it seems doubtful at best that such outlines really do contribute much towards our experience of the poem, especially since it seems likely that a reader given a section of the poem and then asked to identify its place in the scheme would not hit on the right answer very often. (Whitman's dismissal of religious traditions, for example, can be found in what Miller sees as the fifth section—"Union [emphasis on faith and love]".) To be sure, a sufficiently clever critic could mount an argument explaining why any given line belongs in any given thematic grouping, but that is more a testimony to a

[55]Miller, "Introduction," *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, p. xlviii.

critical rage for regularized order than to the allegedly inherent, if elusive, orderliness of *Song of Myself*.

Rather than challenging us to wedge the multifariousness of *Song of Myself* into a traditional concept of ordered experience, Whitman asks us to reconceive orderliness itself, and to entertain the idea that order of some kind exists even where no one authority is guiding or directing the events of the world, or when the poet has refused the task of hammering his materials into some shape of regular outline. In this respect he resembles his contemporary, Charles Baudelaire, who, like Whitman, drew inspiration from the variegated texture of modern urban life. Noting the paradoxical coincidence of order and disorder in the metropolis, Baudelaire asserts that the modern artist "marvels at the eternal beauty and the amazing harmony of life in the capital cities, a harmony so providentially maintained amid the turmoil of human freedom," and has as his task "seeking out and expounding the beauty of modernity," "this transitory, fugitive element, whose metamorphosis is so rapid."[56] These statements read like a gloss on Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," a meditation on the bustle of lower Manhattan in which the poet is inspired even by those aspects of the modern city that appall many critics of modern life: "Burn high you fires, foundry chimneys! cast black shadows at nightfall! cast red and yellow light over the tops of the houses!"[57] The poet sees "perfection" in the unregulated activity of the city, even though the city defies our attempts fully to comprehend what is going on in it and what all the activity is tending toward:

> Thrive cities—bring your freight, bring your shows,
> ample and sufficient rivers,
> Expand, being than which none else is perhaps more
> spiritual
> . . . .
> We fathom you not—we love you—there is perfection
> in you also.[58]

[56]Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, Jonathan Mayne, trans. (London: Phaidon, 1964), pp. 11, 15.

[57]Whitman, *Complete Poetry and Selected Prose*, p. 120.

[58]Ibid.

One can get a better idea of the way Whitman sees harmony in the midst of turmoil by sampling a slightly more than sonnet-sized excerpt of *Song of Myself*, taken from one of the extended "catalogues" that punctuate the poem, great lists that aspire to capture the astonishing variety of America without either insisting we see that variety as tending towards a univocal purpose or despairing at the sheer incoherence of phenomena.

The prostitute draggles her shawl, her bonnet bobs on
her tipsy and pimpled neck;
The crowd laugh at her blackguard oaths, the men jeer
and wink to each other;
(Miserable! I do not laugh at your oaths, nor jeer you;)
The President, holding a cabinet council, is
surrounded by the Great Secretaries,
On the piazza walk three matrons stately and friendly
with twined arms,
The crew of the fish-smack pack repeated layers of
halibut in the hold;
The Missourian crosses the plains, toting his wares
and his cattle;
As the fare-collector goes through the train, he gives
notice by the jingling of loose change;
The floor-men are laying the floor—the tinners are
tinning the roof—the masons are calling for mortar;
In single file, each shouldering his hod, pass onward
the laborers;
Seasons pursuing each other, the indescribable crowd
is gather'd—it is the Fourth of Seventh-month—
(What salutes of cannon and small arms!)
Seasons pursuing each other, the plougher ploughs,
the mower mows, and the winter-grain falls in the
ground;
Off on the lakes the pike-fisher watches and waits by
the hole in the frozen surface;
The stumps stand thick round the clearing, the
squatter strikes deep with his axe;
Flatboatmen make fast, towards dusk, near the
cottonwood or pekan-trees;
Coon-seekers go through the regions of the Red river,
or through those drain'd by the Tennessee, or through
those of the Arkansaw;
Torches shine in the dark that hangs on the Chattahoochee
or Altamahaw;

> Patriarchs sit at supper with sons and grandsons and
> great-grandsons around them;
> In walls of adobie, in canvas tents, rest hunters and
> trappers after their day's sport.[59]

In spite of the characteristic emphasis on the everyday facts of commerce and labor, nothing could be further from the spirit of these lines than, to pick an example from far afield, a similarly expansive piece of Soviet propaganda in which workers of all kinds are seen as united by their labor to glorify the State. Each of Whitman's vignettes preserves its subject's sharp individuality, and their unity resides not in some common aim, but rather in the way each of them, regardless of region, race, or class, engages in an ongoing drama of self-realization—sometimes, to be sure, as in the case of the prostitute, with pathetic results.

In his poetry and prose, then, Whitman provides something of a training ground for the development of a new kind of aesthetic appreciation, an appreciation that he hopes will carry over from his readers' experience of the poem into their experience of the world, a world from which the traditional signposts of hierarchical—or, as Whitman tended to say, feudal—order have been largely eradicated. For the aesthetic wholeness of *Song of Myself* resembles the wholeness of a spontaneous order, a wholeness that, although its general character can be grasped by the reflecting intelligence, incorporates teeming particulars, many of whose links to one another are not readily apparent, and that resist the comprehensive mastery that would allow them to be marshaled in support of an overarching program. Both *Song of Myself* and the spontaneous order constitute wholes that, to adopt the terms of Whitman's description of the city in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," can be loved, even if they cannot be fathomed.

[59]Ibid., pp. 35–36.

6

The Invisible Man and the Invisible Hand: H.G. Wells's Critique of Capitalism

Paul A. Cantor

One might wonder whether these intellectuals are not sometimes inspired by resentment that they, knowing better what ought to be done, are paid so much less than those whose instructions and activities in fact guide practical affairs. Such literary interpreters of scientific and technological advance, of which H.G. Wells, because of the unusually high quality of his work, would be an excellent example, have done far more to spread the socialist ideal of a centrally directed economy in which each is assigned his due share than have the real scientists from whom they have cadged many of their notions.

—Friedrich Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit*

Science! What we want now is socialism—not science.

—H.G. Wells, *In the Days of the Comet*

I.

First published in 1897, H.G. Wells's *The Invisible Man* has given birth to innumerable literary imitations, film adaptations, and even a couple of television series, thus becoming a kind of modern myth. In Wells's hands, the story of Griffin, the University College student who finds a way to make himself

invisible, becomes a parable of the dangerous power of modern science. Driven to his experiments by a fierce ambition in the first place, Griffin grows increasingly megalomaniacal once he becomes invisible. He thus takes his place in a line of literary portrayals of mad scientists that stretches back to Mary Shelley's Victor Frankenstein, the prototype of the man who isolates himself from his fellows to pursue an ambitious project and in the process loses his humanity, unleashing forces he can neither truly understand nor control. Interest in *The Invisible Man* has understandably tended to focus on the scientific aspects of the tale, especially the questions Wells raises about the ethics of modern technology.[1]

But as often happens in Wells's work, the science fiction situation in *The Invisible Man* provides a vehicle for exploring a larger set of economic and political problems that preoccupied him throughout his career. In particular, although Griffin's invisibility has scientific causes, it largely has economic effects, above all, on the movement and transfer of money. To put it bluntly, the chief use Griffin makes of his invisibility is to rob people of their cash:

> The story of the flying money was true. And all about that neighbourhood, even from the August London and Country Banking Company, from the tills of shops and inns . . . money had been quietly and dexterously making off that day in handfuls and rouleaux, floating quietly along by walls and shady places, dodging quickly from the approaching eyes of men. And it had, though no man had traced it, invariably ended its mysterious flight in the pocket of that agitated gentleman.[2]

Wells calls attention to the difficulty of tracing the movement of money. In our age of offshore banking and all sorts of money

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[1]See, for example, Bernard Bergonzi, *The Early H.G. Wells: A Study of the Scientific Romances* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1961), p. 120 and Richard Hauer Costa, *H.G. Wells* (Boston: Twayne, 1985), pp. 19–21.

[2]H.G. Wells, *The Invisible Man,* David Luke, ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 70. All quotations are taken from this Oxford World's Classics edition, with an Introduction by John Sutherland.

laundering schemes, we hardly need to be reminded that the circulation of money can be mysterious even without a literally invisible man behind it. Perhaps, then, Wells's *The Invisible Man* is an economic as well as a scientific parable, with money as one of its central subjects.[3]

For Wells, Griffin's invisibility symbolizes the working of an impersonal, decentralized, and—in Wells's view—dangerously chaotic market economy, which fails to respect the dictates of either traditional communal ties or established government authorities. In effect, what is most significant about Griffin is his invisible *hand*. In his *Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith had argued that in an unfettered market economy, an invisible hand guides the self-seeking actions of individual entrepreneurs for the good of the community as a whole.[4] In sharp contrast to Smith, Wells

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[3]It is surprising how few critics have explored the economic dimension of *The Invisible Man*. The only one I have been able to find is Roslynn D. Haynes, who, in her *H.G. Wells: Discoverer of the Future: The Influence of Science on His Thought* (London: Macmillan, 1980), makes a passing comment on Griffin's "bourgeois mania for financial gain" (p. 203).

[4]The phrase "invisible hand" actually occurs four times in Wells's narrative (see pp. 76, 84, 85, and 90). Given the situation Wells was dealing with, this may have been inevitable, but it might be a covert reference to what is after all Adam Smith's most famous phrase. That Wells was familiar with Smith is evident from the fact that he mentions him in his *A Modern Utopia* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1905), p. 85. The only critic I have found who mentions Smith in connection with *The Invisible Man* is Frank McConnell, *The Science Fiction of H.G. Wells* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 114, but he is simply making a general point about the nineteenth-century novel "as capitalist fable." A precedent for using invisibility to symbolize the power of capitalism can be found in Richard Wagner's opera, *Das Rheingold*. There the villain Alberich uses the magic of the Tarnhelm to make himself invisible and tyrannize over his fellow dwarves in Nibelheim, forcing them to amass treasure for him. Alberich thus becomes a symbol of the capitalist boss enslaving and exploiting the working class. That this interpretation of Wagner was circulating in Wells's England is evident from George Bernard Shaw's *The Perfect Wagnerite*, first published in 1898. See especially Shaw's characterization of Alberich's rule over the Nibelungs:

> For his gain, hordes of his fellow-creatures are thenceforth condemned to slave miserably . . . lashed to their work by the invisible whip of starvation. They never see him, any

was a socialist. Indeed, he was a principal force in shaping the course that socialist theory and practice took in twentieth-century Britain; he is generally regarded as one of the architects of the modern welfare state. It should come as no surprise, then, that Wells uses his parable of the Invisible Man to call Smith's economic theories into question, presenting Griffin as a monster of egoism and finding chaos and catastrophe where Smith had seen order and progress. Thus, *The Invisible Man* offers an opportunity to examine Wells's critique of capitalism, both the substance of his arguments and the motives behind his hostility to the free market. In particular, we will see that Wells had special reasons as a creative writer for criticizing the impersonality of the market economy and its invisible ordering forces.

II.

The key to understanding *The Invisible Man* is the dual setting of the story. The novel largely takes place in the rural village of Iping and other rustic parts of England. But in Griffin's flashback narrative of how he became invisible, the scene shifts to the urban metropolis of London. *The Invisible Man* turns on the contrast between life in a small village and life in a big city. In fact, despite all the novelty of its science fiction premise, *The Invisible Man* explores territory already quite familiar in nineteenth-century British literature, from William Wordsworth to Thomas Hardy. Like a Romantic poet or a Victorian novelist, Wells juxtaposes the tradition-bound, community-oriented existence of a rural village with the *anomie* and rootless cosmopolitanism of a modern metropolis. In moving from London to a country village, Griffin creates the dramatic tension in the story, a confrontation between antithetical ways of life. As Wells describes Griffin's situation: "His irritability, though it might have been comprehensible to an urban brain-worker, was an amazing thing to these

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> more than the victims of our "dangerous trades" ever see the shareholders whose power is nevertheless everywhere, driving them to destruction.

Quoted from George Bernard Shaw, *Major Critical Essays* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 198. See also p. 205.

quiet Sussex villagers."[5] Wells portrays Iping as a tightknit community: everybody knows everybody else, and indeed everybody minds everybody else's business. The citizens of Iping are close-minded and superstitious, easily upset by anything that might disturb the regularity of their existence. In the opening pages of the novel, Griffin arrives in Iping as the quintessential stranger, unknown to anyone in the village and visibly alien by virtue of his grotesque appearance in a disguise calculated to conceal his invisibility (one of the locals even speculates that Griffin may be racially distinct from the townsfolk).[6]

In these circumstances the only thing that gets Griffin accepted in Iping is money. The novel opens with a prototypical market transaction. Griffin gets a room at the inn, not because of "human charity" as he at first suggests, but because of his ability to "strike" a "bargain" and pay the going rate.[7] Money in and of itself already confers a kind of invisibility on Griffin. Even in a town of busybodies, he is able to remain anonymous. As nosy as the innkeeper, Mrs. Hall, is, she does not even bother to learn Griffin's name as long as he pays his bills on time.[8] Indeed, money buys a lot of maneuvering room for Griffin. His strange and reclusive habits arouse the suspicions of the narrow-minded villagers, some of whom believe that he must be a criminal hiding from the police.[9] But at least in the case of Mrs. Hall, Griffin is able to calm her down whenever she complains about the damage he has done to his lodgings with a simple offer to pay for it: "Put it down in the bill."[10] As Mrs. Hall herself says: "He may be

[5]*Invisible Man*, p. 21.

[6]Mistaking Griffin's invisibility for blackness, one of the villagers thinks "he's a kind of half-breed" (p. 18). Wells in effect anticipates the use that Ralph Ellison was to make of invisibility as a symbol in his novel *Invisible Man*. Ellison may have been the first to realize that Wells was using Griffin's invisibility as a symbol of the way an individual can be marginalized by the prejudices of his society. On the parallels with Ellison, see John Sutherland's "Introduction" in Luke, ed., *Invisible Man*, p. xxii.

[7]*Invisible Man*, p. 1.

[8]Ibid., p. 22.

[9]Ibid., p. 20.

[10]Ibid., p. 17.

a bit overbearing, but bills settled punctual is bills settled punctual, whatever you like to say."[11]

We thus see how money transforms a traditional community. The citizens of Iping are used to dealing face-to-face with people well-known to them; as one of the villagers says: "I'd like to see a man's face if I had him stopping in *my* place."[12] But a complete stranger is able to live among them by virtue of the power of money, which stands for the impersonal working of the market.[13] One would think that Wells would welcome this power as a force for progress. As he himself demonstrates, a market transaction allows perfect strangers, who may even have reasons to be hostile to each other, to cooperate for their mutual benefit. Money seems to be a way of greatly expanding the range of social interaction. And in Wells's portrayal, villages like Iping certainly look as if they could use some broadening of their horizons. On the whole, Wells treats the villagers comically, making us laugh at their conventionality and superstitiousness. Nevertheless, he seems to take their side, accepting their way of life as the measure of normality and presenting the Invisible Man as the sinister figure, the one who in his secretiveness and obsessive concern for privacy disrupts the peaceful functioning of the village community. Wells reserves his truly sharp criticism for the modern city, for London.

In the London section of the narrative, Griffin's invisibility oddly comes to symbolize the weakness and vulnerability of modern man, the way he becomes a non-entity under the pressure of mass society, the way he gets lost in the shuffle of the urban crowd, turning into a sort of "nothingness."[14] In contrast to the later cinematic versions of the story, Wells from the beginning tends to emphasize the disadvantages of invisibility. Griffin has of course high hopes for what his invisibility will allow him

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[11]Ibid., p. 19.

[12]Ibid., p. 11.

[13]Money is one respect in which the big city has already penetrated even this small village; the name of the local bank is the London and Country Banking Company. Money links the country with the city.

[14]*Invisible Man*, p. 93.

to do, but once he actually becomes invisible, almost the first thing he discovers is how much trouble his new condition is going to cause him. Emerging triumphantly into the streets of London, expecting to "revel in [his] extraordinary advantage,"[15] Griffin finds himself instead buffeted by the mass of people in the big city: "But hardly had I emerged upon Great Portland Street . . . when I heard a clashing concussion and was hit violently behind. . . . I tried to get into the stream of people, but they were too thick for me, and in a moment my heels were being trodden upon."[16] Hoping to be a god in the eyes of his fellow Londoners, Griffin at first finds that he is quite literally nothing to them; they walk right into and over him. Griffin's invisibility is simply an extreme case of a common urban problem. Many nineteenth-century novelists explored the anxiety of the individual threatened with the loss of his identity in a mass society. Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* is perhaps the best example. Like Griffin, Dostoevsky's protagonist suffers the indignity of having people walk right by him on a St. Petersburg street as if he were nothing.[17]

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[15]Ibid., p. 105.

[16]Ibid., pp. 105–06.

[17]Here is Dostoevsky's underground man strolling along Nevsky Prospect:

> I slipped in and out among the promenading crowd in a most unbecoming fashion, continually stepping out of the way of generals, cavalry officers, hussars, ladies. . . . It was sheer torture, a continuous intolerable sense of humiliation at the idea . . . that I was nothing but a fly before all that fine society.

The underground man is particularly humiliated by an encounter with an officer he knows: "He also stepped out of the way of generals and personages of rank; but men of my ilk . . . he simply crushed; he walked right at them, as if there were but empty space before him, and never yielded the way." Quoted in the translation of Mirra Ginsburg, *Notes from Underground* (New York: Bantam Books, 1974), pp. 60–61. The situation of the Invisible Man in London literalizes what Dostoevsky presents metaphorically. Ralph Ellison's notion of the invisible man also turns on the idea that his fellow human beings refuse to recognize him: "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. . . . When they approach me they see only

Griffin's invisibility thus becomes a striking image for everything Wells is trying to show about the impersonality of the market economy. In the small village of Iping, Griffin's problem is that all eyes are upon him; everybody wants to butt into his business. His problem in London is just the opposite; in the big city he is completely ignored. Griffin himself eloquently describes the unfeeling, uncaring character of the big city:

> I had no refuge, no appliances, no human being in the world in whom I could confide. . . . I was half minded to accost some passer-by and throw myself upon his mercy. But I knew too clearly the terror and brutal cruelty my advances would evoke. . . . Even to me, an Invisible Man, the rows of London houses stood latched, barred, and bolted impregnably.[18]

In contrast to Iping, London is a thoroughly impersonal community, in which no one knows anybody else, or at least a man can be virtually unknown to his next-door neighbors. Wells seems to suggest that even without his fiendish experiments, Griffin would be in effect invisible in London. Wells uses invisibility in this metaphorical sense in his later novel *Tono-Bungay* (1908) when he describes the situation of a young student who comes to London and finds himself lost in the crowd:

> In the first place I became invisible. If I idled for a day, no one except my fellow students (who evidently had no awe of me) remarked it. No one saw my midnight taper; no one pointed me out as I crossed the street as an astonishing intellectual phenomenon.[19]

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my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me." See Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: New American Library, 1952), p. 7. McConnell plausibly argues for the influence of Wells's *The Invisible Man* on Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent*, "especially in the celebrated last scene of the novel, where the Professor is described as passing, unseen, like a plague among men" (*Science Fiction*, p. 116).

[18]Ibid., p. 110.

[19]H.G. Wells, *Tono-Bungay* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 112. For more on invisibility as an image of modern urban existence, see Sutherland's "Introduction" in Luke, ed., *Invisible Man*, p. xxvi.

The modern urban metropolis is a peculiarly attenuated form of community, in which people live together but have very little in common. Wells emphasizes this point by giving Griffin "an old Polish Jew" as a landlord in London,[20] who speaks Yiddish at a key moment.[21] London is not simply a paradoxical community of strangers; it is in fact a community of foreigners, who sometimes do not even speak the same language.

For Wells, then, to be invisible in London is to be an individual in a vast, impersonal market economy, which provides no genuine roots or community and which hence turns a man into a purely necessitous being. Throughout the story Griffin is surprisingly obsessed with the basic human needs: food, clothing, shelter.[22] He ends up embodying everything Wells finds wrong in capitalist existence. With nothing to stabilize his life, Griffin is always on the go, unable to find rest. He is continually scheming against his fellow human beings, always trying to take advantage of any situation. In particular, he encounters all the problems of the emancipated individual in the modern enlightened world. Griffin is a scientist, a man who tries to live by reason alone and who rejects all traditional religious beliefs. The villagers are particularly upset by the fact of his "never going to church of a Sunday."[23]

Wells emphasizes the fact that the Invisible Man is at war with traditional values by a peculiar and gratuitous turn in the plot: Griffin's symbolic murder of his father. In order to get the funds he needs to pursue his experiments, Griffin robs his father of money that does not belong to him; in disgrace, the old man shoots himself. The scene of the funeral of Griffin's father is one of the most powerfully realized moments in the book. Wells associates the death of Griffin's father with the modernizing forces that are despoiling the countryside and destroying the traditional English way of life:

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[20]*Invisible Man*, p. 100.

[21]Ibid., p. 103.

[22]See, for example, ibid., p. 116.

[23]Ibid., p. 31.

> I remember walking back to the empty home, through the place that had once been a village and was now patched and tinkered by the jerry builders into the ugly likeness of a town. Every way the roads ran out at last into the desecrated fields and ended in rubble heaps and rank wet weeds. I remember . . . the strange sense of detachment I felt from the squalid respectability, the sordid commercialism of the place.[24]

Here Wells tips his hand: "commercialism" is "sordid"; the market economy does on a large scale and systematically what Griffin did indirectly and impulsively. It kills the father, replacing the traditional order of the country village with the monstrous functionality of modern tract housing. Like a Romantic poet, Wells writes of "desecrated fields" and laments the urbanization of a once largely rural England.[25]

Cut off from his family and any sense of community, the Invisible Man becomes a monster of egoism, governed only by his own will and desires. As Dr. Kemp describes him: "He is pure selfishness. He thinks of nothing but his own advantage, his own safety."[26] Thus, Griffin serves as Wells's representation of *homo economicus*, the man who pursues his rational self-interest to the exclusion of all other considerations. This explains Wells's otherwise odd association of Griffin with Robinson Crusoe.[27] Invisible in the streets of London, Griffin is as isolated from his fellow human beings as Crusoe is on his island. Both men are in a kind of Hobbesian state of nature, searching obsessively for a Man Friday, any form of human companionship that might extricate them from a war of all against all. The Invisible Man shares with Crusoe a radical sense of insecurity, living in a perpetual state of anxiety about the future. Moreover, Crusoe is one of the earliest

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[24]Ibid., p. 95.

[25]For Wells's hostility to suburban development, see John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880–1939* (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 2002), especially pp. 118–20.

[26]*Invisible Man*, p. 131. See also p. 136: "He was certainly an intensely egotistical and unfeeling man."

[27]Ibid., p. 109.

literary representations of the purely acquisitive side of human nature, and Wells wishes to explore the same subject. With no communal sense of purpose, the Invisible Man becomes obsessed with satisfying his own appetites.

Thus, the Invisible Man becomes Wells's symbol of the pure consumer. In a telling scene, Griffin invades the bastion of bourgeois consumerism, a department store. The phenomenon was sufficiently novel in Wells's day for him to feel compelled to have Griffin explain the concept: "[I] found myself outside Omniums, the big establishment where everything is to be bought,—you know the place,—meat, grocery, linen, furniture, clothing, oil paintings even,—a huge meandering collection of shops rather than a shop."[28] Griffin's invisibility gives him access to the full panoply of consumer goods capitalism produces. But Wells adds a twist to his myth of the Invisible Man to suggest the self-defeating character of the capitalist economy and its consumer rat-race. In one sense Griffin's invisibility makes him the perfect consumer. He can acquire anything he wants; he is a regular consuming machine: "No person could hold me. I could take my money where I found it. I decided to treat myself to a sumptuous feast, and then put up at a good hotel, and accumulate a new outfit of property."[29] But in another sense Griffin is perpetually frustrated as a consumer. Wells dwells upon the difficulties Griffin encounters consuming the goods he acquires. If he eats the food he

[28]Ibid., p. 110. Like Wells, Griffin is fascinated by the new phenomenon of the urban department store; he contrasts it with traditional methods of retailing, including no doubt the way business was transacted in country stores:

> I was really surprised to observe how rapidly the young men and women whipped away the goods displayed for sale during the day. . . . Finally all the chairs were turned up on to the counters, leaving the floor clear. Directly each of these young people had done, he or she made promptly for the door with such an expression of animation as I have rarely observed in a shop assistant before. (pp. 111–12)

Griffin is struck by how much faster people work in a department store, but also by how much takes place behind the scenes, out of the sight of the customers. Once again, Wells highlights the "invisibility" in the working of capitalism.

[29]Ibid., p. 123.

craves, it renders him temporarily visible to his enemies until his body can assimilate it. If he puts on the clothing he covets, he becomes similarly vulnerable. Griffin himself formulates his dilemma precisely: "I went over the heads of the things a man reckons desirable. No doubt invisibility made it possible to get them, but it made it impossible to enjoy them when they are got."[30] Here Wells anticipates later, post-Marxist critiques of capitalism, particularly that of the Frankfurt School. Capitalism may succeed in allowing consumers to acquire the goods they want, but it prevents people from enjoying them. Indeed, by generating an infinity of desires, and involving consumers in an unending process of acquisition, the market economy, in this view, dooms them to perpetual dissatisfaction.

The Invisible Man begins with "a couple of sovereigns" being "flung upon the table,"[31] and it ends with money as well. In a comic epilogue, Wells reveals what happened to all the cash Griffin stole. It winds up in the hands of his treacherous helper, Marvel. Precisely because of the untraceability of money, Marvel gets to keep all the stolen cash. "When they found they couldn't prove who's money was which,"[32] society's loss becomes Marvel's gain in a final inversion of Smith's invisible hand principle. And in one last twist, in the capitalist world Wells is portraying, even the story of the Invisible Man itself gets commercialized. With his insider's knowledge, Marvel becomes a celebrity on the stage: "And then a gentleman gave me a guinea a night to tell the story at the Empire Music 'all—just tell 'em in my own words."[33]

Furthermore, Marvel has been able to exploit his encounter with Griffin by opening an inn of his own, for which the Invisible Man becomes a sort of trademark, indeed his chief advertisement: "The sign of the inn is an empty board save for a hat and boots, and the name is the title of this story."[34] Wells wryly calls

[30]Ibid., p. 124.

[31]Ibid., p. 1.

[32]Ibid., p. 153.

[33]Ibid.

[34]Ibid.

attention to the fact that he himself is trading off the story of the Invisible Man. It became one of his most enduringly popular books and he was hardly averse to making as much money as possible from it. He dealt cannily with Hollywood over the movie rights to the story, and was doubly rewarded by seeing sales of the book revived by the success of the 1933 Universal film. In his 1934 autobiography, Wells refers to *The Invisible Man* as "a tale, that thanks largely to the excellent film recently produced by James Whale, is still read as much as ever it was. To many young people nowadays I am just the author of the *Invisible Man*."[35] Even in a study of money in *The Invisible Man*, it would be unseemly to dwell on how much of it Wells made from the novel, but his successful commercialization of the story is a good reminder that, however shrewd a critic of capitalism Wells may have been, he was even shrewder at playing the capitalist game himself.

III.

Wells thus cleverly employs the figure of the Invisible Man to develop a critique of capitalism, thereby making his novel something subtler and more interesting than the simple mad scientist story critics have typically found it to be. Nevertheless, Wells's critique of capitalism ultimately fails. For one thing it is not narrowly targeted enough. In most of *The Invisible Man*, Wells is not criticizing capitalism in particular but modernity in general. The aspects of life he questions—large-scale organization, urban existence, the masses of people, cosmopolitanism, rationalist and anti-traditional behavior—characterize all modern regimes, socialist as well as capitalist. If anything, capitalism mitigates the negative effects of mass society by dispersing economic power and preserving private pockets of resistance to the Leviathan state. The experience of socialist communities in the twentieth century suggests that in a centrally planned, command economy, human beings are in fact more likely to feel like zeroes, with even their rights to private property and private initiative taken away.

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[35] *Experiment in Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1934), p. 475.

As for Wells's point about consumption under capitalism, it rests on a false analogy. Nothing in the real world corresponds to the difficulties Griffin encounters in enjoying what he acquires; they are entirely peculiar to his situation as an invisible man. In fact, most consumers under capitalism want their consumption to be visible; ever since Thorstein Veblen, critics of capitalism have been complaining about "conspicuous consumption." Wells may have a point in his critique of capitalist consumption, but his particular fictional vehicle for expressing it does nothing to prove it.

Indeed, his central metaphor of the invisible man fails to work in one respect that is so fundamental that it obviates the need for a detailed, point-by-point refutation of Wells's position. There is only *one* Invisible Man in Wells's story. Far from functioning in a market system, he enjoys a kind of monopoly. Hence he operates without the checks and balances that are vital to Adam Smith's notion of the invisible hand. Smith never denied that human beings are egoistic. But his point was that as selfish as individual human beings may be, when that selfishness is made to operate within the system of a market economy, it is forced to serve the common good. Thus, Wells's science fiction parable fails to offer a fair test of Smith's economic principles. Smith would in fact agree that to make a man invisible would be to turn him into a monster of egoism, for it would set him free from the normal discipline of the market, where businessmen keep each other in check precisely by observing each other's actions, ever on the lookout for any competitive advantage. In Smith the individual entrepreneur is *not* invisible; indeed the working of the invisible hand depends entirely on the visibility of businessmen as they meet in open competition.

I want to concentrate therefore on analyzing, not the logic of Wells's position, which is weak, but the motives behind his hostility to the market economy. The most striking fact about *The Invisible Man* is the atavism of Wells's position. He generally sides with the backward, unsophisticated villagers against the forward-looking, scientific genius, Griffin. Wells seems in fact to be guilty of a kind of economic and political nostalgia in *The Invisible Man*, looking back fondly to an earlier and simpler age, when communities were small and tightly knit, and human beings could count on directly cooperating with each other to

solve their problems.[36] Wells fundamentally distrusts the central insight of Smith and later economists, that the market provides a way of rationally ordering the productive activities of human beings without the need for central direction or even the actors knowing each other personally. Wells evidently shares the suspicions and fears of capitalism that typically grip the citizens of pre-modern and economically undeveloped communities. To such people, the operation of the market economy looks like magic. The merchant, the entrepreneur, the financier—all these basic actors in the market economy apparently produce wealth out of nothing and thus seem like sorcerers to the common man.[37] Wells's portrait of Griffin confirms all the common man's suspicions of the businessman: that he is unproductive, that he is secretive in his dealings, that all he does is move money around that belongs to other people, that essentially his acquisition is a form of theft, that he lives off the work of others. Like many people, Wells cannot understand or appreciate the special contribution that the entrepreneur makes to the good of the economy as a whole. In his *A Modern Utopia*, he makes the revealing statement: "trade is a by-product and not an essential factor in social life."[38]

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[36]See Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie, *The Life of H.G. Wells: Time Traveller* (London: Hogarth Press, 1987), p. 127. Friedrich Hayek offers a brilliant analysis of this atavistic mode of thinking in *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

[37]On this subject, see the excellent analysis in Hayek, *Fatal Conceit*, pp. 89–105.

[38]Wells, *Utopia*, p. 84. In other signs of his hostility to ordinary economic functions, Wells's utopia forbids usury, which he defines as "the lending of money at fixed rates of interest" (p. 287), not exorbitant rates as most people would. In a telltale passage, Wells writes: "The idea of a man growing richer by mere inaction . . . is profoundly distasteful to Utopian ideas" (p. 287). The order of rulers in this utopia, who are strangely called the *samurai*, are forbidden to participate in any entrepreneurial activities:

> It is felt that to buy simply in order to sell again brings out many unsocial human qualities; it makes a man seek to enhance profits and falsify values, and so the *samurai* are forbidden to buy to sell on their own account, . . . unless some process of manufacture changes the nature of the commodity (a mere change in bulk or packing does not suffice), and they are forbidden salesmanship and all its arts. (p. 287)

In fact, the entrepreneur, by means of his special knowledge of market conditions and his willingness to assume risks in an uncertain world, makes it possible for the goods people want to be available when and where they want them. Anyone who believes that the entrepreneur does not earn his profits is essentially claiming that we live in a risk-free world.

Like many nineteenth-century Englishmen with socialist leanings, Wells had trouble accepting the messiness and apparent disorder of the complex system of the market economy, which works precisely by dispersing economic knowledge, power, and control. Wells was not overtly nostalgic for the Middle Ages and its feudal system the way writers such as Thomas Carlyle and William Morris were,[39] but he did in effect return to medieval ways of thinking in his insistence that order has to be imposed on society from above, that only with leaders centrally directing economic activity can it take a rational form. This principle formed the core of Wells's utopian thinking:

> If we are to have any Utopia at all, we must have a clear common purpose, and a great and steadfast movement of will to override all these incurably egotistical dissentients. . . . It is manifest this Utopia could not come about by chance and anarchy, but by co-ordinated effort and a community of design. . . . Such a world as this Utopia is not made by the chance occasional

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This is exactly the kind of thinking Hayek identifies as the common man's misunderstanding of the merchant's activities: "That a mere change of hands should lead to a gain in value to all participants, that it need not mean gain to one at the expense of the others . . . was and is nonetheless intuitively difficult to grasp" (*Fatal Conceit*, p. 93).

[39]Signs can be found throughout Wells's writing that he was in fact subtly guided by medieval notions, even in what is probably his single most important statement of his socialist vision and what is explicitly designated as a modern utopia. In describing property ownership, he says that the "World State" will be "the sole landowner of the earth, with ... the local municipalities, holding, as it were, feudally under it as landlords" (Wells, *Utopia*, p. 89). Drawing upon a notion out of feudal Japan, Wells calls the ruling order of the utopia *samurai*, and compares them to "the Knights Templar" (pp. 159, 174, 277). When Wells speaks of "Utopian chivalry" (p. 310), we begin to realize how much a "boyish conception" (p. 174) of the gallant world of the Middle Ages stands behind his socialist vision.

> co-operations of self-indulgent men. . . . And an unrestricted competition for gain, an enlightened selfishness, that too fails us. . . . Behind all this material order, these perfected communications, perfected public services and economic organisations, there must be men and women willing these things. . . . No single person, no transitory group of people, could order and sustain this vast complexity. They must have a collective . . . aim.[40]

Throughout *The Invisible Man*, it is clear that Wells does not like the idea of a character operating outside the ken of any central authority and hence beyond any centralized control.[41] The Invisible Man personifies everything Wells distrusts in the spontaneous order of the market. Griffin is the least predictable of human beings. He can appear anywhere at any time and throw a wrench into the working of the most elaborate government plan. He is indeed the government bureaucrat's worst nightmare: for example, how can you tax a man if you cannot even see him?

Toward the end of the story, Griffin begins to behave like the archenemy of government authority, the terrorist.[42] He hopes to undermine the power of the government by means of random acts of violence that will demonstrate its inability to assert its authority and maintain order. Accordingly, *The Invisible Man* builds up to what amounts to Wells's vision of the well-ordered society. Faced with the threat of murderous violence from Griffin, the community finally organizes—into a huge manhunt from which even an invisible man cannot escape. Griffin has been a

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[40]Wells, *Utopia,* pp. 128, 172–73.

[41]Mr. Marvel seems to speak for Wells when he says of the Invisible Man:

> It makes me regular uncomfortable, the bare thought of that chap running about the country! . . . And just think of the things he might do! . . . Suppose he wants to rob—who can prevent him? He can trespass, he can burgle, he could walk through a cordon of policeman as easy as me or you could give the slip to a blind man! (pp. 67–68)

[42]Earlier in the story Griffin is thought to be an Anarchist, specifically "preparing explosives" (p. 20). On Griffin as a terrorist, see Sutherland's "Introduction" in Luke, ed., *Invisible Man*, p. xxv.

challenge to what Foucault and others call the panoptical character of government—its ability to see into every corner of society and thus to oversee all the activities of its citizens. With a nationwide dragnet, Wells's authorities will make sure that Griffin can no longer elude their surveillance:

> The countryside began organizing itself with inconceivable rapidity. By two o'clock even he might still have removed himself out of the district by getting aboard a train, but after two that became impossible. Every passenger train along the lines on a great parallelogram between Southampton, Winchester, Brighton, and Horsham, travelled with locked doors, and the goods traffic was almost entirely suspended. And in a great circle of twenty miles round Port Burdock, men armed with guns and bludgeons were presently setting out in groups of three and four, with dogs, to beat the roads and fields. Mounted policemen rode along the country lanes, stopping at every cottage.[43]

Wells inadvertently shows his true colors here.[44] This vision is profoundly totalitarian; hostility to the Invisible Man easily passes over into hostility to ordinary commerce, and indeed to the free and spontaneous movement of any individual.

The nationwide dragnet lays bare what has all too often been the nightmare result of the socialist dream: to turn society into an armed camp, what Wells himself describes as a "state of siege."[45]

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[43]*Invisible Man*, p. 134.

[44]Characteristically, Wells's utopia requires a plan to keep all citizens under perfect surveillance: "If the modern Utopia is indeed to be a world of responsible citizens, it must have devised some scheme by which every person in the world can be promptly and certainly recognized, and by which anyone missing can be traced and found" (Wells, *Utopia*, pp. 162–63). Wells goes on to outline a chilling plan for indexing every person in the world, with "the record of their movement hither and thither, the entry of various material facts, such as marriage, parentage, criminal convictions and the like" (p. 163). Wells recognizes that some people might find this scheme repugnant, but he chastises them as "old-fashioned nineteenth-century" Liberals (p. 165), who do not understand the goodness of government: "The old Liberalism assumed bad government, the more powerful the government the worse it was. . . . But suppose we do not assume that government

Nothing in the country is to move without the government knowing about it, and any right to privacy has been suspended. At a number of points earlier in the story, Griffin is protected by the traditional Anglo-Saxon regard for civil rights. Even when the authorities suspect him of having committed crimes, they punctiliously observe the procedures designed to protect the individual against unjustified government intrusion into his life, such as the requirement for search warrants.[46] But by the end of the story, all sense of the individual's rights has been dissolved and the government conducts an all-out war against one of its citizens. Wells is able to make a case for the unique danger of an invisible man, but one may still be struck by the disproportion between the power of a solitary individual like Griffin and the vast forces mobilized to capture and destroy him. In the end Wells shows the rebellious individual literally crushed by the weight of the community arrayed against him, what Wells calls "the pressure of the crowd."[47]

At just the point when the Invisible Man threatens to elude the control of the authorities in England, he momentarily escapes Wells's control as a novelist as well. In Chapter 26 Griffin finally becomes invisible even to his author.[48] Up to this point, Wells has

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is necessarily bad . . . then we alter the case altogether" (pp. 165–66). Wells's faith in the goodness of government evidently knew no bounds. Here is his remarkable description of Joseph Stalin after an interview with him in 1934: "I have never met a man more candid, fair and honest, and to these qualities it is, and to nothing occult and sinister, that he owes his tremendous undisputed ascendency in Russia" (Wells, *Autobiography*, p. 689).

[45]*Invisible Man*, p. 134. Earlier Kemp calls for a "council of war" against Griffin (p. 132).

[46]For several of these occasions, see pp. 32, 37, 39, 74, and especially p. 132, where even at this late stage of the story, one of the characters is troubled that the measures being taken against Griffin are "unsportsmanlike." By contrast with his own characters, Wells seems to have contempt for the traditional liberal respect for individual rights; his narrator offers this comment on the scrupulous way the Iping townspeople deal with Griffin: "The Anglo-Saxon genius for parliamentary government asserted itself; there was a great deal of talk and no decisive action" (p. 32).

[47]*Invisible Man*, p. 152.

[48]For an insightful but somewhat different development of this point, see McConnell, *Science Fiction*, pp. 123–24.

generally stayed in command of his characters, able to recount their movements and even to give us access to their inmost thoughts. But suddenly he loses sight of his own creation:

> Thereafter for some hours the Invisible Man passed out of human perceptions. No one knows where he went nor what he did. But one can imagine him hurrying through the hot June forenoon, . . . and sheltering . . . amid the thickets of Hintondean. . . . That seems the most probable refuge for him. . . . One wonders what his state of mind may have been during that time, and what plans he devised. . . . At any rate he vanished from human ken about midday, and no living witness can tell what he did until about half-past two.[49]

This is an odd moment in Wells's science fiction. He rarely concerned himself with epistemological problems in fiction, and was usually content to tell his stories in a straightforward manner, without worrying about how his narrators know what they know. But here Wells calls attention to the fictionality of his story and indeed throughout the rest of this chapter he presents himself as a limited narrator, who is forced to resort to rank speculation: "We can know nothing of the details of the encounter"[50] or "But this is pure hypothesis."[51] Wells is not in total control of his story; he cannot supply the full explanation of the action he normally gives his readers. Thanks to the elusiveness of the Invisible Man, Wells's own story threatens to become opaque to him.[52]

In this rare moment in his science fiction, we get a glimpse of what unites H.G. Wells the novelist and H.G. Wells the socialist—both believe in central planning. Wells was used to plotting

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[49]*Invisible Man*, p. 133.

[50]Ibid., p. 135.

[51]Ibid., p. 136.

[52]Wells of course is the author of *The Invisible Man*, and if Griffin momentarily escapes his grasp, he does so only because Wells has chosen to let it happen. In that sense, Wells remains in control of the story. But that control takes the paradoxical form of choosing to lose control of one of his characters—something Wells seldom does in his science fiction. In this case, however, Griffin's elusiveness is strangely appropriate—he is after all an invisible man.

his novels carefully so that he maintained strict control over their structure. He is distinguished, at least in his early science fiction works, by the leanness of his plots, the fact that he generally excludes extraneous matter, and keeps a tight focus on his thematic concerns. He almost never grants any freedom to his characters. They exist only to carry out his plot and to express his ideas.[53] One reason Wells has not been a favorite among literary critics is that his novels strike them as thematically didactic and technically unsophisticated, which is another way of saying that Wells does not go in for the sort of modernist fiction that grants a certain autonomy to the characters and their points of view. The world of a Wells science fiction novel may be beset by chaos and cataclysms—dying suns, rebellious beast people, invading Martians, giant insects run amok—but the novel itself remains well-ordered and clearly under the author's command.

This obsession with control seems to have carried over into Wells's attitude toward politics and economics. He expected society to be as well ordered and centrally planned as one of his novels. As a novelist, Wells was always looking for closure, for the artfully plotted story that would take shape once and for all time.[54] But in the free market, stories do not work out with the clear shape and neat outcomes of well-written novels. The market is always in flux, continually adapting to changing circumstances in the natural world and the changing desires and attitudes of consumers. Hence Wells's dislike for the market. Like that of many artists, Wells's socialism has an aesthetic dimension.[55] As a novelist, he had one model of order constantly in

[53]See Carey's formulation of the point: "the people who occupy Wells's utopias and dystopias are representatives, like the people in [advertisements]. They illustrate a design" (*Intellectuals*, p. 147).

[54]See Michael Draper, *H.G. Wells* (London: Macmillan, 1987), p. 123: "Wells did not become a genuine scientist or politician but an aesthete, irrationally demanding that life should possess the coherence and closure of a work of art."

[55]Wells himself sometimes wondered if aesthetic considerations governed his commitment to socialism. In *Tono-Bungay*, he has his main character observe: "perhaps after all this Socialism to which I had been drawn

front of him: if a novel has a shape, this seems to result from a single consciousness planning the work. Wells's aesthetic distaste for contingency prejudiced him against the spontaneous order of the market economy. He was used to the static perfection of a work of fiction, in which nothing is left to chance and the author takes responsibility for tying up all the loose ends by the conclusion.[56] In speaking of his own utopian impulse, Wells describes how "the mere pleasure of completeness, of holding and controlling all the threads, possesses" him.[57] This ideal of control may provide an excellent blueprint for fiction (a tautly plotted story), but it offers a poor one for society (totalitarianism and the complete subordination of the individual to the community).[58]

IV.

To understand more fully Wells's hostility as a creative writer to the Invisible Man and the capitalist order he represents, we must return to his characterization of Griffin. In the tradition of Victor Frankenstein, Griffin is a portrait of the scientist as a young artist. Wells deliberately eliminates all the collaborative aspects of scientific research, and presents Griffin as a solitary creative genius,

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was only a foolish dream. . . . Morris and these others played with it wittingly; it gave a zest, a touch of substance, to their aesthetic pleasures" (p. 149).

[56]As we saw above in section VI of "The Poetics of Spontaneous Order," this model of fiction is by no means universal. Some fiction writers, among them Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, have deliberately incorporated elements of contingency into their narratives in an effort to mirror the contingency of life itself—thereby creating an open-ended form of fiction, which has been brilliantly analyzed by Gary Saul Morson in his *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994).

[57]Wells, *Utopia*, p. 354.

[58]Alexis de Tocqueville came to a similar conclusion in his analysis of the role of men of letters in provoking the French Revolution: "What is a merit in the writer may well be a vice in the statesman and the very qualities which go to make great literature can lead to catastrophic revolutions." See Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, Stuart Gilbert, trans. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1955), p. 147.

operating like a Romantic artist alone and on the fringes of society. By virtue of his invisibility, he becomes a kind of marked man, a Cain figure, obviously different from his fellow human beings and unable to participate in the normal pleasures of social life. His isolation both fuels and is fueled by his creativity, and Griffin becomes an example of the familiar Romantic principle that to be a creator, one must be prepared to suffer for one's creativity. As we have seen, Wells is highly critical of his Invisible Man, to the point of imaginatively siding with his enemies. And yet, like most authors, Wells could not help to some extent sympathizing with his protagonist.[59] Indeed, it would be odd if Wells, the visionary science fiction writer, did not in some way identify with Griffin, the visionary scientist.

Thus, in addition to being a symbol of the capitalist order, the Invisible Man can be viewed as a self-portrait of Wells. Like his creator, Griffin is a man ahead of his time, so far ahead that the public fails to appreciate his genius. Griffin may thus give us a glimpse into his creator's dark side—the novelist may have revealed more than he wanted to about his own psychology and in particular his hostility to the market economy. Griffin thinks of himself as a god among men—indeed he plays that role to the servant he adopts, Thomas Marvel, who even addresses him as "Lord."[60] Specifically, Griffin thinks of himself as a kind of Nietzschean superman, raised above the conventional moral restraints ordinary men feel compelled to observe.[61] But at the same time, Griffin is a brilliant study of what Nietzsche calls *ressentiment*. In many ways, his invisibility scheme is an attempt to compensate for his deep feelings of inferiority, inadequacy, and powerlessness. Coming from humble origins, perpetually short of money, Griffin is a classic case of a man who tries to rise in the world by virtue of his wits; he wants desperately "to become famous at a blow."[62] By his own account, he is jealous of

[59]See, for example, p. 133, where Wells writes of Griffin: "we may still imagine and even sympathize a little with the fury the attempted surprise must have occasioned."

[60]*Invisible Man*, p. 48.

[61]Ibid., p. 120.

[62]Ibid., p. 93.

other researchers and paranoid that they will steal and take credit for his discoveries.[63] Griffin reveals himself to be obsessed with petty frustrations, chiefly the drudgery of his career as a teacher, surrounded by "gaping, silly students"[64] and under constant pressure to publish or perish.[65] When he finally states his motives for becoming invisible, Griffin reveals his psychology clearly: "And I beheld, unclouded by doubt, a magnificent vision of all that invisibility might mean to a man. . . . And I, a shabby, poverty-struck, hemmed-in demonstrator, teaching fools in a provincial college, might suddenly become—this."[66]

In short, Griffin feels woefully undervalued by society. He knows that he is more intelligent than the people around him, but many of them make more money or hold more honored positions. Society does not reward intelligence sufficiently to suit Griffin. His invisibility scheme is an attempt to use his intelligence finally to obtain the rewards and privileges society has been denying him. Griffin is out to prove something, as he tells the ignorant villagers of Iping: "'You don't understand,' he said, 'who I am or what I am. I'll show you. By Heaven! I'll show you.'"[67] Griffin has a profound contempt for ordinary people, whom he regards as well beneath him in the one quality he esteems: intelligence.[68] That is why he is frustrated by the fact that an ordinary man like Marvel can interfere with his plans: "To have worked for years, to have planned and plotted, and then to get some fumbling purblind idiot messing across your course! Every conceivable sort of silly creature that has ever been created has been sent to cross me."[69] Griffin's contempt for the stupidity of the common man means that he has contempt for the market economy and the way it distributes wealth. After all, it is

[63]Ibid.

[64]Ibid.

[65]Ibid., p. 94.

[66]Ibid., pp. 93–94.

[67]Ibid., p. 35.

[68]See Antonina Vallentin, *H.G. Wells: Prophet of Our Day*, Daphne Woodward, trans. (New York: John Day, 1950), p. 124.

[69]*Invisible Man*, p. 125.

the market economy that has denied Griffin the rewards he thinks he so richly deserves. The principal use Griffin makes of his invisibility is to redistribute wealth, to take it away from the established owners of property and send it flowing in his own direction. To the extent that the Invisible Man seeks to undo the injustice of a market economy that in his view does not adequately reward merit, he may be said to be a socialist himself.

I may appear to be contradicting myself, by presenting Wells's Invisible Man as at one moment a symbol of capitalism and at another of socialism. But I believe that this contradiction lies in Wells's novel itself, that he portrays his central figure inconsistently. In many ways Wells was trying to give a portrait of the capitalist mentality in the figure of the Invisible Man, but he evidently invested too much of himself in his protagonist, and ended up simultaneously portraying the mentality of a political visionary, a man who tries to remake the world to fit his image of a just social order. Indeed, at several points in the novel, the Invisible Man sounds a lot more like a radical revolutionary than a capitalist businessman. He conceives the idea of a Reign of Terror to establish and consolidate his power: "Port Burdock is no longer under the Queen, . . . it is under me—the Terror! This is day one of year one of the new epoch,—the Epoch of the Invisible Man. I am Invisible Man the First."[70] This is hardly the language of the free market. As Griffin's proclamation of a new era indicates, this is in fact the language of revolutionary totalitarianism.

Claiming to be able to spy into any corner of society and arrogating to himself the right to execute anyone he chooses, the Invisible Man becomes the mirror image of the panoptical, totalitarian regime arrayed against him. His model of order is not the free market but absolute monarchy. In proclaiming himself "Invisible Man the First," Griffin is only drawing the logical conclusion from his belief in his mental superiority to all of humanity. He is smarter than all other men; hence he ought to be able to rule them and give order to their lives. In his own way, the Invisible Man becomes a profoundly atavistic force,[71] wanting to

[70]Ibid., p. 138.

[71]See Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie, *Life*, p. 126.

return England to its illiberal past, substituting one-man rule from above for any spontaneous ordering of market forces from below.[72]

As a brilliant case study of *ressentiment*, Griffin allows us to observe the psychology of the modern, alienated intellectual and his typically anti-capitalist mentality.[73] In his feeling that the market economy treats him unjustly by not sufficiently rewarding his talent and his genius, Griffin is indeed the prototype of the modern intellectual. This attitude helps explain why so many artists, scientists, academics, and other members of the intellectual and cultural elite have rejected capitalism and embraced socialism. They fantasize that a socialist order would undo the injustices of the market economy because, like Griffin, they secretly imagine that they will be the ones in charge of the centrally planned economy and thus able to redirect the flow of rewards as they see fit.[74] Wells himself provides a perfect example of this mentality, which may explain why he does such a good job of portraying Griffin. Like Griffin, Wells came from a humble background, spent time as a teacher, and used his wits (a good deal more successfully) to rise in the world and make himself famous.[75] Moreover, despite his socialist leanings, Wells had

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[72]Griffin plans on ruling by terror. Ironically, his terrorist campaign gives the government an excuse to impose unprecedented restrictions on the free movements of its citizens. The government is able to exploit the panic Griffin causes to assume new powers for itself. In effect, the government ends up mirroring Griffin in his plan to rule by terror.

[73]On this subject, see Ludwig von Mises, *The Anti-Capitalistic Mentality* (Princeton, N.J.: D. Van Nostrand, 1956), especially pp. 48–72 and Hayek, *Fatal Conceit*, especially pp. 89–105.

[74]For this point illustrated in a contemporary of Wells, see my essay "Oscar Wilde: The Man of Soul Under Socialism," in James Soderholm, ed., *Beauty and the Critic: Aesthetics in an Age of Cultural Studies* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997), pp. 74–93, especially pp. 84–87.

[75]Wells's accounts of his own experience as a teacher sound suspiciously like Griffin's. Consider this passage from *Autobiography*, p. 242 describing his first teaching job:

> I realized my career had got into a very awkward cul-de-sac. . . . There was nothing for me now but to stick it for at least a year, get some better clothes, save a few pounds,

a great deal of contempt for the common man and believed that society must be ruled from above, by an intellectual elite.[76]

These attitudes surface and are in fact quite prominent in *The Invisible Man*. We have already seen that, although Wells ultimately sides with the villagers against Griffin, he presents them in a negative light, ridiculing their simplemindedness. The villagers as Wells portrays them could never protect themselves on their own against a genius like Griffin. They would be doomed without the intervention of Dr. Kemp, the medical associate Griffin tries to enlist on his side but who quickly turns against him. As Wells sets up the situation, one man of intellect is required to counteract the nefarious schemes of another man of intellect. Kemp shows his superior intelligence in the way he immediately sizes up Griffin and grasps the full extent of the threat an invisible man constitutes to England and humanity. Moreover it is Kemp, and Kemp alone, who comes up with all the plans for organizing society to capture Griffin (chapter 25). Kemp is a kind of double for Griffin. They were students in college together and in his own way Kemp shares Griffin's scientific ambitions: "the work he was upon would earn him, he hoped, the fellowship of the Royal Society, so highly did he think of it."[77] But Kemp is also

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> hammer away at my writing, and hope for some chance of escape. . . . Had that summer weather and my returning health and vigour lasted for ever, I should have slackened slowly from my futile literary efforts and reconciled myself altogether to the role of a second rate secondary teacher.

Wells sounds even more like Griffin in a letter in response to his second teaching assignment: "I have suffered as the son of not very well-to-do and rather illiterate parents at the hands of these scholastic pirates and I do not think I could refrain from the chance of sticking a knife under the ribs of this system of fraud if every friend I had stood on the opposite side" (quoted in Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie, *Life*, p. 80).

[76]For a thoroughgoing treatment of the contempt for the common man and the promotion of an intellectual elite in Wells and other Victorian and modern authors, see Carey, *Intellectuals*. See also George Watson, *The Lost Literature of Socialism* (Cambridge, U.K.: Lutterworth, 1998), p. 49.

[77]*Invisible Man*, p. 71. On Griffin and Kemp as doubles, see Draper, *Wells*, p. 49. There are, of course, significant differences between Griffin and Kemp. As shown by the reference to the Royal Society, Kemp is more

a double for Wells himself, as one seemingly extraneous passage suggests: "After five minutes, during which his mind had travelled into a remote speculation of social conditions of the future, and lost itself at last over the time dimension, Doctor Kemp roused himself with a sigh, pulled down the window again, and returned to his writing-desk."[78] Kemp seems to be getting ready to write Wells's own novel, *The Time Machine*.[79] This passage strongly suggests that Kemp is Wells's surrogate in the novel and that when he presents Kemp as the savior of England, he is imagining no less a role for himself.[80]

In Kemp's role in *The Invisible Man*, we see how in late nineteenth-century England, socialism took a peculiarly aristocratic form. Socialist doctrine seemed a way of clamping down on all the productive forces that had been unleashed by free market policies, forces that looked chaotic and anarchic to fastidious Englishmen like Wells and seemed to threaten the lingering ascendancy of cultural elites left over from the aristocratic past.[81] Wells hoped to replace the old aristocracy of birth with a new aristocracy of talent,[82] particularly intellectual and artistic talent, but his basic attitude remained aristocratic and anti-democratic nonetheless. One can detect a strong element of the socialist equivalent of *noblesse oblige* in Wells; his concern for the common man is mixed with a good deal of condescension, if not outright

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willing than Griffin to work within established scientific channels. Kemp wants Griffin to be like him and pursue a more conventional path as a professional scientist: "Don't be a lone wolf. Publish your results; take the world—take the nation at least—into your confidence" (p. 128).

[78]*Invisible Man*, p. 77.

[79]For a somewhat different yet parallel interpretation of this passage, see McConnell, *Science Fiction*, pp. 125–26.

[80]See Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie, *Life*, Illustration 12 (discussed on p. 63), for a remarkable cartoon Wells drew when he was twenty of himself "meditating on his future," which includes placards proclaiming: "How I Could Save The Nation" and "Wells's Design for a New Framework for Society."

[81]I analyze these developments in the specific case of Oscar Wilde in "Man of Soul," pp. 74–93. For the connection between Wilde and Wells, see McConnell, *Science Fiction*, pp. 42–43.

contempt. By virtue of his superior intellect and cultivation, Wells thought himself entitled to show Englishmen how they should live, how they should organize their social and economic existence. This is the peculiar Nietzscheanism of Wells's socialism.[83] Like his contemporary, George Bernard Shaw, Wells managed to combine faith in socialist doctrine with the belief that only a kind of Nietzschean superman could successfully implement it. He believed that if society is to be saved, it cannot be by a collective effort, but only by the work of a single great man, or perhaps a band of great men, an elite brotherhood.[84] In his later novel, *The Food of the Gods*, it takes a group of Nietzschean supermen in the form of literal giants to bring a rational and socially just order to England.[85]

If, then, I seem to have given a contradictory account of *The Invisible Man*, the reason is that a fundamental contradiction lies

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[82]See Haynes, *Wells*, p. 83. That is why Wells defines his *samurai* in *A Modern Utopia* as an order of "voluntary noblemen" (p. 121). Wells stresses the openness of his aristocratic order, and yet eventually he comes around to admitting that the *samurai* will become "something of a hereditary class" (p. 299). This is just one more sign that Wells's socialism would take us out of capitalism only to return us to medieval conditions.

[83]On Nietzsche and Wells, see Sutherland's "Introduction" in Luke, ed., *Invisible Man*, p. xxv, Carey, *Intellectuals*, p. 140, Bergonzi, *Wells*, pp. 9–12, 153, Vallentin, *Wells*, p. 124, John Reed, *The Natural History of H.G. Wells* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1982), pp. 238–39, and John Batchelor, *H.G. Wells* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 5. In *In the Days of the Comet*, Wells's narrator, who in many respects is an autobiographical figure, proclaims: "I'm a disciple of Nietzsche" (*Seven Science Fiction Novels of H.G. Wells* [New York: Dover, 1934], p. 909; bk. I, chap. 4, sec. 4).

[84]Wells's attraction to supermen as leaders of the common herd often gives a fascist cast to his socialism. Although Wells opposed National Socialism as it developed in Germany, the liberal socialist George Orwell detected affinities between Wells's vision of the perfect state and Hitler's: "Much of what Wells has imagined and worked for is physically there in Nazi Germany. The order, the planning, the State encouragement of science, the steel, the concrete, the aeroplanes, are all there." See "Wells, Hitler and the World State" in George Orwell, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968), vol. 2, p. 143.

[85]See Carey, *Intellectuals*, p. 138.

at the core of Wells's thinking. He upheld a socialist ideal of community, and yet at the same time he saw a form of heroic individualism as the only way to bring about socialism. Wells's vacillation between socialism and heroic individualism helps explain his conflicted portrayal of the Invisible Man, indeed the basic incoherence of the Invisible Man as a symbol. But it is precisely this incoherence that makes *The Invisible Man* such a richly rewarding work to analyze. Wells may have set out to give a critique of capitalism, but in the process he ended up providing the materials for a critique of his own position and more generally of the artist-intellectual's predilection for socialism. Above all, Wells's portrait of the Invisible Man teaches us how contempt for the common man and contempt for the market economy actually go hand in hand. Wells's socialism is ultimately aesthetic and aristocratic in nature; it is rooted in his conviction that, as an artistic visionary, he is superior to the ordinary mass of humanity.

7

Cather's Capitalism

Stephen Cox

"Economics and art are strangers."[1] So said Willa Cather in an essay written deep in her last period of authorship.

For once in her life, Cather was wrong—though she was wrong for sufficient reason. Leftist critics had been hounding her about her novels' alleged lack of relevance to current industrial and social problems.[2] She responded by arguing that art must not be reduced to such partial and temporary terms. If this is "economics," she suggested, then art should have nothing to do with it.

But "economics" need not be treated merely as a solvent for other modes of human experience. If one adopts a non-reductive view, the falsehood of Cather's declaration about the estrangement of economics and art becomes obvious. Her own art was economic in every useful sense of the term. It was economic in its practical concern with buying and selling, prices and investments. It was economic in its analysis of the framework of institutions that supports

[1]Willa Cather, "Escapism" (1936), in *Stories, Poems, and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1992), p. 972.

[2]Cather's principal antagonist was Granville Hicks, who in the 1933 *English Journal* published an essay charmingly entitled "The Case against Willa Cather." It is reprinted in *Willa Cather and Her Critics*, James Schroeter, ed. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1967), pp. 139–47.

the capitalist or market system. Finally and most importantly it was economic in its application of certain essential principles of choice and valuation that are crucial to an understanding of the capitalist system but that long remained obscure even to professional economists. Cather, a mere novelist, discovered them through her art.

I.

Cather's most straightforwardly economic book is *O Pioneers!* (1913). It was the first of her major novels and the first with which she felt content. It was also the start of her unwelcome reputation as an American regionalist and purveyor of heartland nostalgia, an author supposedly indifferent to large social issues and hard economic facts. Even Cather's sympathetic critics tend to regard *O Pioneers!* as a story about a slice of the American landscape. If economic principles are at issue, the critics do not see it.

The reason, perhaps, is that the idea of an "economic novel" still carries its old, anti-capitalist associations. Hearing the phrase, one thinks of masses and classes, oppressed labor and plutocratic power, and everywhere the crying injustice of unearned profits. One thinks of Upton Sinclair, Frank Norris, Michael Gold, and large portions of Theodore Dreiser. *The Grapes of Wrath* may come to mind, and *What Makes Sammy Run?* Economics perhaps, but not Willa Cather's kind. *O Pioneers!* is a textbook exposition of capitalist theory and practice, viewed from a perspective that is highly unusual, even today, in the literature of the world's greatest capitalist country—the capitalist perspective. The protagonist of Cather's novel is a successful capitalist. She is also something much rarer in our literature: she is a capitalist who understands and appreciates the economic principles and social implications of the capitalist system.

The protagonist (the heroine, indeed, for Cather is always on her side) is Alexandra Bergson, the child of Swedish immigrants who arrive in Nebraska before it looks anything like a heartland. The Bergsons are confronted by "the Divide," a wilderness of wind and hostile vegetation—coarse, dull, and miserably unprofitable. Alexandra's father dies at the age of 46, bequeathing to his

family a wretched farm and the prospect of a lifetime of hard labor. The Bergsons' neighbors are giving up and heading out; the Bergsons wonder if they should, too.

But if Nebraska is not yet the heartland, it may still be the site of such heartland virtues as hard work and family solidarity. The situation is made to order for any novelist who wants to inculcate those virtues, or, for that matter, to take the familiar "economic" approach and demonstrate the delusiveness of the American dream of success. In either case, the resulting novel would practically write itself. But Cather has no interest in novels that write themselves. She is not about to suggest that the Bergsons' story will arrive at any particular destination simply because the Bergsons work hard or nourish dreams or cultivate family values. The decisive aspect of the story that she tells is neither land nor dreams nor work nor family but one person's capacity for economic thought. Alexandra Bergson has that capacity. She understands the modern capitalist theory of value.

Her father lacked her understanding. He "had the Old-World belief that land, in itself, is desirable."[3] Alexandra's eldest brothers, Lou and Oscar, never begin to understand. Oscar is especially backward. He is a radical exponent of the equally old-world belief that labor is desirable and valuable in itself. He is so convinced that "there [is] a sovereign virtue in mere bodily toil" that he "like[s] to do things in the hardest way." He is willing to thresh a crop "at a dead loss" after he knows it has failed.[4] Hard work may be a moral value, but as Oscar's performance demonstrates, it may have absolutely no relationship to economic value. Only Alexandra perceives that value, in this sense, is intrinsic to neither land nor labor. What has value is something that people want to buy. Alexandra's butter and egg business doesn't require hard work, but her eggs can be sold at a profit, and the profits can be used to buy the labor of a hired man and contribute something

[3]Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!,* in *Early Novels and Stories* (New York: Library of America, 1987), p. 148.

[4]Ibid., p. 165.

to the Bergsons' capital. "It was one of my mistakes," says the dying Mr. Bergson, "that I did not find that out sooner."[5]

Alexandra sees what is bad about the labor theory of value and what is good about a *division* of labor, about people doing *different* things that can help to make a profit. Her father had a glimmer of this idea when he left the direction of the farm to her and the hard labor to Lou and Oscar. Alexandra grasps the idea, and improves on it. She intends to use her skill as a financial manager to take the hardship out of labor itself: "I don't want you boys always to have to work like this. I want you to be independent." To her, the vital thing is economic insight. She wants "to do like the shrewd ones," the people who know what it means to make a profit.[6]

So she follows the market reports, investigates real estate values, and talks to experts about alfalfa and new kinds of clover.[7] She concludes that new methods of farming will enable the land to produce more marketable goods, thus multiplying its own market value. She therefore suggests doing the opposite of what seems sensible at the moment. She suggests that the family mortgage its homestead (the only apparent virtue of which is that it currently lacks a mortgage) and buy as much more seemingly unprofitable land as possible. When real estate prices rise, the Bergsons can sell some of their holdings, use the profit to pay their debts, and end up with more land (and incomparably more money) than they had when they started. The market will make them rich.

This idea is beyond Oscar and Lou. Oscar complains that he can't possibly work hard enough to take care of all the land that Alexandra wants to buy—and this is true, supposing that he keeps on working in the same old way. But to Alexandra, that's just the point: the Bergsons are going to make money by specialization, innovation, and investment, not by hard labor. The objection, of course, is that investment means risk. But Alexandra knows that successful competition requires that a risk be taken,

[5]Ibid., p. 151.

[6]Ibid., p. 172.

[7]Ibid., pp. 149, 166, 170–72, 220–21.

the risk of doing something different. She realizes that she may suffer the fate of her grandfather, who "speculated" and lost a fortune.[8] But she considers the chance worth taking.

This is a very hard thesis for her brothers to buy. They are not only risk-averse but also socially minded in a way that makes them incapable of comprehending the individualism of the marketplace. "Everybody will say we are crazy," Lou says. "It must be crazy, or everybody would be doing it." But Alexandra understands that the market is founded on diversity. "If they were," she replies, "we wouldn't have much chance." In fact, "the right thing is usually just what everybody don't do."[9]

She makes her case with a shrewd play on the two meanings of "chance." Chance means risk, and chance means opportunity. Some people "have a little certainty," Alexandra declares, but "with us there is a big chance. . . . The chance that father was always looking for has come." She herself is "nervous" about this chance, and her brothers are scared out of their wits.[10] But since mental labor is not their forte, they can't figure out how to defeat her arguments. They finally submit—and within ten years they have become more prosperous than they could have dreamed.[11]

The economic ideas that appear in this first movement of *O Pioneers!* are not just so much background to the real action. Alexandra's character emerges in the debate about these ideas, and the resolution of the debate determines the course of the plot until its next crisis, which involves yet more debate about economic principles and Alexandra's kind of individualism.

This second crisis comes after Alexandra has made her fortune and has started to show an interest in marriage. Her choice is Carl Linstrum, a man who is (in a purely financial sense) simply not worth thinking about. Carl has traded any prospect of

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[8]Ibid., p. 149.

[9]Ibid., p. 172.

[10]Ibid., pp. 170–71.

[11]*Pace* Demaree Peck ("'Possession Granted by a Different Lease': Alexandra Bergson's Imaginative Conquest of Cather's Nebraska," *Modern Fiction Studies* 36 [Spring 1990]: 7), who believes that the brothers' "hard labor in the fields writes the actual history of western settlement."

wealth for the chance to pursue an old-fashioned art. "Wood-engraving is the only thing I care about," he tells her,

> and that had gone out before I began. Everything's cheap metal work nowadays. . . . [M]easured by your standards here, I'm a failure. I couldn't buy even one of your cornfields. I've enjoyed a great many things, but I've got nothing to show for it all.[12]

Carl prompts Alexandra to revisit the problem of values, prices, and profits. The results of her thinking would be shockingly out of place in the ordinary "economic" novel, where she would probably be expected to adopt one of two roles, or both roles sequentially. She could play the part of the class-conscious capitalist and let Carl know that if he wants to earn her respect he should get busy and make some money. Or she could play the part of the repentant convert to a higher social consciousness who has suddenly been forced to realize that capitalism turns life and love and even art into mere commodities. She adopts neither of those roles and expresses none of those sentiments. She remains herself, and she continues to say pretty much what a free-market economic theorist would say.

Her ideas closely resemble those of Cather's younger contemporary, Ludwig von Mises, an influential figure in the twentieth-century theory and defense of capitalism. His theory starts with the basics: a price is something that one foregoes in order to obtain something that one prefers to have; a profit is the difference between the value that one foregoes and the value that one gains in any transaction. But Mises emphasizes that these ideas apply to nonmaterial as well as material goods; there are "money profits," he says, and there are also "psychic profits." The quest for profit is universal: "To make profit is invariably the aim sought by any action." When Carl refers to "your standards," as if there were more than one measure of economic value, he is more correct than he thinks he is. "Profit in [the] primary sense," says Mises, "is purely subjective. . . . The difference between the

[12] *O Pioneers!,* p. 197.

valuation of two states of affairs is entirely psychical and personal."[13]

These are the ideas on which Alexandra bases her assessment of Carl's life, and her own. Both of us, she argues, have paid a price, and both of us have made a profit. Carl actually does have something "to show for" his investment in art: "[Y]ou show for it yourself, Carl."[14] There is value in being the kind of man Carl is—if you are the kind of person who recognizes such values. The appearance of great wealth on one side and sheer poverty on the other results from the assumption that all values are money values. But this assumption is as false as the idea that value inheres in land or labor or other material things. Carl's profit, as Alexandra sees it, is largely "psychic," but it is no less real for that.

She too has made investments of time and energy, and she too has profited; she has gained wealth and security. But she has also paid a price. She has surrendered "freedom." She and all the other prosperous people of the heartland have incurred nonmaterial costs in exchange for material gains: "We pay a high rent, too, though we pay differently. We grow hard and heavy here. We don't move lightly and easily as you do, and our minds get stiff."[15] This doesn't mean that the lives of farmers are any more "commodified" than the lives of artists. It means that there are nonmaterial as well as material commodities, and that a price must be paid for all of them.[16] Prices are inseparable from profits.

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[13]Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*, 3rd ed., rev. (1966; rpt. Chicago: Contemporary Books, n.d.), pp. 97, 289–90. David Kelley (private communication) has suggested that "relational" may be a better term than "subjective," because it stresses the relationship between object and subject and does not imply that economic values are merely arbitrary or context-free—which Mises does not mean to suggest they are.

[14]*O Pioneers!,* p. 197.

[15]Ibid., p. 198.

[16]Merely to observe this, of course, is to invite the disapproval of literary critics (left, right, and center), for whom commodities and the consumption thereof are traditional objects of moral aversion. Walter Benn Michaels has commented: "As long as the best thing to do with consumer culture is renounce it, literary criticism will be happy" (*The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987], p. 15).

Alexandra makes no attempt to decide whether the heartland folk pay a greater or a lesser price than Carl has paid. The standard of value (which is not necessarily the "money" standard) must be defined by every individual.[17] It is "subjective"; it depends on each individual's order of preferences.

And because it is subjective, it is changeable. What is valuable to one person may not be as valuable to another, or to the same person at another time. As Mises says, all economic valuations are rendered by particular individuals at "a definite time."[18] The definite time when Alexandra estimates the psychological "rent" that she pays for her farm and begins to find it onerous is *after* she has made the place financially profitable. Now she can say, "I don't need money."[19] What she needs now is Carl Linstrum, and the lightness and ease that she associates with him.

The problem is Lou and Oscar, who are just as unenlightened about the issue of economic valuation as they ever were. Computing Carl's value in strictly material terms, they estimate it as less than zero. In the event of a marriage, an event they are determined to prevent, Carl would not add wealth to the family. He would probably take some away: "Don't you know he'd get hold of your property?" Well, Alexandra answers, "He'd get hold of what I wished to give him, certainly."[20] She has estimated Carl's value in her own mind and has found it perfectly adequate.

The argument from individual preference and subjective value is lost on her brothers. They assume that there is one and only one standard of value, which just happens to be their own; and they try to enforce that standard by appealing to notions of collective authority. Although the Bergsons' land has now been legally divided among the various siblings, Lou still refers to Alexandra's property as "[o]ur property" and says that it

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[17]Money, as Lord Roll puts it, "acts as a price index" and allows for the exchange of goods to which individuals attach different values (Eric Roll, *A History of Economic Thought*, 5th ed., rev. [London: Faber and Faber, 1992], p. 357).

[18]Mises, *Human Action*, p. 121.

[19]*O Pioneers!,* p. 227.

[20]Ibid., p. 219.

"belongs to us as a family."[21] To this Oscar adds the ancient principle of collectivism, the principle of patriarchy: "The property of a family belongs to the men of the family, because they are held responsible, and because they do the work."[22]

Alexandra is well acquainted with such ideas. Her brothers have always been conformists, casting sidelong glances at the surrounding community and trying their best to do what everybody else does. They continue to believe, or hope, that the community will consider them "responsible" for anything that Alexandra does. And they remain addicted to the labor theory of value, believing that all the family's property "belongs" to them because they did "the work" on it, thus giving it value. By "work" they mean hard labor, not skill at dealing with the marketplace. "You liked to manage round," Lou tells his sister, "and we always humored you. . . . But, of course, the real work always fell on us. Good advice is all right, but it don't get the weeds out of the corn."[23]

"Maybe not," she says, "but it sometimes puts in the crop, and it sometimes keeps the fields for corn to grow in."[24] Her argument would be decisive, if her brothers could only understand it. But they can't. Their only refuge is misogyny: "That's the woman of it. . . . You can't do business with women."[25] Yet as Lou confusedly remarks after Alexandra lets her brothers know that she's finished both with the conversation and with them, "Alexandra ain't much like other women-folks."[26]

No wonder he's confused. For him, values are fixed: labor has value, men have value, women have value; everything has its own *fixed* value. But what can you say about a woman who isn't like other women? Lou and Oscar are amazed to discover that Alexandra can still have value—from Carl's perspective, and from her own—despite her lack of any attractive female qualities.

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[21]Ibid.

[22]Ibid., p. 220.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Ibid.

[25]Ibid., pp. 221, 222

[26]Ibid., p. 222.

As Oscar reminds her, she is 40 years old, and she has not yet married![27]

II.

Lou and Oscar Bergson are two of the stupidest characters in American literature. Cather is not about to give these suckers an even break. Their function is to show the harmony between bad economic ideas and bad ideas about such matters as family, community, sex, and politics. What ties these ideas together is their opposition to individualism.

From Alexandra's point of view, individualism is a practical necessity, akin to the division of labor: "It's bad if all the members of a family think alike. They never get anywhere." A family ought to use its differences and even its mistakes as a source of new information: "Lou can learn by my mistakes and I can learn by his."[28] Alexandra has identified a principle of self-correction that is crucial to the success of competitive market societies. Such a thought would never occur to Lou and Oscar. Alexandra is a methodological individualist; they are methodological collectivists. Her idea is that diversity increases opportunities to profit by increasing opportunities to learn; their idea is that the community, considered as a whole, already knows everything worth knowing.

Lou and Oscar never realize that there is anything the least bit backward about their ideas. They are not imaginative enough for that. Lou regards himself, indeed, as a disciple of progress. When 1896 rolls around, he becomes a fervent supporter of the Democratic nominee, William Jennings Bryan, Cather's fellow Nebraskan and her generation's greatest proponent of "progressive" economic causes.

But there is less irony here than meets the eye. Bryan's progressivism was in most respects highly reactionary. His "free silver" campaign proposed to relieve labor of its debts by the old-fashioned expedient of inflating the currency, in this case by

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[27]Ibid., p. 221.

[28]Ibid., p. 181. See also p. 149, on Alexandra's ability to learn "by the mistakes" of her neighbors.

the minting of an unlimited supply of silver coins. The campaign was supported by everyone in America's heartland who cherished the venerable conception of labor as the source and measure of value, everyone who harbored suspicions about such newer ways of establishing value as the mortgage market, the commodities market, and the money market. Such people naturally resented the idea that the currency should be based on the price of gold instead of something more readily inflatable for social purposes; they eagerly accepted as their prophet the man who shouted: "You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold."[29]

It is inevitable that Lou should be attracted to Bryan's cause. Cather prepares us for the worst. "The trouble with Lou," she announces in her most confident narrative voice, "is that he is tricky. . . . Politics being the natural field for such talents, he neglects his farm to attend conventions and to run for county offices."[30] Enriched by his sister's speculations, Lou can afford to spend his time extracting votes for "labor" from people who are still busy laboring. He represents a common human type: the man who *has* wealth and would *like* power. The salient though unspecified and "tricky" feature of Bryanism was the economic power it would convey to politicians. A victory for free silver would greatly enhance their ability to manipulate the marketplace in the name of the workers and farmers. Bryanism was made for people like Lou, people who like first-person plurals and assertions of community feeling. "We're waking up to a sense of our responsibilities," he declares: "We gave Wall Street a scare in ninety-six, all right, and we're fixing another to hand them. Silver was n't the only issue. . . . There's a good many things got to be changed. The West is going to make itself heard."[31]

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[29]William Jennings Bryan, speech to the Democratic National Convention (1896), in *American Public Addresses: 1740–1952*, A. Craig Baird, ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1956), p. 200.

[30]*O Pioneers!,* p. 185.

[31]Ibid., p. 192. Cather got the last laugh on Bryan when, two decades after the free silver campaign, Sinclair Lewis turned up in Nebraska to inform its citizens that "Willa Cather is . . . incomparably greater than

While waiting for that to happen, Lou feels entitled to demand that the oppressed people of the East "get together and march down to Wall Street and blow it up. Dynamite it, I mean."[32] Carl, who is the audience for these remarks, reminds Lou that the community he claims to represent is actually doing pretty well under the capitalist system: "One only has to drive through this country to see that you're all as rich as barons." But—values being individual and subjective, after all—what Lou values most is power, not money. He sees money as valuable because it can buy a degree of political power. "We have a good deal more to say than we had when we were poor," he says "threateningly."[33]

But neither Lou nor anyone else can acquire enough power to abolish economics. Carl makes that point. Blowing up Wall Street, he says, "would be a waste of powder. The same business would go on in another street."[34] Nothing can change the human desire to buy and sell and try to make a profit—in Adam Smith's famous expression, "to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another."[35] The market is a permanent structure. It would exist even if Wall Street did not. Alexandra's brothers concede this by their actions and choice of words. When they come over to her place to convince her that she doesn't really own it, they go to "do business" with her.[36] They propose a trade in certain goods: if she will give them control of her marriage plans and property, they will give her something that they think she ought to value more, preservation of the family. As traders often do, however, they misjudge their market; they make a wrong estimate of their customer's values and preferences.

William Jennings Bryan." And the Nebraskans had to listen. See James Woodress, *Willa Cather: A Literary Life* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), p. 319.

[32]Ibid., p. 192.

[33]Ibid.

[34]Ibid.

[35]Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, bk. 1, chap. 2.

[36]*O Pioneers!,* p. 222.

Oscar starts off by trying to intimidate Alexandra with the threat of social sanctions. He says that already "people have begun to talk" about Carl and her. But Alexandra, who has been going over her business records, "shut[s] her account-book firmly" and warns them not to continue. Her financial accounts may have been "neglected of late" because of her involvement with Carl, but she has not neglected her accounting of nonmaterial goods. She knows precisely what other people's opinions are worth to her, and she knows they are worth much less than freedom. The ensuing quarrel over her property rights proves that she is capable of breaking completely with her brothers if that is the price she has to pay to "do exactly as [she] please[s]."[37] There is finally nothing left for the brothers to do but go away and discuss the price they will have to pay for trying to "do business" with Alexandra in the overbearing way they chose. Oscar thinks that the price of arrogance may not be prohibitive: there is considerable profit in having one's "say." Lou isn't so sure: "Talk of that kind might come too high, you know."[38]

Cather must have had fun assigning business metaphors to Lou and Oscar, who are absolutely terrible businessmen. Still, the snap of Alexandra's account-book is a very earnest note. It signals her definite choice in the marketplace of spiritual and material goods, and it does something more: it signals her intention to retain the power of individual choice on which the marketplace itself is founded. Every reader sees that *O Pioneers!* is a story about personal freedom; not every reader sees the relationship it establishes between the personal, the political, and the economic dimensions of freedom. Cather makes the relationship explicit by making Alexandra an exponent of free exchange and free contracts as well as an exponent of her freedom to act as she will toward her family.

All of Alexandra's dealings with other people are freely contractual. Early in the novel, when she is doing her best to persuade her brothers to risk everything on her investment scheme, she stipulates that they must not sign the mortgage papers unless

[37]Ibid., pp. 218–19.

[38]Ibid., p. 222.

they really want to.[39] If they refuse to sign, her scheme is doomed; but she would rather stay poor than force them to do anything against their will. Later, the contract principle governs her relations with employees and dependents.

The best of many examples is old Ivar, an eccentric neighbor who "lost his land through mismanagement," then took up residence on Alexandra's land.[40] How would one expect to find this situation represented in the standard "economic" novel? One would expect to see all the local communitarians sympathizing with Ivar, who would be regarded as a victim of the ruthless banking system that foreclosed on him; and one might expect to see Alexandra, a successful practitioner of the capitalist or "Protestant" ethic, despising Ivar's mismanagement as if it were a sin. But again, Cather plays against the normal pattern of "economic" fiction: the communitarians despise Ivar because he doesn't fit in with the community, and Alexandra respects him because he is an individualist, as she is.

Nothing about capitalism requires her to conform to purely "commercial" values. Enjoyment of any kind can amount to profit. Thus, when Ivar worries about the neighbors' not liking to see him around her house, she assures him that his presence is in her "interests"; she has a "need" for him.[41] Their relationship has dignity because it is freely contractual, a free exchange in which both of them profit. Alexandra offers Ivar a home because she values his presence; he accepts her offer because he values her protection and respect. No larger community has to take "responsibility" for Ivar or judge his worthiness for official charity or welfare.

Alexandra's implicit contract with Ivar is one more cause of the rift between her and her eldest brothers. Ivar complains, and she agrees, that heartland America can be a distressingly conformist place: "The way here is for all to do alike. . . . [H]ere, if a man is different in his feet or in his head, they put him in the asylum."[42] Sure

[39]Ibid., p. 172.

[40]Ibid., p. 180.

[41]Ibid., pp. 182, 183.

[42]Ibid., p. 182. The young Willa Cather had seen in Bryan a representation of "the entire Middle West" in all its "magnitude [she does not say

enough, Lou turns Sunday dinner at his sister's house into an opportunity to threaten her with legal action if she doesn't do something about Ivar, whom Lou considers insane: "[T]he neighbors will be having a say about it before long. He may burn anybody's barn. It's only necessary for one property-owner in the township to make complaint, and he'll be taken up by force."[43]

Lou is gearing up for his communitarian attack on Wall Street and, quite soon, on Alexandra's right to own her land. But Alexandra has no difficulty deciding the Ivar question. If her neighbors try to diminish Ivar's freedom, she'll "take the case to court, that's all."[44] She, too, is gearing up. When her brothers claim that they own her land, despite any contractual agreements to the contrary, she makes a similar response: "Go to the county clerk and ask him who owns my land, and whether my titles are good."[45] Her brothers have political and social theories; she has a theory, too: government exists to defend her freedom to transact her own business, in her own way.

Alexandra's politics are as liberal, in the classical sense of the term, as her economics. Her ideas agree with those of James Madison, who in the *Federalist Papers* refers to "[t]he diversity in the faculties of men from which the rights of property originate." Madison defines "[t]he protection of these faculties" as "the first object of Government." Pressed by her brothers, Alexandra issues a challenge: "Go to town and ask your lawyers what you can do to restrain me from disposing of my own property. And I advise you to do what they tell you; for the authority you can exert by law is the only influence you will ever have over me again."[46]

That is, to put it bluntly, no influence at all. The government will protect Alexandra's property, and thereby her ability to differ from other people and survive despite the difference. As

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greatness] and *monotony*" (emphasis added)—Cather, "The Personal Side of William Jennings Bryan," *The Library* (July 14, 1900), in *The World and the Parish: Willa Cather's Articles and Reviews, 1893–1902*, William M. Curtin, ed.(Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970), p. 789.

[43]*O Pioneers!,* p. 186.

[44]Ibid., p. 187.

[45]Ibid., p. 219.

[46]Ibid., p. 221.

Madison realized, this can be put in another way: the object of government is to protect individual differences, and thereby the ability of individuals to create and acquire different kinds of property.[47] Individual freedom and property rights—the political principle and the economic one—cannot be separated. Alexandra understands that fully.

III.

This is classical liberalism, and it helps to resolve the notoriously difficult question of Cather's own political preferences.

In her thirties, before she published *O Pioneers!,* Cather edited *McClure's* magazine, the nation's leading "muckraking" journal and a focus of "progressive" politics. But she revealed no particular interest in political questions. To her grimly progressive friend Elizabeth Sergeant she confided that "all this practical side of her [Cather's] career was directed to getting together enough money to retire and write fiction." In her forties, Sergeant says, Cather reacted to the advent of *The New Republic* by demanding to know if "these people" were "Wilsonians, Bull Moosers, and such?" Assured that they were, she contemptuously and "abruptly changed the subject." In her sixties, she retaliated against Sergeant's praise of New Deal projects by declaring that the government should *not* help *anybody*, even (in case you were wondering) artists and writers like herself: "Endowments, frescoes for public buildings, travelling fellowships be damned." Sergeant concluded that Cather still "believed in the early American virtues, courage, sturdiness, tough endeavor."[48]

That is why people often call Cather a "conservative," whether they approve of conservatism or not. James Woodress, her most authoritative biographer, goes so far as to call her "a staunch Republican."[49] But she was not the kind of "conservative" or

[47]Peck, "'Possession Granted by a Different Lease'" (p. 7) asserts that Cather gives Alexandra's property rights "priority" over her brothers'. She doesn't.

[48]Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, *Willa Cather: A Memoir* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), pp. 2, 124–25, 261.

[49]Woodress, *Willa Cather*, p. 208.

"Republican" who can easily be confused with Babbitt. Many of the social attitudes that annoyed her leftwing critics annoyed her, too. She opposed prohibition and know-nothing laws against the teaching of foreign languages.[50] She wrote an article for *The Nation* in which she reproved heartland Americans who wanted their children to study something called "the principles of business" instead of the humanities, and who enjoyed "buying things instead of making anything." Such people wanted "snug success and easy money"—so much the worse for them.[51]

But even here, individualism and individual enterprise are Cather's touchstones. What is being lost, she says, is the education that "enrich[es] personality," the job that reveals "character."[52] In her novel *A Lost Lady* (1923), Cather distinguishes the pioneer generation from the one that succeeded it. The first generation consisted of "great-hearted adventurers" who knew "the great brooding spirit of freedom." These people could be "unpractical" enough, in narrowly commercial terms, to exchange financial profit for the enjoyment of sheer "magnificence." But the next generation, which was her own, was infested by "men . . . who had never dared anything, never risked anything," men who were "trained to petty economies" and mean-spirited envies.[53] They were individuals, surely, but hardly individualists.

These are the men who appear in Cather's story "The Sculptor's Funeral" (1905, 1920), a work that probably did her reputation very little good among conservative midwesterners. The story is set in the "progressive town" of Sand City, Kansas. It is about Sand City's posthumous valuation of a former citizen, the artist Harvey Merrick. Merrick was the only great man who ever

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[50]In *Willa Cather in Context: Progress, Race, Empire* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), Guy Reynolds labors to bring forth a "progressive" Willa Cather and is greatly assisted by the author's "multiculturalism"—although he is annoyed by her supposedly "illogical" representation of Alexandra Bergson as both a capitalist and a nice person (pp. 16, 56).

[51]Willa Cather, "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle," *The Nation* 117 (September 5, 1923), p. 238.

[52]Ibid.

[53]Willa Cather, *A Lost Lady*, in *Later Novels* (New York: Library of America, 1990), pp. 58–59.

came out of Sand City; he had to come *out* of it if he was ever to amount to anything. When Merrick's body is returned to Sand City for burial, the village grandees gather to sneer. They believe that he would have done better if he had taken "a course in some first-class Kansas City business college."[54] So much for "the great brooding spirit of freedom" in Cather's generation.

If Cather was a conservative, what she wanted to conserve was America's tradition of individualism, which was more valuable to her than any current set of heartland attitudes. There was a world of difference between taking a creative risk in business, as Alexandra did, and taking a class in some local business college; but there was nothing about the market system that dictated which alternative anyone must choose. Individuals had the chance to make their own decisions, and take the consequences, too. Their choices would show whether they had courage and character. Even while Cather was telling *The Nation* what she thought was wrong with America's worship of mere "mercantile processes," she was defending America's capitalist framework of decision-making. She observed that the depression of 1893 stimulated "the People's Party and the Free Silver agitation," the politics of Lou Bergson. But the more significant result was a testing of individuals: "These years of trial, as everyone now realizes, had a salutary effect on the state. . . . The slack farmer moved on. Superfluous banks failed, and money lenders who drove hard bargains with desperate men came to grief."[55]

The effects were not uniformly salutary: remember those remarks about people who received harsh training in "petty economies." But there were large entries in the credit column: "those who had weathered the storm came into their reward."[56]

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[54]Willa Cather, "The Sculptor's Funeral," in *Youth and the Bright Medusa* (1920), in *Stories, Poems, and Other Writings*, pp. 508, 507.

[55]Cather, "Nebraska," p. 238.

[56]Ibid. For Guy Reynolds—"Willa Cather as Progressive: Politics and the Writer," *The Cambridge Companion to Willa Cather*, Marilee Lindemann, ed. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 28—there is "a sense of *laissez-faire* capitalism" here; yet he believes that Cather's statements are significant chiefly as a "populist" or "progressive" attack on banks.

The Alexandra Bergsons showed that they could survive and prosper in the real economy as well as the economy of Cather's novels; they showed that they could prosper both spiritually and materially. Their "attainment of material prosperity," she said, "was a moral victory" in a "struggle that tested character."[57] In both the real economy and the fictional one, people's values were revealed by the choices they made, including their choice of attitudes toward the market system. They could view it either as a source of "snug success and easy money" or as an opportunity to accept risk and exhibit courage and intelligence. But that is the nature of a market system: it is an arena of individually chosen and competing values. Sand City may think that there is just one kind of values and one kind of profits; the Alexandra Bergsons and the Harvey Merricks know better.

Cather is not presenting some kind of Social Darwinist stories about the survival of the financially fittest. (Those stories proved more congenial to the socialist novelists of Cather's time—Dreiser, Norris, Sinclair.) Her stories have room for success and failure; but, simply because they are stories about economic freedom, as opposed to evolutionary law, they are stories in which almost anything can happen.

IV.

Where did Cather get her political and economic ideas? The political ideas were easy to come by. Their sources were anywhere and everywhere in America's classical-liberal tradition. Her ideas about economics, many of them, might develop easily enough from her experience of life in a capitalist society. Some of them, however, were recent additions to economic theory. Working knowledge of these ideas was rare, except among professional economists. The crucial concepts in this category are the principle of subjective value and the closely related principle of marginal utility.

Both ideas run counter to the traditional, intuitive belief that some things (e.g., land and labor) are intrinsically valuable. It is

[57]Ibid.

counterintuitive, but it is true, that a single cup of water may be more valuable than all the farmland in Nebraska. Yet something needs to be added at the end of that sentence—the words "to a certain person, at a certain time." The single cup of water might be supremely valuable to a person dying of thirst, but without any value at all to other people, or to the same person at a different time. As Mises argued, the only way to be sure about the economic value of a commodity is to see what someone does when he has to choose between it and something else.[58] We know that the cup of water is more valuable than the farmland (to the chooser, at the moment of choice) if the chooser gives up the farmland in order to possess the water. Someone else might not make the same choice. The same person might not make the same choice about a *second* cup of water. Once his thirst was assuaged, a few sections of Nebraska farmland might start to look more attractive to him than they had before.

To put this in another way: If I don't have a refrigerator, I will probably want one very badly; once I have a refrigerator, I will probably prefer almost anything else to a second one. In fact, I will probably be willing to part with some money to get a second refrigerator removed from my home. According to the principle of marginal utility, which is the economic principle at stake in these examples, each successive unit of a commodity is valued in response to the place it occupies, at each successive moment of choice, in each chooser's scale of preferences. The principle, which became "the accepted basis of economic theory" (accepted, that is, by economists, though unfamiliar to most other people) was formulated in the early 1870s by "the celebrated trinity," William Stanley Jevons, Léon Walras, and Carl Menger, the progenitor of the Austrian or "subjectivist" economics embraced by Mises and other twentieth-century figures.[59]

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[58]Mises, *Human Action*, p. 95.

[59]Roll, *A History of Economic Thought,* pp. 361, 341. See also Mises, *Human Action*, pp. 119–27. Roll usefully reviews the nineteenth-century work that preceded that of the "trinity." The term "marginal utility" was first introduced by Friedrich von Wieser in 1884 (Roll, p. 369).

If Alexandra's brothers understood this principle, they would not be so shocked to see her snap her account-book shut and communicate the astonishing intelligence that additional units of Carl Linstrum's company are now more valuable to her than additional units of their own. Forced to choose, she will take more of Carl and less of them—and less of money and property, too, if it comes to that. None of these things has any fixed and inherent value. Value is assigned by Alexandra's subjective acts of choice.

This way of thinking is profoundly disturbing to Lou and Oscar, whose sense of their own fixed and inherent value has so much to do with the fixed and inherent value of man's land and man's work. Alexandra's new economic thought is the unsettling factor in the first crisis of the novel, when she announces her land investment plan. This is her brothers' unhappy introduction to a world of fluctuating values, a world in which hard acres of land are transformed into flexible objects of speculation, a world in which successive units of man's physical labor can become much less valuable than successive units of a woman's financial management.

Alexandra's new way of thinking continues to be disruptive. It enriches her brothers materially, but it is bad for their mental health. She uses it to justify her valuation of Carl and of herself, a valuation that from her brothers' point of view is as offensively unearned, *unworked* for, as Wall Street profits. Like Wall Street, it arouses their envy and resentment. Figuratively speaking, Alexandra's brothers live in Sand City, where people are "hated" for many things, but primarily for "winning out."[60]

I will return to the problem of envy. At present, it is important to notice the precision with which Cather controls her political argument. Alexandra, she says in a careful aside, has "not the least spark of cleverness."[61] She is individual but not unique. What she does in the marketplace, millions of other men and women can do. She exemplifies the familiar classical-liberal argument that individuals of ordinary intelligence can handle the

[60]Cather, "Sculptor's Funeral," p. 509.

[61]*O Pioneers!,* p. 168.

business of life perfectly well, if they are left alone to do it. And yet . . . Alexandra is cleverer, in one way, than John Locke, Adam Smith, and Karl Marx. None of those distinguished economic and political theorists had been able to dismiss the traditional, and very plausible, idea that the value of a commodity must have something to do with the inherent value of the labor that went into producing it. Alexandra knows better than they did.

Yet the evidence lay all about them. It could be seen wherever people like Oscar worked hard but stayed poor, wherever people like Alexandra "managed round" and grew rich. As for the principle of marginal utility, which Cather uses so adroitly in *O Pioneers!,* its operations could be seen in even the most casual inspection of economic behavior. Anyone could see such things; anyone in a capitalist society could see them all day long.[62] But obviously a mere *sight* of the evidence was not enough. Imagination was required to make proper sense of it, and imagination works in mysterious, unpredictably tardy ways. The method of thinking about economic values that is central to *O Pioneers!* was not assimilated by formal economic theory until the "marginal revolution" of the 1870s, when capitalism had long been the

[62]Literary theorist Fredric Jameson (*The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981], pp. 249–50) points in this direction when he observes that the problem of economic valuation became an issue in capitalist society as it had not in earlier societies. He mentions "the new subjectivity of individualism" involved in people's ability to choose among various activities and professions: "the realm of values becomes problematical." But holding, as he does, to the labor theory of value, he associates this phenomenon with the discovery of "equivalent labor-power" and the "commodification of all labor," by which I suppose he means the discovery (perhaps not exactly new to the nineteenth century) that money can buy virtually any kind of "labor." He thus misses several things that are hard to miss if you aren't trying to operate with the labor theory of value. Among them is the fact that economic choice and valuation may become quite interesting in a period in which some kinds of "labor" (e.g., innovation, investment, and other canny uses of the brain) are routinely found to produce more valuable "commodities" (i.e., things that people are willing to buy) than more traditional kinds of "labor" could ever produce. In other words, when Alexandra is free to choose how she wants to "labor," she is able to make a lot more money than Lou and Oscar, and this is very "problematical" for them.

object of searching intellectual inquiry. That method of thinking, it is safe to say, is still unknown to the great majority of intellectuals.[63]

Nevertheless, it can be practiced with sophistication by people who have no special training in economics. Cather had no such training, and no taste for it, either. She seems to have studied no more profound economic authorities than the authors of the attacks in *McClure's* on big capital and corrupt labor; and she made little or no use of their ideas in her novels. When she had the opportunity to look over the library of her compatriot, Mr. Bryan, she reported that "[t]he works on political economy were mostly by quacks."[64] She had confidence in her judgment, although her chief economic equipment was the gift of imagination. But that, as an economic writer once said, is the principal intellectual "faculty" that economics demands.[65]

It takes imagination to identify an economic principle. It takes still more imagination to follow the implications of the principle outside the context of commercial activity and explore its psychological, social, and political meanings. Cather had that kind of

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[63]It is never encountered in works of literary interpretation and theory, and it is often missing in works of history. William Cronon's admirable book about the economic development of Chicago, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: Norton, 1991), explains in fascinating detail the ways in which capitalist innovation and investment developed gargantuan new sources of value. But Cronon maintains that all of this exemplifies in some way the labor theory of value, simply because human work and "social relationships" were involved. He then qualifies the labor theory, but only to insist on the "value" that supposedly came to the Chicago markets "directly" from nature, ultimately from the "stored sunshine" that is the life of plants and "the wealth of nature" (pp. 149–50). Cronon doesn't ask himself about the "value" of all those units of sunshine that are stored but never used or wanted, or about the sunshine that was stored on this earth for millions of years before, in Cather's words, "a human face was set toward it with love and yearning" (p. 170, see below). He is imagining the world as an historian or ecologist, but not as an economist.

[64]Cather, "Personal Side of William Jennings Bryan," p. 783.

[65]Harry Scherman, *The Promises Men Live By: A New Approach to Economics* (New York: Random House, 1938), pp. xii–xiii.

imagination. It responded fully to her need, as a novelist, to understand her characters' behavior. It made economic processes and modern economic insights essential to the structure of her texts, which is a structure of choices and valuations. "The economy of the text" is a phrase one often finds in literary theory. Usually it has less to do with any modern principle of economics than with some conception of the text as a world of its own (an 'oikouménē, to use the old Greek term for "inhabited world," a term only distantly related to *economy*). Cather's stories give the phrase a closer relevance to the modern idea.

V.

To illustrate: here is a story called "Two Friends," which Cather published in 1932 in a little volume called *Obscure Destinies*. It shows something about her thoughts on economic issues, with particular reference, once again, to the unfortunate Bryanites.[66] It also shows her way of structuring a text as a pattern of individual or "subjective" economic valuations.

The two friends are Mr. Dillon, a banker, and Mr. Trueman, a cattleman. They are the most prominent personalities of a little Western town, a town much like Cather's Red Cloud, Nebraska. It is 1896, the great election year. Cather chooses that crucial moment of decision between two political and economic theories—populist free silver and capitalist hard money—as the opportunity for Mr. Dillon and Mr. Trueman to decide their own values and confirm their own destinies. Those destinies are as "obscure" as Red Cloud, but for Cather they are as significant as the power of choice they exemplify.

What Dillon and Trueman choose is shocking to the town; many years later, it remains shocking to the story's narrator. In 1896, the narrator was an impressionable girl who saw the two

[66] Woodress, *Willa Cather,* p. 445, suggests that "Two Friends" is "the unique exhibit in the canon of Cather's fiction in which politics provides plot"—a statement that needs to be qualified, especially in view of the political choices that appear in crucial episodes of *O Pioneers!* and other works; e.g., *One of Ours* (1922), *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927), *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* (1940).

men as her "unalterable realities." Intelligent, self-assured, unpretentiously kind, they were the image of concord and stability, an implicit gold standard of human experience. But that summer, Dillon attended the Democratic national convention and heard Bryan's great attack on gold. He became an ardent Bryanite, maintaining that "gold had been responsible for most of the miseries and inequities of the world; that it had always been the club the rich and cunning held over the poor; and that 'the free and unlimited coinage of silver' would remedy all this."[67] To this Mr. Trueman replied, "That's no way for a banker to talk." In his opinion, "a banker had no business to commit himself to a scatter-brained financial policy which would destroy credit."[68]A banker ought to know that people will avoid making investments if they expect to be repaid in inflated currency. But there is a market in ideas about money as well as a market in money itself. Just now, the market of ideas is full of paper that some people regard as valuable and others perceive as worthless. Dillon and Trueman, the "unalterables," prove that fact about the market when they decide to quarrel about Bryan's program. Is there nothing more valuable for them to do with their limited and passing time? But bad money tends to drive out good.

Trueman retaliates against Dillon's ideas by withdrawing his money from Dillon's bank. The flight of money is always an objective effect of a subjective cause, of a lapse of confidence. Trueman's act, which causes a sensation "all over town," is a publicly visible index of how far, for him, Dillon's moral stock has fallen. In response to Trueman's disapproval, Dillon ostentatiously makes new and less critical friends. He finds utility where he never found it before. He roams the countryside "organiz[ing] the Bryan Club and the Bryan Ladies' Quartette," thereby confirming Trueman's hypothesis that unscattered brains are in short supply on the Bryan side.[69]

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[67]Willa Cather, "Two Friends" (1932) in *Stories, Poems, and Other Writings*, p. 686.

[68]Ibid., pp. 687, 686.

[69]Ibid., pp. 686–87.

Cather's own view of Bryanism isn't hard to guess. She allows Trueman to argue against Bryan's economic crusade, and she never allows a substantial refutation. According to her narrator, it is "senseless" and "stupid" for a friendship to end because of something like this. It is worse than stupid; it is "commonplace."[70] But that word is odd. Bryan's campaign for free silver was virtually the *last* thing that middle Americans born in the late nineteenth century would call "commonplace."[71] Cather, who conscientiously avoided cheap and transient literary material, clearly regards the Bryan campaign (the only external political event that is mentioned in *O Pioneers!*) as reason enough for the fictional conflict she wants to evoke in "Two Friends." The word "commonplace" is a calculated choice; it has an ironic emphasis, the signal of a complexity in Cather's intention.

That signal can easily be missed by people who are more interested in direct statements of values than in Cather's way of building value choices into the economy of her texts. For Granville Hicks, who led the leftist attack on Cather in the 1930s, the meaning of "Two Friends" is obvious. The story simply "teaches" "that politics is much less important than friendship." I must add that "teaches" is not meant kindly. It connotes an Olympian detachment, a cultivation of elitist and "romantic dreams" that involve "the distortion of life," the true life of modern politics and economics.[72]

But one could just as easily argue that the story teaches the opposite idea (if it plainly "teaches" anything). We see Dillon and Trueman making choices, and their choices reveal that politics, at this juncture, is *more* important to them than friendship. For good or bad reasons, politics is what *they* choose to buy. The narrator would presumably have chosen otherwise; to her, a

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[70]Ibid., p. 684.

[71]Robert W. Cherny, "Willa Cather and the Populists," *Great Plains Quarterly* 3 (Fall 1983): 206–18, a very valuable contribution, shows how important the great populist movements were to Cather's neighbors, and outlines her unfavorable reaction to them early and late in her career.

[72]Hicks, "The Case against Willa Cather,"p. 146.

preference for politics over friendship seems *merely* commonplace, merely one more example of people's chronic willingness to surrender spiritual gold in exchange for ideological silver: it naturally leads to "a stupid, senseless, commonplace end." Cather herself would probably agree. But that isn't what she chooses to say. She does not, as Hicks alleged, find it "necessary to rely on direct statements."[73] Instead, she retires behind her narrator, shifting the emphasis from her own position to the contrasting positions and priorities of Dillon, Trueman, and the narrator. Cather's first priority—what *she* values most, in the economy of *this* story—is the presentation of the characters' acts of choice and valuation, not an argument about what they should have chosen and valued.

When one looks at the story in this way, one realizes that Cather permits the word "commonplace," like the word "destiny" or the word "obscure," to suggest two possible meanings. The reader can buy either one of them. "Obscure" can mean either "insignificant" or "significant in some subtle way." "Destiny" can mean either "what has to happen" or "what one's choices cause to happen." "Commonplace" can mean either "ordinary, trite, uninteresting," or "standard, basic, of essential interest." What is commonplace in this second sense of the term is people's ability to assign violently competing values to the same object, whether that object be gold, free silver, friendship, or an "unalterable" sense of reality. The deepest irony of the story is that particular values are constantly in flux, within the unalterable frame of people's need and ability to value.

"Two Friends" does not represent a "romantic dream" or a flight from economics; it explores the ways in which the human economy works. Whether we are concerned with material or nonmaterial goods, or with both, as we are in this story, choice and subjective valuation are the essence of economics; and to choose, in economic terms, is to pay a price, to forego one possible good for another. Dillon and Trueman choose politics over friendship; the narrator chooses friendship over politics; Cather,

[73]Ibid.

devising the economy of the story as a whole, makes her own choice, which is to emphasize choice itself—and to offer her audience the opportunity to make some choices, too, choices that reveal her readers' values just as precisely as the choices within the story reveal the values of the characters. Even Hicks, who had other priorities than an attentive reading of Cather's story, saw it as an enticing target for investment in a certain kind of political and economic values. It was all the more enticing because he assumed that his competitor, the exalted Miss Cather, had made the mistake of investing in a rival fund.

Literary effects come at a price. Hicks made Cather look like a one-sided writer, and he paid for the privilege by writing one-sidedly himself. His strategy remains a substantial debit against his literary reputation. The price that Cather paid in "Two Friends" was the sacrifice of more direct means of self-expression. She could drop enough hints about her economic and political ideas to allow readers to make some persuasive deductions, but adding more hints would not have been a wise investment. It would not have helped her achieve her more general purpose. She was willing to forego that pleasure. It was the price she paid for the emphasis she wanted. "That which is abandoned is called the price paid for the attainment of the end sought. . . . The difference between the value of the price paid (the costs incurred) and that of the goal attained is called gain or profit or net yield."[74]

In one of her essays, Cather advances the same idea, although she uses more vivid and concrete language. Recalling a painting by Millet, she says that he created it by "sacrificing many conceptions good in themselves for one that was better and more universal." Then she discusses the costs and profits of literature: "Any first rate novel or story must have in it the strength of a dozen fairly good stories that have been sacrificed to it."[75] A real artist has the courage to pay the price and the insight to anticipate the profit.

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[74]Mises, *Human Action*, p. 97.

[75]Willa Cather, "On the Art of Fiction" (1920), in *Stories, Poems, and Other Writings*, p. 939.

This is an act of courage because there is no guarantee that the audience's valuation will coincide with the artist's, even if the audience is as intelligent as Granville Hicks. Cather's work was financially successful, but she knew that her income depended on strong support from a small portion of the total book market. Even then: Cather's *My Ántonia* earned only $1,300 in the first year, $400 in the second.[76] There is, as she understood, "no market demand" for art as there is for "soap or breakfast foods" or putatively realistic ("photographic") fiction about contemporary social problems.[77] She believed that real art does have a permanent audience, an audience defined by its willingness to pay the high price that artists demand—a price paid chiefly in sensitive attention and reflection, but sometimes also in money (Cather refused to cheapen her books by permitting paperback editions). Nevertheless, an artist's investment may never bring adequate returns of recognition. That is a risk the artist takes.

There is always, of course, a risk of sheer incomprehension by one's best audience. This risk is especially serious for the kind of artistic effort that is itself most fully constituted by risks. An excellent example is Cather's defiantly enigmatic novel *My Mortal Enemy* (1926). In this book we are about as far from the forthright approach of *O Pioneers!* as we can possibly get, but Cather's interest in the economy of subjective values remains intact. If anything, it is enhanced, and that is where the risk comes in.

Myra Driscoll, the protagonist of *My Mortal Enemy*, expects—is practically assured of getting—a fine inheritance from her rich and doting uncle. Then she falls in love with Oswald Henshawe, who is merely "handsome and promising." Her uncle opposes the match. He "confronted her with a cold, business proposition. If she married young Henshawe, he would cut her off without a penny. . . . If she did not, she would inherit two-thirds of his property."[78]

Myra selects Option 1. She takes the risk of giving up the inheritance, surrendering it as the price of a romantic marriage—

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[76]Sharon O'Brien, in Cather, *Early Novels and Stories*, p. 1310.

[77]Cather, "On the Art of Fiction," pp. 939–40.

[78]Willa Cather, *My Mortal Enemy,* in *Stories, Poems, and Other Writings,* p. 538.

and later finds reason to regret her choice. Oswald is touchingly devoted to her, and their lives pass pleasantly enough, for the most part; but as the romance gradually cools, Myra thinks more and more about the comforts and pleasures she exchanged for it. Embittered and ill, she asks, "Why must I die like this, alone with my mortal enemy?"[79] But what does she mean by that?

Cather's narrator answers the question in a carefully ambivalent way: "Violent natures like hers sometimes turn against themselves . . . against themselves and all their idolatries."[80] From one point of view, the enemy is Myra herself. From another, it's her husband, the unworthy idol.[81] In either case, the issue is choice and risk, the possibility of making a disastrously wrong valuation, either of oneself or of what one desires, at either the beginning or the end of one's course of choices. The problem is the unpredictable manner in which values can "turn" and fluctuate, for both the chooser (Myra Henshawe) and the observer (the reader or, perhaps, the author) who is trying to assess Myra's choices at each stage of their making and their effects. And Cather is unwilling to reduce the risk of unprofitable interpretive choices. She provides sufficient evidence to substantiate any of four symmetrical interpretations and valuations:

1. Myra thinks that Oswald is the enemy, and she is right.
2. Myra thinks that Oswald is the enemy, and she is wrong.
3. Myra thinks that she herself is the enemy, and she is right.
4. Myra thinks that she herself is the enemy, and she is wrong.

Cather confided in a private letter what she chose not to confide in her book: in her opinion, Oswald is the enemy. But she also indicated that she thought "most people" would not agree with her.[82] She had not shaped the economy of the text so as to eliminate the risk of diverging choices. Quite the contrary: she

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[79]Ibid., p. 577.

[80]Ibid.

[81]Woodress, *Willa Cather,* p. 384.

[82]Ibid. In correspondence that passed much later, she added a complication by discussing the problem in terms of Myra's view of Oswald: Myra came to feel he was the enemy because she had originally admired him too much (ibid., pp. 384–85).

had shaped it so as to emphasize that risk, omitting any authorial moralizing that might possibly reduce it.

So the novel is *about* the problem of choice, and it *is* a problem of choice. It was therefore criticized, wrongly but understandably, for being "[a]ll bones and no flesh. . . . Significant things are left out, and the reader is left not only unsatisfied, but also puzzled."[83] Some of Cather's most sympathetic and perceptive readers have been baffled by the novel or have tried to explain it in terms that are not its own. Woodress suggests that it provides a "comment on the destructive power of money": "Myra is wrecked by greed" because she threw away her inheritance and then regretted it.[84] But is money in itself to blame? Myra confesses that she is "greedy" for it, but she is greedy for other things, too. She especially wants an admiring "circle" of her "own kind."[85] She wants "community," in the trendy phrase; and whatever she wants, she wants intensely. It is her intensity—by turns charming, repulsive, pathetic—that makes one pause before either condemning or acquitting her. And Cather won't provide the verdict herself.

She made generous allowance for the problems implicit in *My Mortal Enemy*. She said that although "[i]n form she thought the book faulty enough . . . one had to choose the thing most desired and try for it at the cost of everything else."[86] She knew that even in the economy of stories, you cannot have everything you want. Like Myra Henshawe, you have to choose what you most desire. What Cather chose, what she thought was valuable enough to buy at the price of "everything else," was a brilliantly pure focus on the risks of choice and valuation. And that is what she got.

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[83]Ibid., p. 388, quoting Louis Kronenberger, *New York Times Book Review* (October 24, 1926), p. 2.

[84]Ibid., p. 386.

[85]*My Mortal Enemy*, pp. 567–68.

[86]Woodress, *Willa Cather*, p. 385.

VI.

Choice, risk, price, payment, competing valuations—such economic concepts came naturally to Cather when she thought about art. They were her way of imagining the life of the imagination. She used them from her earliest period of authorship, and she made sure to use them in contexts where they were likely to cause offense. As a young journalist, she ridiculed the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children for trying to prevent a thirteen-year-old actress from working. Cather's argument was that art has its price:

> It is a pity that the kindhearted . . . folks do not extend their noble efforts and forbid authors to write and musicians to play before they are fifteen years old. If the society had its way there would be no actors at all in a generation or two. The greatest part of an actress' education must be completed before she is fifteen. The society claim that it is cruel for a child to be put to the strain of acting every night when she ought to be at home and in bed. Of course it is cruel, most art is cruel, and very few artists have time to sleep much in this world, though we trust they rest very peacefully in the next. . . . Great actresses cannot be brought up upon what Kipling calls the "sheltered life-system." They must have abundant knowledge of good and evil. . . .[87]

Cather found her own art deeply fulfilling, but she still had to pay for it, if only, as she indicated in a late and unusually mild remark, by giving up whatever she regarded as *less* agreeable.[88] On the whole, she greatly enjoyed writing her World War I novel *One of Ours*, yet she could have set herself an easier task. The hero was modeled on her cousin, G.P. Cather, who died in the war. The cousins had not been close. She told a friend that "to get away from him and his kind . . . was why she wrote at all."[89] It was a

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[87]Willa Cather, *Nebraska State Journal* (February 11, 1894), in *The World and the Parish*, p. 50.

[88]Woodress, *Willa Cather*, pp. 451–52.

[89]Ibid., p. 304.

cruel process to try to give his life an appropriate literary form—crueler than it might have been, because the portrait that emerged must not be cruel. But, she said, "we all have to pay a price for everything we accomplish and because I was willing to pay so much to write about this boy, I felt that I had a right to do so."[90]

The price that the artist pays and the profits that she expects to get are the subject of Cather's most comprehensive study of an artist's development, *The Song of the Lark* (1915). It is the story of Thea Kronborg, a girl from a small town in Colorado who becomes a world-renowned singer. Toward the end of the book, Thea considers how different her valuations are from everyone else's. Of her artistic achievement, she thinks: "nobody on God's earth wants it, *really*!" Of an old friend, she thinks: "The things she [herself] had lost, he would miss readily enough. What she had gained, he would scarcely perceive."[91] Again, this is the wisdom of the economist: "The difference between the valuation of two states of affairs is entirely psychical and personal. . . . It can be sensed only by the individual."[92]

At this particular moment of Thea's life, that is not a very cheerful reflection. But it fails to convert her to a less economic view of reality. It simply shows her that she can bear even the "psychical" cost of understanding reality as she does. Taking a few minutes out of her demanding schedule to audition a prospective husband, Thea informs him, "Who marries who is a small matter, after all. . . . If you're not interested, I'll do my best, anyhow. I've only a few friends, but I can lose every one of them, if it has to be." A romantic speech! and one that has not been to every reader's taste. But there is nothing to indicate that Cather disapproves. The point is: "anything good is—expensive."[93]

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[90]Ibid., p. 305.

[91]Willa Cather, *The Song of the Lark* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943), pp. 557, 514. This edition contains Cather's revisions to the 1915 text, which is the one reprinted in the Library of America edition of *Early Novels and Stories* (see above, note 3). No revisions significantly affect the passages quoted in this essay.

[92]Mises, *Human Action*, p. 97.

[93]*The Song of the Lark*, pp. 559, 557.

The Song of the Lark derives its literary structure from a hard, unyielding sequence of investment decisions. As a girl, Thea learns what life in her little western town has to offer—stability and community—and what has to be paid for it—conformity and mediocrity. She refuses to pay. She leaves town, gambling a small inheritance and her unproven musical talent against the enormous risk of failure in a profession that most people regard as useless to begin with. She finally succeeds in the limited and demanding marketplace that exists for her art, but she does so only by sacrificing virtually everything that is not art. She surrenders friends, would-be lovers, even a dying mother whom she cannot visit because she needs to sing Elizabeth in *Tannhäuser*. Cather registers no disapproval. To be an artist, she told Sergeant, one must "refuse most of the rest of life."[94] Cather surrendered "most of the rest" of her own life as an investment in art. Her management of life was roughly similar to her management of Thea's career and her management of *The Song of the Lark* in general.

In each episode of that novel, Thea must choose something, some definite amount or extent of something, and let the rest of life go—which is just another way of saying that at each moment of the story Cather herself must weigh the marginal utility of every kind of thing she could put into it, paying for what she chooses to do with the price of everything that she chooses not to do. Of course, every author has to make such choices; every author confronts the principle of marginal utility. In this regard, *The Song of the Lark* is interesting mainly because it shows an unusual self-consciousness about the economics of the artistic process.

It is also interesting because it shows an author's gradual education in the management of her artistic investments. There is a general sense among Cather's critics that the first half of the novel takes far longer than necessary to describe the small-town life that both Thea and Cather chose not to settle for. Cather carefully works up subsidiary characters whose stories neither she nor her protagonist finds worth pursuing for very long in the second half.

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[94]Cather, quoted in Sergeant, *Willa Cather: A Memoir,* p. 63.

As the novel nears its end, Thea reflects on one such friend "and all that he recalled." "[B]etter as memories," she muses.[95] So, perhaps, does Cather, who has been learning artistic ruthlessness along with her heroine. The novel's last movement proceeds with maximum efficiency. Thea decides to marry one of her admirers, Fred Ottenburg, but neither she nor Cather can afford to waste much time on this. The decision episode has been described as "probably the most unsentimental betrothal scene in all of Western fiction. . . . [Thea's] car is waiting. She's singing Sieglinde on Friday, and she has to get her rest."[96] Thea rides off alone, and twenty pages later we learn that "Mr. Ottenburg" has become "her husband."[97]

It's not simply that Thea cares more about her career than she cares about Fred. It's also that Cather has discovered where to dim the lights and where to bring them up again. They should be dim for the "betrothal scene" (which, in that twilight atmosphere, might easily be mistaken for a rejection scene); they should be bright again for Thea's triumphant performance of *Die Walküre*, because this is where the great investment pays off:

> The stupid believe that to be truthful is easy; only the artist, the great artist, knows how difficult it is. That afternoon nothing new came to Thea Kronborg, no enlightenment, no inspiration. She merely came into full possession of things she had been refining and perfecting for so long. Her inhibitions chanced to be fewer than usual, and, within herself, she entered into the inheritance that she herself had laid up. . . .[98]

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[95]*The Song of the Lark*, p. 515.

[96]Joan Acocella, *Willa Cather and the Politics of Criticism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), p. 1. Acocella's book is a lively and judicious assessment of Cather's achievement and of other critics' attempts to come to terms with it.

[97]*The Song of the Lark*, p. 578.

[98]Ibid., p. 571.

VII.

Cather entered into her own inheritance by learning what needed to be spent, paid, given up. You can see it in her life; you can see it in the small, cunning effects of her fiction.

She was fascinated, for instance, by the Indian ruins of the American Southwest. She visited them, she loved them, she was always interested in them; but she found out when to use them and when to sacrifice them to something else. In the second half of *The Song of the Lark*, she finds a way for Thea to visit them and there discover "the inevitable hardness of human life. No artist gets far who doesn't know that."[99] But once Thea has gathered all the intuitions she needs, Cather has her grow "tired of the desert and the dead races, of a world without change or ideas." So she leaves, on the eastbound express.[100] Cather, who is by now on frank and intimate terms with the principle of marginal utility, leaves too. She returns in *The Professor's House* (1925) and *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927). In those two novels, she places stories about the Indian past precisely where she thinks they will contribute some crucial insight. Then, precisely where that ceases to be true, she returns to the living world, where ideas and values constantly, unpredictably change.

Change is unpredictable because it results, not from the necessities of environment or "economics," but from the choices of individuals for whom the fundamental economic necessity is choice itself. I suppose that no American novelist is more famous for the arts of environment—atmosphere and setting—than Willa Cather. But her stories never just emerge from their environments, as if the fictional landscape were studded with fields and mines and forests that required no investment to exploit. Nothing is a resource until someone makes a decision to invest in it and turn it to human use. Usable resources vary with desire and choice.

That is the optimistic message of *O Pioneers!,* and the unsettling message of *The Professor's House*. The protagonist of the latter

[99]Ibid., p. 554.

[100]Ibid., p. 408.

novel, Professor St. Peter, is wealthy and respected, a man of finished culture and consummate intellectual power. But he has reached a stage of life at which intellectual gold no longer seems to justify the expense of mining it, and his happy family life no longer makes him happy. After a point, some mysterious point that can be fixed only by himself, whatever goods the Professor possesses are not what he wants any more of. This is the principle of marginal utility, with a vengeance. Waking in a room that is filling with gas from a malfunctioning stove, he faces the apparently easy task of deciding whether to open a window. But it's not clear to him that the returns are worth the effort. Further increments of existence may not repay the cost of getting out of bed. He starts to let himself die—only to be rescued by a hired woman who happens to set a higher value on his life than he does. Limited in many ways, enslaved (as anyone else might say) to commonplace duties, she has a quality of realism that clarifies St. Peter's sense of the inevitable hardness of existence. That sense of the desert, he now decides, may justify the investment of continued life. The novel ends. Its end may or may not be edifying; that's for the reader to decide. But its construction is true to Cather's economic principles.

Cather advocated "the novel démeublé": "How wonderful it would be if we could throw all the furniture out of the window." The furniture that she especially wanted to defenestrate was the detailed surface realism that loves to "catalogu[e]" facts about characters' "material surroundings," as if that were the important thing.[101] Cather's characters often share her desire to throw things out. Contemplating the "simple and definite" in the remains of the Southwest Indians, Thea decides that her mind is stuffed with useless material and "she must throw [the] lumber away."[102] In Cather's stories, what goes sailing out the window is pseudo-economic "realism" and its assumption that values are determined by what people have (or do not have) instead of by what people choose.

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[101]Willa Cather, "The Novel Démeublé" (1922), in *Not Under Forty* (1936), in *Stories, Poems, and Other Writings*, pp. 837, 834–35.

[102]*The Song of the Lark*, p. 380.

"Neighbour Rosicky," another offering from *Obscure Destinies*, has much to say about this subject. Cather's theme is the Rosicky family's independence from any ordinary, pseudo-economic plot. Rosicky is a modestly successful farmer who decides to remain modestly successful—as success is defined by people who think in purely material terms. His neighbors think that Rosicky and his wife lack "good judgment" about the marketplace, because the pair can't see the value of getting all the cash profits they can possibly get from it. But the Rosickys have perfectly reasonable ideas about profits. When they give their dairy cream to their children instead of selling it, they receive more value, as they define value, than they would otherwise. The Rosickys are individual enough—and unenvious enough, a great point with Cather—to see "their neighbours buy more land and feed more stock than they, without discontent"; they prefer to spend their time and energy pursuing nonmaterial profits. Within the economy of Cather's text, Neighbor Rosicky is a very successful man. When he dies, Cather's eminently reliable spokesman pronounces his life "complete and beautiful."[103] It has been said that the Rosickys are successful because they allow the "human" to take "precedence over the economic,"[104] but that isn't quite right. Economic values are human values, too. Cather's idea is that the Rosickys are successful because they are humans who make wise economic choices.

The larger form of the Rosickys is Ántonia Shimerda, the protagonist of *My Ántonia* (1918). A pseudo-economic novelist would have portrayed her as a victim of her environment, the captive of a heartless landscape where her father kills himself in despair, where she is seduced by a worthless lover and abandoned to bear his child, where she is finally forced by circumstances to marry a man for whom she feels no passion. But that is not Cather's story of Ántonia's life. Her story is about the power of individual choice,[105] and about everything that choice

[103]Willa Cather, "Neighbour Rosicky" (1930), in *Stories, Poems, and Other Writings*, pp. 71, 15, 24–25.

[104]Woodress, *Willa Cather*, p. 438.

[105]As stressed by Cherny ("Willa Cather," pp. 213–15), who traces Cather's development of the theme through the various situations in which

implies in economic terms: valuation, investment, risk, the chance of success.

The narrator of *My Ántonia*, Jim Burden, is described in the novel's introduction as a capitalist who has been important in the development of the West. His business investments have been more successful than his personal ones (his wife is a rich dilettante with leftish political interests, disliked by Cather), yet he retains his "romantic" disposition and his interest in other people's romantic investments.[106] Some of those investments have tragic results, such as the suicide of Ántonia's father, a man who should never have risked his all on the American West. Others turn out better. As the novel continues, Cather's emphasis on investments and outcomes grows stronger and her handling of the theme grows more complex. She provides examples across the range of possibilities: old Colonel Raleigh, who lost most of his "inherited fortune" by investing it in real estate "at the time of inflated prices"; Tiny Soderball, a servant girl who made a fortune in the Klondike by speculating in real estate and buying up "claims from discouraged miners"; Lena Lingard, another impoverished girl who built a lucrative business and "[c]ertainly . . . had no one but herself to thank for it"; and Wick Cutter, the local usurer and villain, who also has no one but himself to thank for the way his investment in life turns out—he quarrels with his wife over what will be done with his property after he dies, then hastens the event with a murder-suicide.[107] The cause is "spite." Obviously, investments in money and property are only two factors in the economy; there is the little matter of character and emotion, too.

All this is preparation for the final report on Ántonia's investments. Needing a legal father for her first child and for the many

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the novel's characters, though influenced or constrained by circumstances, are shown to retain their power of choice.

[106]Cather, *My Ántonia*, in *Early Novels and Stories*, p. 712. In her 1926 shortening of the introduction (pp. 1332–34), Cather took out the specifically leftist sympathies of the wife, perhaps because they had dated, but she kept the "romantic disposition which . . . has been one of the strongest elements in [Jim's] success."

[107]Ibid., pp. 888, 896, 878, 931–32.

others that she wants to bear, Ántonia marries a man so poor that he has "to borrow money from his cousin to buy the wedding-ring."[108] She assumes other risks. She and her husband take up cheap new land on time payments.[109] He is no better prepared to cope with the situation than her father was, but her ability gets them through. Their land appreciates fivefold; they are able to liquidate the mortgage on the original property and buy up more.[110] Yet Ántonia is not to be considered a successful investor because she makes a lot of money. She never becomes rich or even middle class. She is successful because, like the Rosickys, she accomplishes her primary purpose, the creation of a large and happy family. That may not be your primary purpose or mine, and it certainly was not Willa Cather's; but it is Ántonia's, and she achieves it by calculated risk and investment.[111]

The results are evident in the celebrated episode in which Ántonia and her virtually uncountable children show Jim Burden the artificial "cave" where she stores her preserves. Woodress sees the visit to Ántonia's fruit cave ("a cornucopia of the earth's bounty") as a Nebraska version of the mysteries of Eleusis, a revelation of life miraculously emergent from earth's darkness.[112] The comparison is apt. When Jim and Ántonia leave the cave, Ántonia's children come running out, "big and little, tow heads and gold heads and brown, and flashing little naked legs; a veritable explosion of life out of the dark cave into the sunlight."[113] Ántonia's cave is a mine of gold—as *she* would define "gold"—although it would be even better to say, as Jim does, that Ántonia herself is the mine, "a rich mine of life."[114] Life is her standard of value and the reward of her investments. And life is

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[108]Ibid., p. 933.

[109]Ibid., p. 920.

[110]Ibid., p. 933.

[111]Susan Rosowski, "Willa Cather's Women," *Studies in American Fiction* (Autumn 1981): 265–68; and Woodress, *Willa Cather* (p. 300) make observations similar to this.

[112]Woodress, *Willa Cather*, pp. 296–97.

[113]*My Ántonia*, p. 918.

[114]Ibid., p. 926.

her creation; she is not a "natural resource." If she is the "mine," she is also the miner, and the mine's very well-satisfied customer. The human economy (and the economy of Cather's story) is complete in her.

VIII.

Elizabeth Sergeant tells us that although Cather disliked the idea of the government's going about to "help" anyone, she herself did a good deal of helping. She regularly gave gifts to the farm families she knew, and "in case of crop failures . . . seed corn was not forgotten. . . . Her presents were always directed to an individual, whose subjective or economic needs she knew."[115] Sergeant's "or" makes "needs" either "subjective" *or* "economic." But in Cather's stories, the economic *is* the subjective, in the sense that "needs" are always defined in accordance with individual differences and desires. The idea emerges continually in Cather's stories: "Only the feeling matters"; "*in der Brust, in der Brust* it is."[116] This is romanticism, but not mere romanticism. It is an economic principle reduced to essential terms.

Another economic principle is that all human action carries risks, and there are plenty of risks connected with practical applications of the idea that "*in der Brust* it is." The idea allows for the existence and interest of a dark as well as a bright romanticism, for values that are decidedly individual and subjective but that are lamentably different from those of Alexandra or Ántonia. It allows for stories about people who "never dared anything, never risked anything" but who bitterly envy what others have achieved. *In der Brust, in der Brust*: they suffer not from the deprivation of anything they had or earned but from the deprivation of something they think they are entitled to. Their idea of profit is the destruction of that thing in others.

Thus, in *A Lost Lady*, the young lawyer Ivy Peters envies the "freedom, the generous, easy life" of the old pioneer, Captain

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[115]Sergeant, *Willa Cather: A Memoir,* pp. 261, 143.

[116]Willa Cather, *One of Ours*, in *Early Novels and Stories*, p. 1239; *Song of the Lark*, p. 99.

Forrester, and everything associated with it. When Forrester falls on hard times, Peters rents his beloved wild marshland, drains it, and plants wheat on it, not so much to make money as to "spite" Captain Forrester. The motive is not superficially but deeply economic: "By draining the marsh Ivy had obliterated a few acres of something he hated, though he could not name it, and had asserted his power over the people who had loved those unproductive meadows for their idleness and silvery beauty."[117]

In exchange for his rent money, Peters reaps big profits in the strong though nonmaterial currency of power. A vengeful egalitarian, he rejoices at seeing Captain Forrester "come down in the world": "He's happier now that he's like the rest of us and don't have to change his shirt every day."[118] The Captain no longer has a certain mysterious personal something that Ivy will always lack; and this, in itself, is profit and romance for Ivy.

Lou Bergson cherishes similarly perverse ambitions. He hates old Ivar and wants to persecute him, not because Ivar poses any objective threat, but (apparently) because he possesses some mysterious—and, as Lou sees it—wholly unearned value in Alexandra's eyes. Lou's envy, however, is directed chiefly against material success, that of his sister and that of "Wall Street," the symbol of the capitalist regime. Without his sister and the capitalist system, he would still be an impoverished farm laborer. He understands neither of them, but he knows that they refuse to give him everything he thinks he deserves. Hence his desire to dominate or destroy: "[B]low it up. Dynamite it, I mean."[119]

The dark subplot of *O Pioneers!* assesses the economics of envy. Frank Shabata, Alexandra's neighbor, is obsessed by an arbitrary sense of deprivation. "Frank had, on the whole, done better than one might have expected," but he continually feels "sorry for himself" because life is "ugly" and "unjust."[120] He never understands that he has "made his own unhappiness," but he values himself for his ability to feel it: "it gratified him to feel

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[117]*A Lost Lady*, pp. 57–58.

[118]Ibid., p. 58.

[119]*O Pioneers!*, p. 192.

[120]Ibid., pp. 209, 270.

like a desperate man."[121] He regards his farm as unsatisfactory, his wife as unsatisfactory, and of course the political economy as unsatisfactory:

> Frank was always reading about the doings of rich people and feeling outraged. He had an inexhaustible stock of stories about their crimes and follies, how they bribed the courts and shot down their butlers with impunity whenever they chose. Frank and Lou Bergson had very similar ideas, and they were two of the political agitators of the county.[122]

It goes without saying that these friends of the common man, as apotheosized in the speeches of William Jennings Bryan, have no desire to exert their benevolence on anyone they actually know. Alexandra, who understands that cooperation and profit are not mutually exclusive, tries to convince Frank that he should help the old woman next door keep her fences in repair; at least then he wouldn't have her hogs in his wheat: "I've found it sometimes pays to mend other people's fences," she says.[123] Her advice is wasted. Frank values his feelings of injury much more than he values good relations with his neighbor—more even than he values hogfree wheat. It is a perverse victory of spiritual over material interests.

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[121]Ibid., p. 267.

[122]Ibid., p. 210.

[123]Ibid., p. 207. Sally Peltier Harvey, who operates with customary literary-critical stereotypes of the great contest between individualism and "community," imagines the mature Willa Cather vexing herself with questions like, "[W]as there a place in modern . . . America for an individualism nurtured by and responsive to community, or did self-aggrandizement necessarily entail ignoring others' needs?" (*Redefining the American Dream: The Novels of Willa Cather* [London: Associated University Presses, 1995], p. 92). It's hard to picture Cather wrinkling her brow over such questions, at any stage of her career. Her answer to the first question is always Yes; to the second, No. Cather has been called a believer in the survival of the fittest, because of what she says about the virtue of people who can "weather the storm" (Cherny, "Willa Cather," pp. 213, 215). But she is hardly the stereotypical Social Darwinist. She characteristically associates individualism with social benefits and collectivism with social detriments, and she sees no paradox in that.

Alexander Pope might have been thinking of Frank Shabata when he discussed the problem of subjective self-valuation:

> A man's true merit 'tis not hard to find,
> But each man's secret standard in his mind,
> That Casting-weight Pride adds to Emptiness,
> This, who can gratify? for who can *guess*?[124]

Frank hates his wife Marie because she fails to gratify the secret standard in his mind, the entirely subjective measure of his superiority: "He wanted his wife to resent that he was wasting his best years among these stupid and unappreciative people; but she had seemed to find the people quite good enough."[125] So he tries to punish her as he thinks he is being punished; he tries to "make her life ugly."[126] In doing so, he destroys three lives, including his own. He drives Marie into the arms of Alexandra's free-spirited youngest brother, Emil; and when he discovers Marie and Emil together, he kills them.

IX.

This third crisis of the novel has much to do with the politics of envy, but it is not exactly Cather's answer to the question, Where will Bryanism lead us? She is concerned with more profound and permanent issues.

The episode should be seen in relation to a literary maxim that she liked to quote: "The elder Dumas enunciated a great principle when he said that to make a drama, a man needed one passion, and four walls."[127] The passion in *O Pioneers!* is Alexandra's love for her land and for what she can make of it. The four walls are the economic facts—not just the little facts of dollars and cents but the big facts of scarcity, choice, cost, and risk that give structure to every form of human action.

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[124]Alexander Pope, "Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot," lines 175–78.

[125]*O Pioneers!*, p. 270.

[126]Ibid.

[127]Cather, "The Novel Démeublé," p. 837.

Cather could have written the type of story that would easily accommodate Alexandra's passion. She could have written a story in which Alexandra worked hard, grew rich, and lived happily ever after with her family and friends, enjoying a conflict-free utopia where every person contributed according to his ability and received according to his need. Naively conservative story-tellers often evoke this kind of heartland vision. It is, basically, the vision of a world without scarcity or deprivation. "In such a world," Mises said, "there [would] be no law of value . . . and no economic problems." But in that world of "plenty and abundance," there would also "be no choices to be made, no action."[128] It would be a pseudo-economic world, a world without prices or costs or the prospects and risks of creative endeavor. It would be a world without any stories worthy of the name, and it would not be the world of Willa Cather.

Cather knew that real stories are bounded by economic walls, and she built those walls with care. In *O Pioneers!* all objects of desire appear, as they really are, "expensive."[129] There is no such thing as emotional free silver, no means of reducing all costs to a level of convenience. Before Marie is murdered by Frank, she talks to Emil about the risks of human action. She sees that this is a world in which knowledge is scarce and unintended consequences are plentiful. They are part of the price of doing what we choose to do. "I would have my own way. And now I pay for it," she says. "You don't do all the paying," Emil argues. But "[t]hat's it," she replies. "When one makes a mistake, there's no telling where it will stop."[130]

Even Alexandra, who is as close to perfection as Cather can take the literary risk of making her, has to pay a heavy price for her involvement in the web of human action. She wins her fortune and holds onto it by accepting risk, deferring romance, and alienating most of her family. Finally she has to suffer the tragedy of Emil and Marie. Because she loved them both, she failed to see any dangerous consequences in their relationship

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[128]Mises, *Human Action*, pp. 235–36.

[129]*The Song of the Lark*, p. 557.

[130]*O Pioneers!,* p. 250.

and made no attempt to protect them from themselves. She accepts what she considers her share of the blame and the misery, but she wonders if life is worth continuing on these terms.

In the end she decides that it is. She reflects on the story of her life and accepts the fact that she cannot govern all the risks of all the choices from which stories have to grow. Adopting what she calls a "more liberal" view of life—"I try to realize that we are not all made alike"—she forgives other people's failures, and her own, and returns to the enjoyment of her land.[131] She no longer associates what she needs to do to possess it with isolation and repetition, with the denial of lightness and ease.

This is ironic, and a bit mysterious; because now she has more reason than ever to curse the land as a source of imprisoned passions, the passions that destroyed Marie and Emil. Part of the reason for Alexandra's optimism is the fact that she now has Carl beside her, and will marry him. The rest of it lies in all those facts of individual judgment and preference toward which we gesture when we concede that "we are not all made alike." Where one person sees four confining walls, another sees the stage of a great play that is still being written. To Alexandra, her land, with all its limitations, again represents "freedom," the freedom to create something by one's own choice, even if the consequences cannot be fully controlled.[132] She finds in the economy of her life the structure and significance that a good author discovers in the economy of her art. Both economies are born of desire and shaped by limitation. They can be understood and appreciated in similar ways. As Alexandra and Carl look over her property at sundown, surveying their lives and thinking about their coming marriage, Alexandra asks him, "You remember what you once said about the graveyard, and the old story writing itself over? Only it is we who write it, with the best we have."[133]

Carl's remark had not been optimistic. He had said that in the pioneers' new graveyard one can already see "the old story" starting "to write itself" all over again. He had suggested that

[131]Ibid., p. 288.

[132]Ibid., p. 289.

[133]Ibid.

stories are made out of limitations, and that even the number of stories is limited; there are, he said, only "two or three human stories" that "go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before."[134] But what Alexandra wants to stress is the individual human agency of every human story: "it is we who write it, with the best we have." Neither Alexandra Bergson nor Willa Cather believes that stories write themselves. Both of them know that art, like the rest of life, is a process of making the best choices possible within a context of scarcity and risk. And the final achievement of both women's art is an understanding of the economy of stories, an understanding that ignores neither the fierceness of individual desire nor the constraints of environment, neither the social and material context nor the choices that respond to it and, in responding, transform and create.

That is what Cather means when she describes Alexandra's solemn joy at the discovery of the great investment scheme that is destined to transform her nearly worthless land:

> For the first time, perhaps, since that land emerged from the waters of geologic ages, a human face was set toward it with love and yearning. It seemed beautiful to her, rich and strong and glorious. Her eyes drank in the breadth of it, until her tears blinded her. Then the Genius of the Divide, the great, free spirit which breathes across it, must have bent lower than it ever bent to a human will before. The history of every country begins in the heart of a man or a woman.[135]

According to a long-established way of reading *O Pioneers!,* the novel is about *the* land and not about the story that Alexandra writes on *her* land with "the best" she has.[136] A similar misreading

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[134]Ibid., p. 196.

[135]Ibid., p. 170.

[136]Even in sensitive discussions of "dialectical" relationships between nature and Alexandra's creativity, the balance can be lost, as I think it is in Susan J. Rosowski's emphasis on Alexandra's learning of nature's "laws" ("Willa Cather's Ecology of Place," *Western American Literature* 30 [Spring 1995]: 44). Warren Motley helps to right the balance by emphasizing the role of Alexandra's "sharp business sense"—although he believes that its successful exercise leaves her "psychologically deadened" ("The Unfinished

represents the novel as a reflection of Midwestern values, as if Cather had no property in her own stories but was merely a wanderer along main-travelled roads. But the invocation to the land in the concluding lines of *O Pioneers!* has a different emphasis. "Fortunate country," it says, "that is one day to receive hearts like Alexandra's into its bosom, to give them out again in the yellow wheat, in the rustling corn, in the shining eyes of youth!"[137]

The country waits expectantly for "hearts like Alexandra's" that will make it fortunate. They will give it the best they have, and the investment will make of the land a profit and a possession for all future generations. Cather's revolt against the economics of "material surroundings" could hardly be more decisive, her ability to capture the economics of individualism could hardly be more complete.

Self: Willa Cather's *O Pioneers!* and the Psychic Cost of a Woman's Success," *Women's Studies* 12 [1986]: 149–65). Peck, "'Possession Granted by a Different Lease'" (pp. 5–22) goes to extremes in an opposite direction when she discusses Alexandra's spiritual possession of the landscape (a good thing to discuss) while ignoring her real estate speculations.

[137] *O Pioneers!,* p. 290.

8

Conrad's Praxeology

Stephen Cox

Like Willa Cather, Joseph Conrad was a great economic novelist who maintained a contemptuous distance from the "economic" novel. Cather asked the rhetorical question: "[W]ho wants any more detail as to how Carmencita and her fellow factory-girls made cigars?"[1] Not Cather; not Conrad, either. Both were interested in a deeper and broader subject, the vast field of exploration that surrounds and includes economics. Ludwig von Mises called this field "the general theory of human action, *praxeology*."[2]

That is a preposterously unliterary word, a word that neither Conrad nor Cather would ever want to see, let alone use. Probably neither of them ever got the chance to see it. They lacked the word—but they had the thing. They understood economic relationships, and they saw that such economic concepts as scarcity, price, profit, and investment have implications that go far beyond the scope of economic behavior as ordinarily represented in works of "economic" or "social" fiction. They tracked those implications

[1]Willa Cather, "The Novel Démeublé," in *Stories, Poems, and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1992), p. 835.

[2]Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*, 3rd ed., rev. (1966; rpt. Chicago: Contemporary Books, n.d.), p. 3.

far into the praxeological hinterland, mapping the points where economics encounters fundamental principles of human action.

The fullest, indeed the virtually inexhaustible, expression of Conrad's praxeology is his novel *The Secret Agent* (1907). Cather thought that her era was characterized by "the revolt against individualism."[3] Conrad saw something larger: a revolt against human action as it really is. *The Secret Agent* attempts to explain both the revolt and what it revolts against.

I.

The praxeology of *The Secret Agent* emerges from Conrad's interest in a certain group of characters, political radicals who are engaged in plotting, or at least in ardently desiring, the downfall of the capitalist system. These people have their own theories about human action, theories that Conrad finds enticing targets for ridicule. From the ruins of their ideologies, he retrieves much that is useful by an opposing system of thought.

One of the easiest theories for Conrad to dismantle is economic and historical materialism, the belief that all human action, even intellectual action, is determined by material conditions. What is material or "economic" in this sense would also be "collective" in its operation and effect. The association of materialism with collectivism is especially attractive to Conrad's revolutionaries, all but one of whom want to replace bourgeois-individualist society with some form of collectivism. They call themselves "anarchists," but they would be more accurately described as communists. Materialism gives them the opportunity to ground collectivist politics in larger ideas about reality.

To refute the materialist theory of action, Conrad provides an example of the theory *in* action, trying to explain itself. His example is the radical ideologue Michaelis, who maintains that "the material side of life" is the source of "all ideas."[4] History, he believes, is "dominated and determined" by "the force of

[3]Willa Cather, "Escapism," in *Stories, Poems, and Other Writings*, p. 971.

[4]Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Agent*, Bruce Harkness and S.W. Reid, eds. (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 40.

economic conditions." Mere "consciousness" is not a significant factor. "Moralists" can think and talk all they want, but they can never change history. Their subjective "phantasies" (unlike material "conditions") lack all "objective value."[5]

There is nothing unprecedented about Michaelis's ideas—they are garden-variety Marxism—and there is nothing inappropriate about Conrad's choice of Michaelis as their exponent. In contrast to Marx and Engels, he can actually boast of working-class origins. But can his materialist theory explain its own discourse?

It would certainly have a hard time with his attack on moralism as irrelevant to human action. Everything he says and does is inspired by moral concerns. His "objective" analysis of capitalism is just a sermon about the "inherent viciousness" of "all private property."[6] The discourse of Marx himself was moralistic in the same way. But the more important thing (and here is the central thrust of Conrad's satire) is that moralism is an essential ingredient of this kind of discourse. People become revolutionaries not because they experience certain material "conditions," but because they regard those conditions as morally wrong. Revolutionaries are made by moral judgments.

And that is the problem: Michaelis's discourse is wrong by its own rationale. There is no *material* reason for him to talk as he does. To Conrad, the idea of a material motivation is a joke, and the source of other jokes—easy, obvious, enormously effective jokes. One of them has to do with the tremendous materiality of Michaelis himself. He is not exactly one of the "prisoners of starvation" invoked by the *Internationale*. He was imprisoned, indeed, because of his revolutionary activity, but

> [h]e had come out of a highly hygienic prison round like a tub, with an enormous stomach and distended cheeks of a pale, semitransparent complexion, as though for fifteen years the servants of an outraged society had made a point of stuffing him with fattening foods in a damp and lightless cellar. And ever

[5]Ibid., p. 37.

[6]Ibid., p. 38.

> since he had never managed to get his weight down as much as an ounce.[7]

Michaelis is the *reductio ad absurdum* of the materialist philosophy. He is drowning in matter, but his consciousness keeps on breathing moralistic ideals.

The oddest thing is that someone who can scarcely move should feel so confident about his ability to explain human action. Yet that is the way it is. Imprisoned, first within a jail, then within himself, Michaelis discovers that "confined space, seclusion, and solitude" are the only conditions "favourable to his inspiration." Marx, as we know, was not a busy traveler to factories and stock exchanges. He was nevertheless inspired to theorize very copiously about capitalist industry and finance. Michaelis, following the master, confidently expects to produce, from his own isolation, a masterpiece of collectivist thought, "a book of Revelation in the history of mankind."[8]

If he tried to square his personal expectations with his materialist theory, he would have to say that confinement in solitude—a kind of enforced individualism—has a surprising amount of objective and material value for collectivism. But materialist theory is never very good at assimilating the surprises of human action, as experienced by particular human beings. In this case, personal experience directly refutes the theory. The value of Michaelis's confinement isn't objective at all. It is purely subjective, purely a matter of his individual response to material conditions, not of the conditions themselves.

At the moment, those conditions are provided by a wealthy woman whom Conrad calls Michaelis's "Lady Patroness." She is an aristocrat of leftist sympathies, a type that recurs pretty frequently in the history of collectivist movements. As an aristocrat, the Lady Patroness nurses a class hatred for "parvenu" capitalists who engage in *making* money instead of inheriting and *keeping* it. Capitalism undermines the social authority of people like her; she therefore welcomes the spectre of communism, believing that the "disappearance of the last piece of money" will somehow

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[7]Ibid., p. 37.

[8]Ibid., p. 94.

"leave the social values untouched": "She could not conceive how it could affect her position, for instance."[9]

Just as Marx and Michaelis would predict, the material circumstances of the Lady Patroness have an influence on her political values. What a materialist would find hard to explain is the bizarre result of that influence, the aristocrat's easy embrace of communism. To explain this effect, not unprecedented, to be sure, and yet grotesquely personal, one must consider such individual factors as ignorance, vanity, and spite. The Lady Patroness hates capitalism and wants to get back at it, so she seizes the heaviest weapon she can find, not bothering to consider that it might possibly destroy her, too. Like Michaelis, she takes so much pleasure in hearing herself talk that she mistakes her own discourse for "incontrovertible demonstration."[10] Like him, she lives in a world of words, an arbitrary state of consciousness that transcends all barriers of economic class. That is why she and Michaelis, two people who are obsessed with their own, quite different, class positions, get along so well together. Michaelis, at least, might find this a problem, if he ever tried to test his praxis against his theory. Fortunately for his material circumstances, he never tries.

II.

As a radical materialist, Michaelis objects to mere individual speculations about the future; material forces will decide what happens.[11] But the culmination and payoff of his theory is the prophecy of a new, more truly "social" world. Of that world he is certain. No political-materialist theory has ever left room for doubt regarding the possibility of such a world, and little regarding its inevitability. If materialism lacked the promise of a better world, there would be small emotional or political profit in materialism.

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[9]Ibid., p. 88.

[10]Ibid., p. 87.

[11]Ibid., p. 37.

Michaelis's theory is typical of materialist theory in another respect. Its new world of the future will be produced by "conditions," but it will be the kind of world that can be maintained only by a great deal of conscious planning. Constant social engineering will be needed to ensure that what is contributed by "each according to his ability" actually gets distributed to "each according to his need." This is a contradiction, but it is a traditional and predictable one. The servants of destiny have always (to quote Albert Camus) submitted "destiny to a plan"—their own individual plan.[12] Without individual determiners, determinism might not work. The determinist philosophy arrives at its payoff only by tacitly incorporating crucial elements of a rival system of ideas that emphasizes the significance of human choice and direction. The determinists are, like Shelley's poets, unacknowledged legislators of the world, unacknowledged even by themselves.

Michaelis is such a poet. His "book of Revelation"—the writing of which was prompted by a capitalist publisher who offered to pay the modern equivalent of $50,000[13] for the privilege of selling it—contains a defense of determinism and the blueprints for large-scale social engineering. According to the scornful comments of "the Professor," one of Michaelis's fellow radicals, the book elaborates "the idea of a world planned out like an immense and nice hospital, with gardens and flowers, in which the strong are to devote themselves to the nursing of the weak."[14] The Professor, who is Conrad's only intellectually alert revolutionist, finds this ridiculous. It is ridiculous.

But in case you're wondering, the Professor's idea of the great society is even less credible (or creditable). He dreams "of a world like shambles, where the weak would be taken in hand for utter extermination."[15] Who would want either kind of world? And that brings us back to the reason for Conrad's

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[12]Albert Camus, *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, Anthony Bower, trans. (New York: Vintage, 1956), p. 240.

[13]"Five hundred pounds" in the money of Conrad's time (*Secret Agent*, p. 94).

[14]*Secret Agent*, p. 225.

[15]Ibid., p. 226.

emphasis on the bizarre and ridiculous extremes of anti-capitalist thought. Only a mind that was, shall we say, somewhat eccentric could harbor such ideas as the Professor's. But this is another sign that the materialists are wrong when they say that ideas are determined by general economic conditions. To be sure, even the radicals in *The Secret Agent* are affected by very general conditions. They make judgments of value, pay prices, and try to maximize utilities. In this, they behave like everyone else. Yet they have their own idea of what constitutes a utility. Such ideas indicate that particular economic values are subjective and relational, not "objective" and intrinsic to economic "conditions."

A well-known Marxist literary critic has argued that *The Secret Agent* is caught in a contradiction: it represents the external conditions of capitalist society as natural and unchangeable, while emphasizing the importance of the internal and subjective.[16] But there is no contradiction here. The objective ("external") conditions of capitalist society, or any other frame of human action, require people to choose one good, one goal, one course of goal-directed action over another; and the choices that they make are internal, individual, and "subjective." The radicals understand quite naturally that they have to make decisions, and they demonstrate the very individual and subjective quality of their judgments when they decide that the greatest possible utility will come from the ending of all messy subjective differences (and objective conditions, too, but we'll get to that).

The radicals can reach their goal only if other people can be brought to share their values, especially the value they assign to their own efforts and abilities. These goods are woefully undervalued by the free market, and the radicals are incapable of viewing this as a mere aspect of materially determined reality. They view it, instead, as a grievous injustice. For all their supposedly advanced ideas, they retain the medieval notion of the "just price." They know they are not getting that price. So they consider themselves entitled to destroy the market.

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[16]Terry Eagleton, *Against the Grain: Essays 1975–1985* (London: New Left Books, 1986), especially pp. 24–25.

The Professor is a good example of their way of thinking. He once respected the capitalist system and hoped to find his place in it. What attracted him was the possibility of winning ample rewards for himself. He was not attracted by the necessity of earning these rewards by offering other people something that they valued enough to give him what he wanted in return. In other words, he was attracted by myth, not reality: "[H]is imagination had been fired early by the tales of men rising from the depths of poverty to positions of authority."[17] Such Horatio Alger tales are usually thought to embody a myth of capitalism. They do offer an idealization of modern capitalist society. But Conrad identifies the real source of their attractiveness, which has nothing in particular to do with capitalism. These tales are attractive because they reiterate the oldest and most reassuring of all economic theories, the labor theory of value, and they give it a decidedly moralized form. This is, however, the form most likely to produce disappointments, moral grievances, and demands for political retribution.

The Professor's experience shows how that happens. His theory is that "hard work" is valuable in itself and reveals intrinsic "merit," and that "merit" will be rewarded with "authority and affluence." He has the "puritanism of ambition"—a greedy but unworldly faith that is bound to be destroyed by events. Yet the Professor discovers that the market does not value him as he values himself. It stubbornly refuses to pay him what he considers the just price of his labor. In his opinion, therefore, he has

> been treated with revolting injustice. His struggles, his privations, his hard work to raise himself in the social scale, had filled him with such an exalted conviction of his merits that it was extremely difficult for the world to treat him with justice—the standard of that notion depending so much upon the patience of the individual.[18]

Like Cather's Frank Shabata, the Professor is the victim of an arbitrary sense of entitlement resulting from the application of an

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[17]*Secret Agent*, p. 66.

[18]Ibid., pp. 62, 66.

arbitrary standard of value. Having once "considered himself entitled to undisputed success,"[19] he continues to demand that he be paid what is owed him, with interest. He has no idea that *he* might owe anything in exchange. Like the other radicals, he wants to control both the prices of the commodities he receives (setting them as low as possible) and the prices of the commodities he purveys (keeping them as high as possible). This, in practice, is what economics means to him. Obviously, as Conrad says, most "revolutionary reformers of a given social state" are not in

> revolt against the advantages and opportunities of that state, but against the price which must be paid for the same in the coin of accepted morality, selfrestraint, and toil. . . . There are natures too, to whose sense of justice the price exacted looms up monstrously enormous, odious, oppressive, worrying, humiliating, extortionate, intolerable. Those are the fanatics.[20]

Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson has noticed Conrad's emphasis on *ressentiment* as a political motivation and has (somewhat resentfully) dismissed it as a product of Conrad's own *ressentiment*. As far as Jameson is concerned, this Conradian form of psychologizing has no value at all as an explanation of political action. He writes disparagingly of "the fiction of the individual subject" in "so-called bourgeois individualism."[21] But without the individual subject, how shall we explain the political revolt against the marketplace, so widespread and yet so varied in the modern world? To put the matter plainly: people revolt in different ways, and far from everyone revolts; the poorest are commonly not in the vanguard, or even near. Conrad gives a crucial role to the individual "fanatic," and surely that figure is worth trying to account for.

The very existence of the fanatic, a person whose values are permanently at odds with those of the rest of the world, shows the predominance of individual economic "convictions" over

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[19]Ibid., p. 66.

[20]Ibid., p. 45.

[21]Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 202, 268, 271, 221.

general economic "conditions." The Professor, indeed, is an extreme "individualist by temperament."[22] But if individualism implies a special interest in asserting private convictions against public conditions, then poor, obtuse Michaelis and his aristocratic patron are individualists, too, and so are most of the other politically engaged characters. The eccentric feature—to their minds, the truly social and progressive feature—of their individualism is its unwillingness to accommodate any individuality but their own. Standing firmly on their private standard of economic justice, they will allow no rewards but the rewards they desire, no prices but the prices they decree, no payments but the payments they require of others.

The Professor wants to exterminate "the multitude" of "weak" people who nevertheless "have power"—the power to ignore his demands for justice.[23] Michaelis and the Lady Patroness have more modest goals; they merely envision "the complete economic ruin of the system," "the annihilation of all capital" and the abolition of "all the multitude" of capitalists who have the "profound unintelligence" to scorn their "humanitarian hopes."[24] Despite such comparatively petty differences, all the revolutionaries in *The Secret Agent*—even Michaelis, whose ideal is a world-wide hospital state—somehow believe that their aim is freedom. Its real aim is control. The revolutionaries are not rebelling against the capitalist system because they want people to be free to do as they please. They are rebelling because they want the power to create a social system that is congenial to themselves, a system that will give them the respect and authority they could never obtain in any imaginable free market in such commodities. The payment they seek can be secured only in a world that they have the power to plan.

In this regard, Conrad's characters are not isolated political cranks or members of a "nonexistent" movement[25] that Conrad,

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[22]*Secret Agent*, p. 66.

[23]Ibid., p. 226.

[24]Ibid., p. 88.

[25]Eloise Knapp Hay, *The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Study*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 247.

for reasons best known to himself, decided to satirize at the length of 100,000 words. The revolutionaries are actuated by commonplace ideas and ideals, which they carry to picturesque and exemplary extremes. They want justice, measured by an instinctively precapitalist theory of value. They want freedom, defined as the power to do and possess certain things. Nothing is more common in the twentieth century than this conjunction of ideas and motives.

John Dewey, with his admirable ability to expound the tendencies of his time, defined "liberty" as the "effective power to do specific things"; he said that "the demand for liberty is [the] demand for power."[26] Dewey was hardly a radical in any crude sense. He was certainly no advocate of the Professor's program or even of Michaelis's. But when you start to identify freedom with power, you may find it hard to know where to stop. You may think that because people have a right to freedom, they also have a right to commensurate degrees of power.

All modern political movements, even those of the fascists and Stalinists, have held that they are struggling for "freedom" of some kind. Their adherents have held, in fact, that they are struggling for economic justice. They have rejected the idea of defining freedom as the absence of coercion and referring economic questions to the marketplace. To embrace that idea would be to surrender their power to plan a better world, "better" being defined in accordance with the particular economic values of the would-be planners. To give up the power to plan human action—that is a steep price to pay. To modern intellectuals, the "socialists of all parties," as Friedrich Hayek called them,[27] the price of political self-restraint "looms up monstrously enormous, odious, oppressive, worrying, humiliating, extortionate, intolerable." They will not pay that price; they revolt against it. An unplanned, spontaneously functioning society appears to them primitive, irrational, inhuman.

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[26]John Dewey, "Liberty and Social Control," *Social Frontier* (November 1935): 41; cited in Friedrich Hayek's salient work, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1944, 1976), p. 26, as exemplifying "[t]he characteristic confusion of freedom with power."

[27]Hayek dedicated *The Road to Serfdom* to "the socialists of all parties."

The Professor is the archetype and extremity of this revolt. He looks at a busy commercial street, full of people intent on their private purposes, and he sees them as so many insects: "They swarmed numerous like locusts, industrious like ants, thoughtless like a natural force, pushing on blind and orderly and absorbed. . . . "[28] Their activity, which seems to lack all conscious planning because it is not planned by him, is monstrous, repulsive, *thoughtless*.

He is wrong, of course. As Conrad indicates in the final sentence of the novel, things are just the other way around: the Professor himself is "a pest" in a "street full of men."[29] But the reader, who is one of the alleged insects, already knew that the Professor's theory was wrong. The people in the street are not "thoughtless like a natural force"; that is simply a determinist fantasy. It has nothing to do with the way in which human action takes place. The people in the street, the readers of Conrad's book, the readers of this essay, are constantly making individual choices of values and pursuing individual rewards. That is *why* they act; that is *how* they are "industrious"; that is *what* human action is.

Further, human action is not an anarchic mess; whenever permitted to do so, it constantly evolves new forms of spontaneous order (as the classical-liberal praxeologists call it), social systems, large and small, in which people cooperate chiefly because they want to do so and need to do so in order to realize their private purposes. That kind of order is what the Professor fears and hates. To him, other people are just so many entities that are not obeying him, entities that have achieved, somehow, a nightmarish solidarity, like that of ants: "What if nothing could move them?"[30]

The verb is well chosen—"move." The Professor wants people to be inspired or "moved," but only by himself. If they will not be moved by him—and they won't—then all motion must be stopped: "Exterminate, exterminate! That is the only way of

[28]*Secret Agent*, p. 67.

[29]Ibid., p. 231.

[30]Ibid., p. 67.

progress."[31] The Professor's idea of progress is the indiscriminate use of dynamite, the property of which is to make all motion cease. But isn't that what power means: the ability to *stop* anything that won't obey?

Action to arrest action: the irony is everywhere in *The Secret Agent*. It is a praxeological irony that runs much deeper than the novel's numerous political and economic ironies. To be sure, the Professor's specific way of acting-to-arrest-action fails to win endorsement by all the other revolutionaries. For many of them, action consists of endless talk about the impersonal movements of history. That is *their* way of making sure that nothing happens. But every major character enlists, in one way or another, in the revolt against human action. All of them act so as to bring the varied, unpredictable, individually conducted and misconducted actions of life to a halt.

To such apparently simple, if preposterous, pursuits the plot of *The Secret Agent* is wholly given up. That may be what Conrad had in mind when he called the work "A Simple Tale." But that subtitle is merely the first of the novel's million ironies, for the plot of this little book is one of the most complicated in modern literature. The complications stem from the characters' apparently simple aim of controlling all complications. Each character's attempts to master or even to *know* the dense surrounding plot merely multiply its branches and render them less knowable by anyone. It makes no difference why the characters want to change, control, and stop human action. Some are revolutionaries, some are reactionaries, some are apolitical. Their specific aims are different, but they all revolt against praxeological principles; and they produce, as a result, a full exposition of praxeological principles, concretized as a novel's plot.

We need to look closely at that plot.

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[31]Ibid., p. 226. Cf. the famous adage, "Exterminate all the brutes!," penned by that other great proponent of progress, Mr. Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Like the Professor, Kurtz is a leftist reformer of an eccentric kind. As "a journalist" wistfully remarks to the narrator of Kurtz's story, his "proper sphere ought to have been politics 'on the popular side'" (Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, rev. ed., Robert Kimbrough, ed. [New York: Norton, 1971], p. 74). This, like almost everything else that is said in *Heart of Darkness*, is true, in its way.

III.

Action begins not with impersonal "conditions" but with the personal and private aims of Adolf Verloc, the Secret Agent. Verloc could be placed in any of the three political categories: he is simultaneously a revolutionary, a reactionary, and a man with no ideological commitments. Political terms can be confusing here; praxeological terms are better. What matters for praxeology is, of course, action; what people do, in preference to every possible alternative choice. The ultimate praxeological fact about Adolf Verloc is his quest for immobility. It expresses an individual preference "as profound as inexplicable and as imperious as the impulse which directs a man's preference for one particular woman in a given thousand."[32] Verloc is a man who will choose any job, enlist in any cause, so long as it helps him evade action.

So highly does he value immobility that he secures *two* jobs in which immobility is the principal occupation. He is hired both by the English police and by the embassy of a reactionary foreign government to infiltrate anarchist organizations and make sure that the anarchist movement never actually moves. These jobs are easy. The anarchists with whom Verloc does his "work" ordinarily choose talk over action anyway. In fact, they spend a lot of time complaining about how anarchists almost always choose talk over action. These people may not have the power to immobilize the capitalist system, but they certainly have the power to immobilize themselves.

Unfortunately, Verloc's success at making nothing happen appears insufficient in the eyes of Mr. Vladimir, a new official of the embassy. Vladimir's opposition to human action is—incredible to say—even stronger than Verloc's. Verloc wants to make sure that nothing happens while he himself is around; Vladimir wants to make sure that nothing *ever* happens. He wants to see revolutionaries totally suppressed. He wants to lead Great Britain into a confederacy of reactionary powers that will end any hope of political change. He demands that Verloc contrive a bomb outrage that will make the British public face the facts

[32] *Secret Agent*, p. 16.

about anarchism and force the government to crack down on it. Should Verloc fail to perform that mission, he will lose his "job."

Vladimir's plan for a bomb attack is a symbolic assault on progress. He commands Verloc to bomb Greenwich Observatory, which is associated, in the public's mind, with forward movement in science and therefore with forward movement in general. The Observatory has a more fundamental symbolic association: it is the point from which all motion on the earth is measured. When Vladimir tells Verloc to "[g]o for the first meridian,"[33] he proposes, in effect, an attack on human action of any kind.[34]

He introduces his idea with a lengthy theoretical argument intended to demonstrate the necessity of using revolutionary means for conservative ends. His theory is almost as comprehensive as Michaelis's, and just as self-assured. But Vladimir, like everyone else who tries to command human action on a truly broad front, has a serious intellectual weakness: he has no idea what he's talking about. If he had any understanding of human action, he would be much less confident about his ability to command it. Only people who fail to comprehend the enormous complexity of a real society can confidently expect to make it reverse its course and conform to their plans. Verloc is astonished at Vladimir's ignorance of political facts, even facts about the anarchist movement. Verloc is far from an intellectual, but he can see that the bomb plot is absurd; Vladimir, the fountainhead of social theory, has no worries at all. This sort of thing very frequently

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[33]Ibid., p. 33.

[34]The significance of Greenwich as a symbol of space and time has been emphasized by Conrad critics ever since R.W. Stallman's essay, "Time and *The Secret Agent*," in *The Art of Joseph Conrad: A Critical Symposium,* R.W. Stallman, ed. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1960), pp. 234–54. Stallman observed that Verloc's attack on time is an attack on "life itself" (p. 236). He was not concerned, however, with Conrad's hypotheses about how life manifests itself in processes of human action. Avrom Fleishman, *Conrad's Politics: Community and Anarchy in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967), p. 205, aptly says that "the effort to destroy time is symbolically an effort to end history—thereby theoretically achieving the revolutionary goal of a world beyond history and without time."

signals the difference between members of the intelligentsia and everyone else. But Vladimir is right about one matter: Verloc will do almost anything to maintain his career of doing nothing. He will assault the prime meridian.

To do so, he requires two things: an explosive device and someone to carry it. He gets the first necessity from the Professor, whose occupation is making bombs and who is more than happy to help destroy Greenwich Observatory or any other feature of bourgeois life. As to the second necessity: Verloc certainly doesn't want to carry the bomb himself. So he enlists his brother-in-law Stevie. Stevie—young, retarded, maladroit—advances toward the observatory, bomb in hand, and manages to destroy himself instead of the prime meridian.

This is the great, indeed the sole, public event of the novel; but its causes and most of its effects are lost to public view. They are hidden in a complex of individual choices and preferences that no one in the novel ever fully understands. Who would guess that a terrorist bombing was intended for the conservative purpose of making sure that no social change will occur? Vladimir knows this intention; it was his own. But he fails to realize that a number of other people are trying to stop things, too, and that their intentions are of considerable importance to the story that he believes he can control.

One of these people is Verloc's very unrevolutionary wife, Winnie. To Winnie, any unexpected movement, even a cab ride to the other side of town, seems to result from a "mania for locomotion."[35] Her goal is to keep her brother Stevie from contracting any such disease. She is wholly devoted to Stevie's welfare, and she knows that he requires a controlled environment. That is why she made the otherwise inexplicable decision to marry Adolf Verloc. She cherished few illusions about Verloc's character, but his very inertness was appealing; it gave good promise of an inertly protective home life. The promise appears to have been fulfilled. Stevie is comfortably immobilized in the Verlocs' living quarters, where he passes his time with a compass and a piece of

[35]*Secret Agent*, p. 118.

paper, drawing "circles, circles, circles; innumerable circles"—concrete forms of stasis and enclosure.[36]

But somehow, when you see them all together, those innumerable, intersecting circles, "concentric, eccentric," suggest something else, too—they suggest a "cosmic chaos"; they suggest, perhaps . . . a bomb explosion. That is what happens. Winnie's attempt to keep Stevie tucked firmly inside the family circle is sickeningly self-defeating. Immured in Verloc's home, Stevie overhears the violent propaganda of the radicals who hold their meetings there. Not being very bright, Stevie "believes it's all true."[37] His doom is secured when Winnie tries to anchor him more deeply in her husband's affections by encouraging them to do more things together. Verloc acts on her encouragement. He uses his tête-à-têtes with Stevie to enlist him in the bomb plot. Inspired by an impulse of humanitarian revolt against the world of suffering and oppression that he has heard the anarchists describe, Stevie tries to bring it to a stop. He attacks the observatory and—in a gruesome over-fulfillment of his sister's desire to immobilize him permanently—is blown into a thousand pieces.

His destruction is also hers. To prevent him from getting lost, she has carefully labeled his clothing with his address. The address survives. With amazing speed, it brings the police to Winnie's door. She learns that her brother is dead and that her husband is responsible for his death. Now the action of the novel—the action initiated by Stevie's, Winnie's, Verloc's, Vladimir's, and the Professor's variously motivated attempts to bring things to a stop—approaches its secret climax. Alone with her husband in the depths of the family circle, Winnie reaches for the carving knife and plunges it into her husband's heart. He dies as he had hoped to live, "without stirring a limb," his final action a faint verbal revolt against action. "Don't," he says.[38]

For Winnie, that word quickly develops a special significance: "Don't let them hang me. . . !"[39] But to keep that from happening,

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[36]Ibid., pp. 14, 40.

[37]Ibid., p. 50.

[38]Ibid., p. 197.

[39]Ibid., p. 216.

she can think of no other way than to get to the river and drown herself. She is planning the final preventive action of a life devoted to preventing action. As we will see, she accomplishes her purpose, in a way. But this is not the only line of action that Conrad is developing.

While these misfortunes befall Mr. and Mrs. Verloc, other people are becoming agitated by the explosion at Greenwich. The revolutionary establishment is distressed to find that someone has actually done something. Police Inspector Heat is distressed to find that Verloc, who has been working as Heat's spy as well as Vladimir's, is implicated in the affair. Heat's superior, the Assistant Commissioner of Police, is distressed by Heat's attempt to cover up what happened. He is even more distressed when he discovers that Verloc has been involved with a foreign embassy. All these dignitaries want the many-branching sequence of events to stop before it causes serious embarrassment to themselves.

The Assistant Commissioner succeeds in lopping one branch. He visits Vladimir and lets him know that somehow, in some way that remains mysterious to this brilliant theoretician of human action, his attempted meddling in British politics has been discovered. Vladimir is now finished in the London diplomatic corps. His attempt to suppress the anarchists has resulted in his own suppression. So much for his part of the story. He has stopped.

But events keep developing in other directions. Simply by investigating and attempting to manage the sequence of actions, the Assistant Commissioner extends it into areas that he can neither understand nor control. His investigation calls Heat's competence into question and activates his self-protective desire to keep things as they are. Heat revolts against his superior, or at least against his superior's way of suppressing revolt. He discovers that the Assistant Commissioner plans to use Verloc as evidence, thereby inviting unwelcome revelations about the "system of supervision" by which Heat monitors the anarchists.[40] Heat tries to procure Verloc's silence. He tells him to skip town.

[40]Ibid., p. 159.

Verloc resists. Afraid that the anarchists will try to kill him, he looks to the Assistant Commissioner to preserve his life. He wants protective incarceration. Characteristically, he doesn't want to move. But now it is his turn, and Heat's, to experience a gruesome over-fulfillment of desire. Verloc will be still and silent, all right, because Winnie has overheard his conversation with Heat and has gathered the truth about her brother's death. She makes sure that Verloc will engage in no future conversations. She kills him.

These plot lines suggest that the Professor was right. The only way to command human action is to "exterminate" all the "swarming," "industrious," "thoughtless" human insects.

IV.

But what kind of story is this?

Literary critics often regard *The Secret Agent* as an anatomy of bourgeois society and a diagnosis of its chronic, perhaps fatal ills.[41] A century after the diagnosis, the patient appears more alive than ever. Who is mistaken: Conrad or the critics?

In fact, the physicians have read the wrong chart. *The Secret Agent* neither anatomizes nor diagnoses society, if by "society" one means that aggregation of economic and occupational classes so minutely catalogued by the ordinary "social" or "economic" novelist. Conrad's characters have extraordinarily diverse social origins, but that is not enough to make them a cross-section of society. For one thing (has anybody noticed?), none of the major participants in this tragedy of capitalist society

[41]Fleishman, an intelligent, influential, and comparatively moderate interpreter of the novel's politics, says that when Conrad's anarchists talk about the cannibalism of modern society they are basically right (*Conrad's Politics,* p. 202). He discusses "the decay of the social order through the widespread ignorance, secrecy, and madness of its members" (p. 194) and associates this decay with (among other things) "private property" (pp. 198, 199). Eagleton (*Against the Grain, passim*) describes the novel as reenacting the dismal contradictions of capitalist society, while offering no "solution." Apparently, Conrad is at fault for declining to announce a redemptive central plan.

is engaged in any kind of capitalistic enterprise.[42] None of them makes anything, except the Professor; he makes bombs. And none of them sells anything, in the normal way of selling, except Verloc; he keeps a store that dispenses soft-core pornography. But his enterprise runs at a loss; it is just a front for his real business, which is spying. There are "no commerical reasons" for it.[43] What unites the characters in this book is the fact that they either work for the government or work by opposing the government—or both, in Verloc's case. They are perfectly innocent of the commercial or "consumerist" mentality that the literary segment of the intelligentsia has always regarded as the sickness of bourgeois society.

That does not mean (to return to an earlier point) that they are immune to economic considerations. Their behavior is thoroughly economic; they make investments, encounter risks, exchange goods, pay prices (which they generally regard as "enormous" and "extortionate"), enjoy profits, conclude contracts, and so forth. But their behavior shows that economics is not confined to financial transactions. In this novel, as in the real world, economic values and incentives extend far beyond the financial band of the spectrum.

To Michaelis, for example, dialectical materialism is a compelling, though a wholly nonmaterial, business occupation. He has paid for his interest in the enterprise with fifteen years in prison, and he regards himself as profiting by the exchange. Because he has paid so much for materialism, he feels justified in treating it as his private property, doling out rations of theory as if he were sole owner of the franchise. He finds this gratifying. Materialism is worth at least as much to him as Inspector Heat's pay envelope is worth to Heat—more proof that Mises was right when he argued that economic values are individual and subjective.

Heat himself notices that materialist ideas of profit and loss do not apply very well to the revolutionaries' pursuit of their

[42]Jeremy Hawthorn, *Joseph Conrad: Language and Fictional Self-Consciousness* (London: Edward Arnold, 1979), p. 85, comes close to noticing this. But see note 57, below.

[43]*Secret Agent*, p. 46.

"morbid ideals."[44] He would like to think that revolutionaries are the only eccentrics he has to deal with, the only people who are driven by nonmaterial incentives. But a chance meeting with the Professor establishes the fact that despite Heat's pay envelope, his own chief incentives are as nonmaterial, and perhaps as eccentric, as those of his adversaries. As the Professor suggests, Heat is inspired by a love of intrigue, a desire to win, and a desire to be seen as a winner. Next to his love of life, he loves "[t]he game."[45] Heat can bluster all he wants, but the Professor is as right as Mises was about the unpredictable and subjective nature of values.

And Conrad's critics are also right, righter than they know. They have worried a good deal about the defects of capitalist society, as revealed in its effects on the characters in this novel, but none of them imagines that Winnie, Stevie, Vladimir, Michaelis, the Professor, or the Assistant Commissioner is chasing the almighty pound. All of these people are, for want of a better term, idealists. Verloc might seem the great exception to the rule that nonmaterial motives prevail; his relationship to his jobs is purely mercenary. Yet money in itself is not his object. Money has value for him only as a means of purchasing idleness, the nonmaterial, the *spiritual* commodity to which he is "devoted . . . with a sort of inert fanaticism" or "fanatical inertness."[46] After his fashion, Verloc is an idealist, too; even a fanatic.

The central group of characters is surrounded by a penumbra of other, chiefly anonymous folk—the people in the street, the people who have nothing to do with revolution, the people whom the Professor scorns as subhuman. These people may be more influenced by material rewards than those who dwell within the novel's deep umbra of political intrigue. That, anyway, is what Mr. Vladimir thinks. He believes that the typical member of bourgeois society worships "material prosperity" and is virtually innocent of ideas.[47] But Vladimir's theories are of

[44]Ibid., pp. 74–75.

[45]Ibid., pp. 75–76.

[46]Ibid., p. 16.

[47]Ibid., p. 30.

doubtful reliability. If he ever met Inspector Heat, for example, he would surely assume that the hypothesis applied to him; but we know better. Vladimir's ideas are a helpful contrast to Conrad's own. Material interests, Conrad suggests, are not without importance, but they are only one aspect of a larger marketplace than the materialists can imagine. The marketplace embraces everyone, even people who, for nonmaterial reasons, want to destroy it.

Because *The Secret Agent* is praxeological, rather than social or economic in the narrow sense, it includes in its marketplace everything that people are willing to buy, every kind of thing that provides a motive for human action—including the idea of ending human action as we know it. The novel identifies the existence of markets in every kind of good and service. It illustrates the curious ways in which markets establish costs and prices and organize human action across all barriers of social class and status and political affiliation.

Consider Adolf Verloc as a site of market activity. Verloc has things to sell, mainly nonmaterial things: his political and social services, such as they are. These things have value; other people are willing to pay for them. In the "exchange" process, he gets commodities that are "worth something to him."[48] Vladimir pays him with cash, Heat with police protection, Michaelis with revolutionary solidarity and credulity, Winnie with conjugal toleration of his shady operations, Stevie with doglike obedience, the Professor with explosives. Each person expects, in return, to get something that he or she regards as valuable: clandestine information, a place for political meetings, a good home, a bomb outrage.

These expectations of profit are as diverse as the various individuals' social origins and psychologies. Markets—legal and illegal—have a strong tendency to unite all the weirdly assorted strands of society in "a causal web of high complexity."[49] They do so, not by imposing common pursuits or common values, but

[48]Ibid., p. 102.

[49]David Hackett Fischer, *The Great Wave: Price Revolutions and the Rhythm of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 86.

by allowing shared access to the many types of goods on sale. The result is not a static but a dynamic set of relationships.

We see this in the Verloc affair. Verloc's local market, like any other, is an arena of rising and falling prices, rigorously subject, in its fluctuations, to the law of marginal utility.[50] When Vladimir indicates that the embassy is reluctant to pay the same price for the next unit of Verloc's "work" that it paid for the last few units, Verloc suddenly has to provide a lot more service to keep himself in business. He renegotiates his contract, strikes a new bargain: if Vladimir insists, he will go so far as to blow up Greenwich Observatory. At some point, however, it is useless to bargain, because no one wants any more of what you have to sell. Verloc reaches that point when the bomb plot miscarries. Thereafter, the Assistant Commissioner is the only person who sets any value on Verloc, and the only thing that interests him is Verloc's testimony, which he can get for practically nothing. He doesn't value Verloc enough to lodge him immediately in a safe jail cell. Tomorrow, he decides, will be soon enough; but by that time, Winnie has intervened and destroyed the merchandise.

Once she was willing to pay an enormous price for Verloc. She was even willing to marry him. He, and the home he made for Stevie, represented "[h]er contract with existence."[51] Like virtually all agreements by which people spontaneously structure their lives, Winnie's contract was only implicit.[52] It was real and

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[50]On marginal utility, see section IV of my essay on Willa Cather, above.

[51]*Secret Agent*, p. 189.

[52]Discussing the transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist economies, Ian Watt comments, "Our civilisation as a whole is based on individual contractual relationships, as opposed to the unwritten, traditional and collective relationships of previous societies" (*The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957], p. 63). This is somewhat misleading. Capitalism does give ideological significance to contracts and multiplies occasions for them by multiplying economic relationships. Capitalist societies have been called "contract societies" because contracts are the legal stiffening of their spontaneous economic order. But contracts need not be written; most are not, even in the most advanced capitalist societies. Neither a capitalist nor a pre-capitalist society could last a moment without the operation of implicit contracts.

significant nonetheless. Winnie agreed to marry Verloc and fulfill all the duties normally regarded as part of marriage; Verloc agreed to give Stevie a protective home. But Verloc ceased to fulfill the terms of the contract. He ceased to give Stevie protection. He caused Stevie's death. Winnie's "bargain" has therefore ended.[53]

That is how Winnie sees it, at any rate. But the difficulty about implicit contracts is that people are so prone to misinterpret them. Ever since John Locke published his unguarded statements about implicit contracts as a basis of people's obligations to government,[54] the possibility of over- or under-interpretation of contracts has vexed liberal social theory. Winnie encounters this problem in the domestic sphere. She believes that her contract with her husband is broken and that she is free. But Verloc's interpretation is evidently not the same as hers. Certain disturbingly sexual signs in his behavior indicate that he believes the marriage contract is still in force. He still expects to be obeyed, even loved. Now that he has "murdered Stevie," Winnie concludes, he will "want to keep her for nothing."[55] Naturally, she refuses to renegotiate the contract on such unfavorable terms. She wants no further units of Verloc's life; in fact, she has a fluctuating, though a generally declining, interest in further units of her own life. By the end of the novel, she has liquidated both investments. For good or ill, all of this is explicable in market terms; in materialist terms, little or none of it makes sense.

V.

Winnie is not the only person who wants to liquidate an investment. Inspector Heat, the embassy, and the anarchists have all made losing investments in Verloc, and none of them is anxious to maintain the connection. Nobody has lost as much as Winnie, but everybody has paid something for failing to see just how shaky Verloc's enterprise was. But what went wrong?

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[53] *Secret Agent*, p. 196.

[54] John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, especially par. 119.

[55] *Secret Agent*, p. 192.

Part of the problem was the simple stupidity of Verloc and his investors. But part of it (to be scrupulously fair) was the peculiar nature of his business. Here the analogy between Verloc's establishment and a commercial enterprise breaks down. Verloc & Co. is not a satire on free enterprise; it is a satire on political attempts to control or destroy free enterprise.

Verloc's most potent investors—Vladimir, Heat, the "anarchists"—have dealings with him because they want either to manage the political marketplace or replace it, substituting a tyranny or a police superintendency or a collectivist utopia. Because the investors are motivated by mutually intolerant political ideas, each can ultimately profit from his investment only if the others do not profit from theirs. This is not a normal business. The best that the management can do is nothing; and although Verloc is the right man for that job, he is finally forced into action because one investor, Vladimir, insists on taking his profits *now*. That insistence destroys the enterprise.

But (again to be fair) the enterprise always presented difficulties for the investors as well as for the entrepreneur. The investors always had to deal with what economists call high information costs. If you want to invest or continue to invest in an enterprise, you have to pay some price in time, energy, or money to find out how well it is doing. Money itself is usually the cheapest source of information. In most cases, you can ask, "How much money does this company make?" and find the answer in a financial report. In this respect, as in others, money is not a problem for human action but a partial solution to its problems—as classical-liberal praxeology has always maintained.

But Verloc is not running a typical capitalistic enterprise. His business is strictly political; it can even be called nonprofit, as nonprofit enterprises are usually defined. Its dividends, if any, are nonmaterial. Investors in such enterprises can have a very hard time finding out if any dividends are being paid. Investors in specifically political enterprises, whether these are states or parties or little spy shops like Verloc's, often have to pay extraordinary prices for any information they can get. And that is what Verloc's associates have to do.

For Heat and the anarchists, the final price of information is a distinct loss of professional prestige: they trusted Verloc, and he made fools of them. For Vladimir, it is loss of prestige coupled with loss of a job. For Winnie, who is the least connected with politics and knows the least about it, the cost is higher still. Instinctively understanding that information can come at too high a price, she has "wasted no portion of this transient life in seeking" it—a policy that Conrad's narration describes as "a sort of economy," a saving of information costs.[56] When Winnie finally does get reasonably full information about Verloc's business affairs, the cost is life itself. What happens to her is a parable of power politics in the modern world, a parable of what happens to the small investor, not in Toyota or Microsoft, but in the political apparatus.[57]

VI.

Information has a cost, however, in any social or economic system. Conrad dramatizes this axiom by making *The Secret Agent* a peculiarly inconclusive novel of detection, a novel in which everyone is too enmeshed in the web of causation to see to the end of more than one short strand.

This is praxeological realism. Everyone is connected by the transactions of daily life with the lives of countless other people,

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[56]Ibid., p. 130.

[57]Hawthorn, one of the many critics of *The Secret Agent* who has been influenced by the Marxist ideology, sees even the behavior of Conrad's anarchists as "*symptomatic*" of capitalist society, although he can find little capitalist work, or work of any kind, going on: "Few people *work* in any real way in the novel" (*Joseph Conrad*, pp. 82, 85). He does not consider that the chief problem may not be the pursuit of private business but the pursuit of power. Indeed, he confuses the "privacy" of specifically capitalist pursuits with the "secrecy" of political manipulations (pp. 77–78). Both involve "mediated," indirect, and unpredictable relationships, but it is not true, as Hawthorn suggests, that the system of market exchange is especially hostile to "public accountability and responsibility" (p. 79). Market exchange exists in every society, and the information that makes for public accountability is always more or less expensive. It tends to be cheaper in market-based than in power-based societies.

most of them total strangers. The web of relationships is woven by an uncountable number of invisible hands. It transcends all social barriers; it eludes all attempts to direct or destroy it. These attempts, indeed, ordinarily redouble its complexity by redoubling the relationships that constitute it.

How can a novel capture this complexity? Part of Conrad's solution is an unusually realistic arrangement of characters. Novels are usually written about groups of people who either know one another or are well known by some one person. In *The Secret Agent*, knowledge is harder for characters to organize, and the narrative pattern enforces the sense of difficulty. The general pattern is this: the reader is introduced to character A, who knows character B; then to character C, who is also known to character B;[58] but C and A know nothing of each other, despite the fact that C may exert a crucial influence on A by means of their mutual transactions with B.

Begin, for example, with Mr. Vladimir. We see him in chapter 2 transacting business with Verloc. He orders Verloc to blow up Greenwich Observatory. We next see Verloc at home with Stevie and Winnie. They know nothing about Vladimir, and Vladimir knows only that Verloc is somehow, inexplicably, married. But before the story ends, Vladimir's bright idea will have caused the deaths of all three people in the Verloc household, and these people will have somehow, inexplicably, caused him to lose his job.

In chapter 3, Verloc introduces us to the anarchist Ossipon, whom we follow into chapter 4, where Ossipon introduces us to the Professor, who by this time has supplied Verloc with the explosives for Vladimir's bomb plot. Both Vladimir and the Professor would be amused to learn that they had cooperated in the production of a revolutionary (or counter-revolutionary) act, but neither of them knows of the other's existence, and the Professor can only speculate about Verloc's affairs. Leaving Ossipon, the Professor enters chapter 5 and accidentally encounters Inspector Heat, who happens to be investigating the bomb outrage. Heat

[58]This pattern is also adduced by Stanton De Voren Hoffman, *Comedy and Form in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad* (The Hague: Mouton, 1969), p. 120, to somewhat different purpose; to Hoffman, it suggests "a kind of *La Ronde* of disorder."

knows nothing about the Professor's role in the bombing, and he learns nothing from the Professor himself. After an exchange of insults, Heat goes to confer with the Assistant Commissioner, his boss, who by the time we reach chapter 7 is on his way to confer with his own boss, Sir Ethelred, the Home Secretary. It goes without saying that Sir Ethelred is wholly unacquainted with the Verloc household, and vice versa; neither does he appear to be acquainted with Mr. Vladimir, who started this sequence of actions.

In just a few steps, we have journeyed from a point near the top of the social hierarchy (the cultivated Mr. Vladimir) to a point near the bottom (Comrade Ossipon, who lives as a parasite on poor working girls), and then to a point near the top again (the aristocratic Sir Ethelred). Yet the shape of the staircase is largely invisible to the people who are on it. At each step, conversation takes place and information is exchanged, as much information as each individual considers profitable to exchange; but it is never sufficient to provide any of them with anything like a prospect of the whole. They are all intimately involved in the same affair, but none of them can see more than one or two steps away from his or her own position. In ways that the characters do not understand, for all their theorizing, they are united in a spontaneous order, an order woven by their most private transactions but extending throughout society.

In this great web of relationships, invisible and informal hierarchies are often more potent than visible and formal ones. That is the hidden significance of Michaelis's Lady Patroness. When she finally appears in the novel, it is because of her relationship with the Assistant Commissioner, not her relationship with Michaelis. The revolutionary and the head policeman have no dealings with each other, but they happen to have the same Patroness. While Michaelis profits from her public charity, the Assistant Commissioner profits from her private ministrations to yet another of the novel's third parties, his wife: "Her influence upon his wife, a woman devoured by all sorts of small selfishnesses, small envies, small jealousies, was excellent."[59] In exchange for this excellent influence on his wife, the Assistant

[59] *Secret Agent*, p. 88.

Commissioner is willing to flatter the old lady's pride. He goes farther. He is willing to protect her friend Michaelis from the machinations of Inspector Heat, who plans to blame him for the bomb blast at Greenwich.

Such a charge would be nonsense. Michaelis knows nothing about bombs, because he knows nothing about anything. But Heat could easily take advantage of his ignorance and frame him. Crime control of that kind, carried on by the Assistant Commissioner's subordinate, would have a distinctly unfavorable effect on the Assistant Commissioner's relationship with the Lady Patroness and, consequently, with his wife. That possibility makes the Assistant Commissioner more interested than he would otherwise be in investigating Verloc and tracing the crime to him rather than Michaelis. He does so immediately and successfully, using the address that Winnie so providently sewed into Stevie's clothing. With the confession of Verloc, the case is closed, the profit made, so far as the Assistant Commissioner is concerned—and so far as Michaelis is concerned, too, if he only knew it.

But this is one of the many things he never learns. The Lady Patroness finds out about it because the Assistant Commissioner makes sure to tell her, so that he can gain the extra profit of her gratitude. But only the Assistant Commissioner knows why Michaelis has been spared. Only he knows the extent of the influence exerted on public business by a certain kind of private business. And, naturally, the Lady Patroness, that great humanitarian, remains sublimely unaware of the fact that Michaelis's freedom has been bought with Verloc's life, and Winnie's. The Lady Patroness has never heard of Winnie Verloc.

Every hierarchy has a top and a bottom—the exploiters and the exploited, as the political materialists would have it. But in a complex society, characterized by many types of human action, top and bottom can be variously defined. In strictly economic terms, the top of the pyramid, at the end of this novel, seems to be Michaelis. In the action of the book, Michaelis is the person who pays least and profits most. Everyone works for his benefit. It is for the benefit of Michaelis, the enemy of all markets, profits, and hierarchical relationships, that aristocrats, police officials, publishers, spies, and women who are simply trying to gain a measure of security for their families all contrive or suffer.

Here is a praxeological irony that the Assistant Commissioner presumably would not find amusing, if he perceived it. But even he, the novel's best detective, cannot see the full extent of the tragicomedy in which he has been acting. There is too much human action standing in the way.

At 10:30 p.m. on the day that began with the bomb outrage, the Assistant Commissioner believes that he does see all the significant things. He has discovered who carried the bomb, and whose idea it was that there should be a bomb; he has obtained Verloc's confession, and he has put Vladimir on notice that his career as a diplomatic terrorist is over. Having accomplished all this, and it is a lot to accomplish, the Assistant Commissioner looks at his watch and congratulates himself on "a very full evening."[60] He cannot know how full it has been. He cannot know that by pursuing Verloc he has stopped one sequence of events, only to start other sequences. He cannot know that because of his investigation, Winnie has killed Verloc and is now attempting to escape from England. At precisely 10:30 p.m., while the Assistant Commissioner is relishing what he regards as his perfect command of the facts, Winnie is leaving Waterloo Station on a train that will carry her to death by drowning in the English Channel.

This is a detective novel that has room for the tragedy of paying too much and the comedy of getting by without paying much at all, but it does not have room for a really conclusive act of detection. That is another of Conrad's jokes, for which he has to pay comparatively little. He merely has to represent the real conditions of human action—although, as Cather wrote, "The stupid believe that to be truthful is easy; only the artist, the great artist, knows how difficult it is."[61]

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[60]Ibid., p. 173.

[61]Cather, *The Song of the Lark* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943), p. 571.

VII.

Few stories are more intricately and obviously contrived than *The Secret Agent*. But "contrived" is not synonymous with "false." Any reader who thinks that this novel is false to human action has failed to notice that the only implausible element is the reader. It has well been said that most of the mysteries of *The Secret Agent* "remain ultimately unresolved—for the characters, that is, not for the readers."[62] Every exchange in the marketplace of a complex society results from so many causes and generates so many effects that only that curious literary invention, the omniscient reader, could possess all the relevant information about it. Even authors are not omniscient until their stories are finished and they read the final product. A novel that allows omniscience to any participant in human action is, to that degree, unrealistic.

But again, every kind of information has its costs, and even godlike readers have to pay. For them—for us—knowledge of human action is purchased at the price of an inability to affect its course. Human action in a work of art is knowable, in a way that other forms of human action are not, because it is permanently frozen. Its economy is finished; it is over before we, the observers, start on it.

We are used to paying this price; it is customary, and like many other customary economic obligations, it has become invisible. But things might have been different. One can imagine a society in which it is customary for audiences to walk on stage and revise the action of *King Lear*. What would happen? Quite probably, Gloucester's eyes would not be put out. But that is a guess. Every intervention would unsettle the economy of the text; every intervention would provide new occasions for choice and action by both the characters and the audience. Gloucester might lose his eyes in some other way.

The reader's omniscience is made possible by the author's omnipotence, the author's ability to plan the text and finish it.

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[62]Zdzislaw Najder, *Conrad in Perspective: Essays on Art and Fidelity* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 113.

There can be no power of this kind in the economy of the world.[63] The text of the world is a spontaneous collaboration that none of its human authors can conclude, despite any delusions of grandeur they may have. As Hayek's work maintains, the "fatal conceit" of our century is the idea that someone could actually know enough to design a world while living and acting inside it.[64] "Conceit," with its literary associations, is a good word for this delusion, which is essentially a delusion of authorship.

It appears as such in *The Secret Agent*. Conrad's intellectuals (or those who pass for intellectuals) cast themselves as omniscient plotters of human action, deriving their inspiration from literary sources that lead them to believe that the shape of history's narrative can be perceived by the genius of certain characters within it—perceived (as if from a distance) and, paradoxically, created.

For Michaelis, the guiding light is Marx's historical romances, in which the unnamed but obvious hero is the genius of Marx himself. Marx believed that he was changing history while charting its predestined course. Michaelis believes that about himself. He sees himself as a hero of authorship. He follows an even stricter principle of literary economy than Marx: his book of revolutionary theory, the *Autobiography of a Prisoner*, doubles as the story of his own life. It represents the history of the "prisoner's" ideas as the history of the world, a history that the book itself will help to write.

The anarchist Alexander Ossipon ("nicknamed the Doctor") has also been reading and writing works of self-aggrandizing social "science."[65] He despises Michaelis, but he does not despise the genre of omniscient social theory in which Michaelis operates. "[A]fter all," Ossipon says, "Michaelis may not be so far

[63]Hawthorn believes that *The Secret Agent* requires an omniscient narrator to reveal the "total workings" of "social relations" in a capitalist society that lacks any "public determining centre of authority" (p. 78). But no society has an authority that could do that job.

[64]F.A. Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

[65]*Secret Agent*, pp. 40–41.

wrong. In two hundred years doctors will rule the world. Science reigns already. It reigns in the shade maybe—but it reigns. And all science must culminate at last in the science of healing."[66] Ossipon does his best to write himself into that story. His imagination transforms him from a failed medical student into a member of the future ruling class, scientists for whom knowledge will truly be power. He thus acquires "that glance of insufferable, hopelessly dense sufficiency which nothing but the frequentation of science can give to the dulness of common mortals."[67] Ossipon, who has written such pamphlets as "The Corroding Vices of the Middle Classes,"[68] surveys the world as if he had been put in charge of it.

The Professor has been reading somewhat different material. His attitudes owe something to Marx but more to Max Stirner, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Herbert Spencer. A strange assemblage: but the Professor does what imaginative people usually do with their sources; he makes them his own, adding and subtracting and using tricks of emphasis to obscure the contradictions. It is not fidelity that matters; it is literary effect. What emerges is a proto-fascist narrative about a world in which the strong will revolt against the weak and subject them to "utter extermination."[69] The Professor refuses to specify the details of this interesting plan; he even denies that he has a "plan." Nevertheless, he *knows* (as Michaelis *knows*, and Marx once *knew*) that the climax of the story will be an entirely "new conception of life." Once that is in place, he will generously allow the "future" to "take care of itself."[70]

At the other side of the political spectrum are Vladimir's fantasies about "international action," "universal repressive legislation," and a total "cure" for anarchism.[71] For these imaginings there is no specific, readily identifiable literary source, but there

[66]Ibid., p. 227.

[67]Ibid., p. 41.

[68]Ibid.

[69]Ibid., p. 226.

[70]Ibid., pp. 60–61.

[71]Ibid., pp. 27, 28, 25.

is a strong odor of decaying words. Vladimir's social theory is a collection of literary stereotypes. "The imbecile bourgeoisie"; "the damned professors"; "the boot blacks in the basement of Charing Cross Station"; moronic tradesmen, as interpreted by comic fiction: these are the substance of his theory. Nothing suggests that he has any substantial knowledge of the kinds of people he discusses, but he has evidently read enough to absorb some useful images, which he recreates as if communing with the muse—"from on high, with scorn and condescension."[72] He enforces his opinions (his *soi-disant* "philosophy") in self-consciously literary ways. He tells stories, asks rhetorical questions, cracks little jokes, mobilizes symbols ("Go for the first meridian"), and personally enacts a series of dramatic roles: British aristocrat, Cockney, Eastern despot, social scientist.[73] Again, what counts is the impression, not the truth—in this case, the truth about human action. The purely verbal text is worth more to Vladimir than the praxeological one.

When his grip on concrete evidence fails him, which it does not take long to do, he retreats to the modern intellectual's last refuge, dialectic—a literary means of turning hopeless contradictions into helpful paradoxes, "droll connections between incongruous ideas."[74] Other characters practice this method, too. Michaelis's dialectical theory begins with an observation that is unusually accurate, for him: "No one can tell what form the social organisation may take in the future." But it ends with the very different idea of "a world planned out."[75] And by whom is that world to be planned, if not by people like Michaelis? The most useful paradoxes are those that allow the greatest scope for authorial power.

Vladimir tries to perform the same kind of dialectical parlor trick. He describes a world cursed by revolutionary violence and the disorganized minds of the bourgeoisie, and from this chaotic world he proposes to create an unyieldingly firm social order.

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[72]Ibid., pp. 28, 30, 26, 32.

[73]Ibid., pp. 24–33.

[74]Ibid., p. 20.

[75]Ibid., pp. 37, 225.

His tools? The same revolutionary violence, reacting on the same disorganized minds. Perhaps the books that lurk behind his ideas are Marxist books, after all. Vladimir, famed for his wit, has found an amusing way to get the Marxist narrative of "social contradictions" to operate in reverse. It is a demonstration of literary skill, a quality that Vladimir, like Conrad's other ideologues, would like to transform into political control.

Vladimir's complaint against the English middle class is that it has "no imagination" and no sense of defining form; it simply wants to continue its spontaneous ways of thinking and feeling. Hence the "sentimental regard for individual liberty" shown by this "imbecile bourgeoisie"; hence its refusal to embrace his version of "finality."[76] This is the kind of political grievance that one expects to hear from a literary artist. It is characteristic of all those men and women of letters who have turned against bourgeois liberalism, not because bourgeois society has broken down or failed in its competition with its adversaries, but because it lacks a satisfying artistic shape, an ability to banish every ugly problem. Such critics were right, to this extent: the liberal social order can never achieve a final form. It is not a work of art. It is not planned by anyone. It is a collaboration of everyone involved in its sphere of human action, a collaboration of immense and indefinite extent, the form of which is constantly subject to change by the unpredictable actions of every collaborator.

VIII.

Modern liberals have been as dissatisfied as anyone else with the sloppiness of the liberal order. That is one of the major reasons, as Hayek suggested, for the prevalence of the "fatal conceit" of power and planning.[77] The embodiment of modern liberal ideas in *The Secret Agent* is the Home Secretary, Sir Ethelred, an enthusiastic social planner. Sir Ethelred appears at the point in British history at which the old liberalism of *laissez-faire* was yielding to the new liberalism of the welfare state. It was a revolution, and

[76]Ibid., pp. 28, 25.

[77]See, for example, the first four chapters of Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom*.

like many other revolutions it was directed from the top down, by men of established social position and power. Sir Ethelred is such a man. He can be compared to Vladimir and the Lady Patroness, highly placed personalities who also believe that their social position entitles them to see to the needs of the lower orders. They are all Patrons; they are all people who want to lay hands upon the world and confer upon it the benefits of their own social stability.

In a novel that is full of heavy, controlling people, Sir Ethelred is one of the heaviest and most controlling. But this is not enough; he even appears to be "expanding."[78] Certainly he wants expanded powers. His current project is a Bill for the Nationalization of Fisheries. This is "a revolutionary measure," according to his well-born private secretary Toodles, "the revolutionary Toodles"; and as you might expect, "[t]he reactionary gang" in Parliament considers it "the beginning of social revolution."[79] They're right.[80] It's not exactly Bolshevism, but it represents something equally powerful, the rebellion of the new liberalism of social planning against the old, "reactionary" liberalism of limited government. And from Conrad's point of view it is susceptible to some of the same difficulties. Like Michaelis and everyone else who wants to manage the world, Sir Ethelred just doesn't know enough to do it.

True, his office has access to economic information of some kind. Toodles has some statistics, since he claims to know that the reactionaries have "shamelessly cooked" their own. But the important thing is Sir Ethelred's private meditations, the ideas that he comes up with when, as Toodles says, he is "sitting all alone" in a dark room, "thinking of all the fishes of the sea."[81]

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[78]*Secret Agent*, p. 105.

[79]Ibid., pp. 112–13.

[80]Fleishman (*Conrad's Politics,* p. 213), who likes Sir Ethelred, observes that Sir William Harcourt, after whom he seems to be modeled, was an apostle of "quasi-socialism."

[81]*Secret Agent*, p. 162. Paul Cantor (private communication) has observed that Sir Ethelred is the typical social planner, "trying to know something that can't be known."

This solitude does not inspire confidence. Toodles says that his boss has a "massive intellect," but that is what somebody named Toodles *would* say about his boss.[82] Sir Ethelred's conversastions with the Assistant Commissioner offer more evidence of mass than of intellect, so far as Sir Ethelred is concerned. Regarding mere information as beneath his notice, he refuses to hear the Assistant Commissioner's report on the Greenwich explosion unless all the annoying particulars are excluded.[83] In the absence of facts, he shows a tendency to jump (if that's the right word for a man who can barely walk) to entirely wrong conclusions. The Assistant Commissioner needs considerable skill to keep him from ruining the investigation by imposing ideas of his own, ideas that are commanding but inadequate to the situation they would command.

Sir Ethelred exemplifies the fact that intellectual incompetence is not confined to avowed enemies of the state. He is one more illustration of the affinity between scarcity of knowledge and pretensions to power.[84] He has another function, too. He helps Conrad address the general problem of scarcity—scarcity of knowledge, scarcity of time, scarcity of means of every type—that is embedded in every form of human action. Sir Ethelred is in rebellion against the very idea that anything he needs should be scarce and costly.

This is a reaction against something more fundamental than the liberalism of *laissez-faire*. It is a reaction against the nature of the world itself. When the Assistant Commissioner happens to mention the fact that "this is an imperfect world," Sir Ethelred hastily cuts him off: "Be lucid, please."[85] The offending remark was extremely lucid; Sir Ethelred merely resents having to hear

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[82]Ibid., p. 113.

[83]Ibid., pp. 106–10.

[84]Hay (*The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad,* pp. 243, 247) misses the web of associations and parallels that gives significance to both Sir Ethelred and the Lady Patroness. Hay believes that "[t]here is nothing in the least offensive" about either one of them: their political projects "come across in a spirit of pure fun"; their "political sentimentalities" are "harmless." What, then, is Conrad's purpose for including them in *this* novel?

[85]*Secret Agent*, p. 108.

it. To be more specific, he resents having to take the *time* to hear either it or any other elucidation of fact. The price of facts is enormous, odious, oppressive, worrying. "Don't go into details," he says. "I have no time for that."[86]

The world that Sir Ethelred longs for, the world that he tries to create in the isolation of his room, is a world in which he has fully sufficient means to command such grossly imperfect things as terrorists, policemen, fish, and time. To some degree, he succeeds in his assault on time; at least he creates the impression of success, which is valuable for political as well as artistic purposes. In either case, an impression carries its own weight and authority. The Assistant Commissioner has to hurry through his report while Sir Ethelred, the "great Personage," stands as massively portentous as power itself. The tableau suggests an audience granted by an eternal "oak" to a frail mortal "reed."[87] The current of time that bore the Assistant Commissioner into Sir Ethelred's office, where he dared to imply that the great man lacked perfect knowledge of a (nearly) perfect world, will soon bear the intruder out again, leaving Sir Ethelred still glaring down from his high place in the forest.

Among the furnishings of Sir Ethelred's perpetually darkened room is a clock, "a heavy, glistening affair of massive scrolls in the same dark marble as the mantelpiece."[88] In the presence of old Sir Ethelred, time itself seems to age and grow heavy, almost too heavy to squirm out of his control. But any attempt to subdue time is ultimately as futile as Stevie's attempt on Greenwich Observatory. Time is the counter-revolutionary that always wins. While Sir Ethelred is haughtily *not* looking, "the ponderous marble time piece with the sly, feeble tick . . . take[s] the opportunity to steal through no less than five and twenty minutes behind his back."[89] The tick of Sir Ethelred's clock is the tiny, unobtrusive, yet decisive evidence that even he is mortal.

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[86]Ibid., p. 106.

[87]Ibid., pp. 106–07.

[88]Ibid., p. 107.

[89]Ibid., p. 111.

To put this in a more praxeological way, the tick of the clock is decisive evidence that all human action—even the Home Secretary's brief chat with his Assistant Commissioner—takes place under the sign of imperfection and scarcity. Scarcity is part of the objective framework of human action. It necessitates choice, it evokes subjective preferences, but it cannot be mastered by choice or preference, no matter how strongly it incites them to express themselves. No matter what Sir Ethelred tries to do or not to do, his clock slyly confirms this fact.

Sir Ethelred can react to the scarcity of time in many ways: he can look at his clock or turn his back on it; he can break his clock or sell it; he can become a mystic and transcend the normal human concern with clocks. The objective conditions of human action require only that he make some choice and assign some preference at each moment of his limited time. He cannot be, do, have, and control everything, all at once; at each moment he has to prefer one course of action to all others, and he has to risk the possibility that his choice may be wrong, that he may never get the profit he expects from it. These are the requirements of all human action, and as such, they are the requirements of every attempt to do without requirements. Sir Ethelred makes an attempt of this nature when he tries to cheat time and deny the imperfections of his knowledge and control. But the clock is still moving; its sly, feeble tick can still be heard.

IX.

Scarcity is the basis of choice and action. This is not a particularly cheerful fact. The modern age has been marked by many attempts to thrust that ponderous detail into the background, to create a world in which scarcity will no longer be regarded as a condition of human action. Freedom from scarcity has been considered both a human right and a technological possibility.[90]

[90]The *locus classicus* of American ideas on this subject is Franklin Roosevelt's Four Freedoms, which include "freedom from fear" and "freedom from want"—that is, freedom from risk and freedom from scarcity of needed material goods. An international application can be found in the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees,

Of course, a world without scarcity would be a world in which there would be no incentive for human action, and thus no human action. In response to this tritely obvious reflection, exponents of a post-scarcity economy have usually restricted the definition of "economy" to the production and distribution of material goods, and the definition of "scarcity" to the lack of certain *necessary* goods that modern technology can (and therefore should) provide for everyone. The ideal of a society in which all material necessities are supplied to everyone has decisively shaped modern concepts of economic justice and personal entitlement. It has inspired countless political movements of the left, right, and center. It has provided a source of high inspiration for people throughout the world. Every practical frustration of the

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among some rights of clearer and sharper definition, an ensemble of rights that amounts to an insurance of success, including the right to "just and favourable remuneration," to "social security," and to "realization . . . of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for [a person's] dignity and the free development of his personality." The idea that "machines," "the machine," or "technology" can easily create enough resources to fulfill such rights, and would certainly do so if the wastefulness of the market system were only curtailed, is common to all socialist and many liberal movements of the industrial age. It was confidently asserted by such philosophers of technocracy as Thorstein Veblen (in, e.g., *The Engineers and the Price System* [1921]). During the 1960s and 1970s, the idea of people's right and power to be free from scarcity was prominent all along the spectrum of left-liberal opinion. The title of *Post-Scarcity Anarchism*, Murray Bookchin's once-famous book, speaks for itself (Berkeley, Calif.: Ramparts Press, 1971). The distinguished historian William Appleman Williams thought that the United States had begun "to master the traditional economic scarcity" and should move on to conquer "the scarcity of humaneness in human relationships" (*The Great Evasion* [Chicago: Quadrangle, 1964], p. 53). John Kenneth Galbraith concluded his very influential book, *The Affluent Society* (1958), by saying that "we have solved" "the problem of producing goods" and must now "proceed . . . to the next task" (2nd ed. [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971], p. 317). The comparatively conservative Democratic Party platform of 1960, more mundane in its interests, insisted upon such alleged rights and powers as that of "every farmer to raise and sell his products at a return which will give him and his family a decent living" (*National Party Platforms*, compiled by Donald Bruce Johnson [Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978], vol. 2, p. 585). Slightly later, President Johnson developed plans for a quick and total elimination of "poverty" (definition uncertain), as a matter of right and duty.

ideal has thrust it back into the seedbed of political hopes, thence to flower in renewed efforts at social planning. It is obscurely felt that the ideal *must*, somehow, be realizable.

Marxist critics of ideology show imaginative insight when they postulate the existence of a "political unconscious" that can be marvelously resistant to reason and experience. Some of the best evidence for the hypothesis can be found in their own adherence to the post-scarcity ideal as a standard by which to measure the failings of bourgeois society. But who will decide what is "necessary" for any other individual's life? Who, precisely, will decide what is just for everyone to demand from the economy, when the standard of economic justice "depend[s] so much" (as Conrad indicates) "upon the patience of the individual"?[91] Who will judge these matters, and how will the judgments be enforced?

To make plans for the allocation of material things is hard enough. Every successive attempt to guarantee an "abundant" distribution of these goods through taxation, rationing, welfare and social security plans, or outright nationalization (the older methods), or "sanctions," "incentives," and "guidelines" (the newer ones) testifies to their persistent scarcity. But how shall we remedy the chronic scarcity of such nonmaterial things as courage, competence, and common sense, without which even the largest supply of material goods may be worth exactly nothing to the possessors?

And this is a mere detail, compared with the failure of post-scarcity idealists to answer (or even, in most cases, to ask) one other question. Assume that everyone can agree on some definition of necessity and justice; assume that "necessities" can be equated with "material necessities"; assume that "technology" can be guaranteed to supply all necessities of this kind, to everyone. What will guarantee that the *technological* necessities will be supplied? Tools do not spontaneously generate themselves. They can be provided only by heavy investments of such resources as time, energy, and intelligence. These resources are necessities, but they are always scarce. Ours is a world in which people do

[91] *Secret Agent*, p. 62.

everything that they do only by *not* doing everything else. It is a world in which Cather's Alexandra Bergson can "write" her story only by taking "a big chance," only by giving up on all the other possible stories.[92] It is a world in which Alexandra, and everyone else, must die.

Efforts have been made to ignore such commonplaces of human action. But to ignore them is to deny what may be called the metaphysical basis, the final facts, of praxeology. Albert Camus, who made "metaphysical rebellion" a central part of his explanation of the past two centuries of human behavior, defined that kind of revolt as a "claim against the suffering of life and death and a protest against the human condition both for its incompleteness, thanks to death, and its wastefulness, thanks to evil." It is a rebellion against scarcity in general. Metaphysical rebels, Camus says, respond to this fact about the world by trying to plan the world anew, to reconstruct it wholesale "according to their own concepts."[93]

Fortunately or unfortunately—for the rebellions in Camus' book range from romantic attempts to live without boredom to Marxist attempts to live without real economics—the attempt always fails.[94] It has to fail, because it is a rebellion against the conditions of all human action. That is how both Camus and the classical-liberal praxeologists frame the problem. They emphasize the idea that all subjective "claims" are situated within objective conditions—objective because they are both real and readily apparent. If attempts are made to deny them, they will *make* themselves known.

Certain permanently true things can be said even about such subjective things as economic valuation. This too has been denied by philosophers like Michaelis, who preaches the great truth that "everything is changed by economic conditions—art, philosophy, love, virtue—truth itself!"[95] But time, space, and

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[92]Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!*, in *Early Novels and Stories* (New York: Library of America, 1987), pp. 170–72, 289.

[93]Camus, *The Rebel,* pp. 24, 100.

[94]Ibid., pp. 49, 223.

[95]*Secret Agent*, p. 43.

matter, all of them agents of scarcity and therefore of choice and valuation, are not social constructions that will be replaced by other social constructions. Conrad evidently believes that this virtually self-evident truth needs to be insisted upon. He therefore repeatedly shows his characters in revolt against the metaphysical framework of human action, and he pictures their revolt as tragically and comically self-defeating.

This is the final meaning of the attempt to destroy the prime meridian, which is the beginning and the *end* of the world's measurements of time, space, and matter. "Nothing easier," Vladimir says, as if he had not been driven to concoct his plan by the hard facts of scarcity.[96] Time is running out; there will soon be a conference of diplomats who will need to be impressed by an act of terrorism; if they are not impressed, then the reactionary age that Vladimir envisions will not come to be. Under these circumstances, no better project comes to mind than the destruction of Greenwich Observatory, and no better tool than Adolf Verloc. Vladimir, hurrying, orders Verloc to attack the prime meridian. Verloc, hurrying, finds no better tool than his brother-in-law, Stevie. Stevie, hurrying, takes the bomb and, stumbling with it, perishes. Or perhaps, as the Professor thinks, Verloc underestimated the speed of the detonator and "ran the time too close."[97] Anyhow, Stevie is dead, a victim of time and the scarcity of time. The human technology that would be necessary to produce either revolution or reaction is just too scarce to do the job. The prime meridian endures and triumphs, a symbol of the imperturbable context that surrounds and provokes all human action: scarcity of time, scarcity of means, scarcity of life itself.

These are heavy burdens for anyone to bear. They seem especially heavy to Conrad's revolutionists, who make especially heavy demands on reality. Ossipon, the scientific revolutionist, emerges as their archetype. He encounters Winnie soon after she kills her husband. She sees him as her last hope to escape the police without the necessity of suicide. She pleads with him to help her, and he agrees; he wants her money. He would probably

[96]Ibid., p. 33.

[97]Ibid., pp. 72, 63.

say that he *needs* her money. But he has a greater and more basic need, the need for time; his mind is fixed on "the shortcomings of time-tables." He realizes that it may be too late to catch the last boat-train to France. In his view, this scarcity of time and poverty of means is manifestly unjust; it is a form of political oppression. "The insular nature of Great Britain obtruded itself upon his notice in an odious form. 'Might just as well be put under lock and key every night,' he thought irritably."[98] Ossipon considers it unfair that islands should be surrounded by water. Like Conrad's other rebels, he will accept no scarcity; he must have what he wants. All he requires to satisfy his needs is that there should be no such thing as objective reality.

X.

On his characters' political rebellions Conrad lavishes all the "indignant scorn" of which he speaks in his Author's Note.[99] Yet he is willing to make certain rebellions *almost* succeed. If time is a chief source of resentment, he will oblige time's adversaries by "stopping" time. Then he can show what would happen if *that* could happen, albeit . . . momentarily. He "stops" time twice in *The Secret Agent*.

The first moment of timelessness occurs during a cab ride. The cab has been hired to convey Winnie's stout, crippled old mother from Mr. Verloc's residence in Soho to a charity home on the far side of the Thames. The journey is macabre in every way. The old lady's destination is a place that resembles "the straitened circumstances of the grave."[100] This is her "last cab ride"; she is riding in the "Cab of Death."[101] Her purpose in thus evacuating the world of human action is to relieve Verloc of financial responsibility for her, in the hope that he will then be more likely to continue supporting Stevie. She has decided, in effect, to bring her life to a stop so that Stevie's life can stop where it is.

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[98]Ibid., p. 212.

[99]Ibid., p. 8. The Note was added in 1920.

[100]Ibid., p. 124.

[101]Ibid., pp. 123, 131.

Acting, in this way, to arrest action, she gets into the cab; and Winnie and Stevie go along to assist her. Sure enough, time appears to be shuddering to a stop. The "Cab of Death" moves with such funereal solemnity that when it reaches Whitehall, "all visual evidences of motion" are rendered "imperceptible": "The rattle and jingle of glass went on indefinitely in front of the long Treasury building—and time itself seemed to stand still."[102] What remains of time is just that faint rattle and jingle of time's inseparable opponent, action, and not much of that.

Has the progress of death been arrested, or is this death itself? A metaphysical question—but not one that occurs to Winnie Verloc, whose mind is on other matters. A woman of "unfathomable reserve" who has spent her life maintaining a decorous silence and inertness, she is scandalized by her mother's strange desire to *go* somewhere.[103] Yet once involved in the cab's weak but stubborn confrontation with the inertness of the Treasury Building, Winnie becomes concerned. Her concern is practical and (in broad terms) economic. She wants to get something for the three-and-sixpence fare; she wants to go somewhere. She wants action; she wants the horse to move. In her inert way, she even protests. "This isn't a very good horse," she says.[104] And it isn't. The poor animal, which seems prepared to die even before it can remove Winnie's mother to her place of death, is an apt symbol for every kind of scarcity in this "imperfect world."

This is something that Stevie can intuitively understand. He knows that if human action is to continue, the horse must be whipped. He feels the horse's suffering, but he recognizes the scarcity of alternatives. The cabman raises his whip; Stevie has to choose what he himself will do. He must do or not do *something*. He chooses to protest the motion of the cab. "Don't whip," he orders the cabman. "You mustn't . . . it hurts."[105]

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[102]Ibid., p. 121.

[103]Ibid., p. 11.

[104]Ibid., p. 121.

[105]Ibid., p. 122.

Now it is the cabman's turn to contemplate a world of scarce alternatives and the choices that they require: "'Mustn't whip?' queried the other in a thoughtful whisper, and immediately whipped."[106] But Stevie has one means of protest left. He jumps down from the cab, hoping to lighten its load and his own sense of responsibility. The driver hastily pulls up. The cab finally, definitely, stops. The timeless moment is complete.

Or is it? Before the wheels have ceased their motion, action has already resumed. The driver is cursing, people are running forward, people are shouting, Winnie is giving commands . . . time is visibly moving forward, and the cab is soon moving forward also, with Stevie back on board. His protest has merely contributed to the onward motion of events.

Part of that motion is an intensification of his revolt against the conditions of life. He learns that the problem is much bigger than he thought. The horse is not the only victim of a scarcity of needful resources. The cabman who whips the horse is a victim too. "This ain't an easy world," he remarks, when his passengers finally arrive at their Hades-like destination. "'Ard on 'osses, but dam' sight 'arder on poor chaps like me." The cabman's idea of consolation is a stroll to a nearby pub.[107] But this is a purely individual solution. Stevie needs something more general.

Letting his thought expand into the highest reaches of dialectic, he reaches the conclusion that the conditions of reality necessitate a total change in the conditions of reality. Michaelis envisions "a world planned out like an immense and nice hospital"; Stevie's idea is similar: he wants to create "a heaven of consoling peace" where he can take both horse and driver "to bed with him." The idea is absurd, but not quite as absurd as Michaelis's idea; Stevie, unlike Michaelis, is capable (for the moment, at least) of a degree of self-criticism. He is able to see that his scheme is "impossible. For Stevie was not mad."[108]

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[106]Ibid.

[107]Ibid., pp. 129, 130.

[108]Ibid., p. 129.

He is, however, rapidly becoming as angry and aggrieved as any professional revolutionist. He has always been the kind of person who feels "that somebody should be made to suffer" for the fact that he himself has scarce resources to relieve other people's suffering.[109] His pity now transforms itself into "pitiless rage." His "universal charity" makes him feel that this is a "bad world," and that "[s]omebody . . . ought to be punished for it—punished with great severity."[110] He has limited means of punishing anyone. But like many other people of generous ambitions and limited means, he quickly thinks of supplementing them with political power.

His first political idea is more reformist than revolutionary. He wants to call the police. Their job, he believes, is to annihilate "evil," so it is clearly their duty to wage war on poverty.[111] But he discovers—as other humanitarians have discovered—that bourgeois institutions are simply not up to comprehensive purposes of reform. When Winnie hears his idea about using the police to promote his vision of social justice, she tells him flatly that "[t]he police aren't for that." Well, Stevie asks, "What for are they then, Winn? What are they for?" Her answer is chilling: "Don't you know what the police are for, Stevie? They are there so that them as have nothing shouldn't take anything away from them who have."[112]

This is a terrible blow to Stevie's respect for legally constituted authority. He is surprised to find that the police have limited powers and that their powers are limited to imposing limitations. They are dreadfully implicated in the world of scarcity.

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[109]Ibid., p. 141. Fleishman (*Conrad's Politics,* p. 196) suggests that Stevie is the only character who allows himself to be aware of suffering. This is remarkably untrue. Stevie's revolt against suffering is exemplary, but virtually all the other characters revolt, too, and some of them ruthlessly. The anarchists revolt against the suffering of the working class, Sir Ethelred revolts against the suffering of unnationalized fishermen, Verloc revolts against the suffering occasioned by the necessity of work, Winnie revolts against Stevie's own suffering.

[110]Ibid., pp. 130, 132.

[111]Ibid., pp. 132–33.

[112]Ibid.

At one time, before Stevie learned what the police are for, he cherished an "ideal conception" of them. Now he realizes that ideals are not the same as realities, and he suffers a loss of confidence—not in himself but in the institutions of bourgeois society. He adopts the ideology of suspicion that is customary with modern intellectuals who are concerned about "the problem of the distribution of wealth": he decides that the police were just "pretending" to play a benevolent social role.[113] Wishing "to go to the bottom of the matter," he is now prepared to listen when Verloc invites him to join the "humanitarian enterprise" of demolishing the bourgeois system.[114] He is ready to go for the prime meridian.

The momentary stoppage of time that followed Stevie's "don't" (the command that in this novel comes so easily to people's lips) has been followed, in turn, by an explosion of activity—activity devoted, like his mother's "mania for locomotion," to the futile task of bringing human action to a stop. Stevie goes for the prime meridian, and is killed there.

XI.

The second occasion on which Conrad "stops" time is one of the many unpredictable results of the first occasion. When it happens, Winnie is standing motionless. Her husband is lying motionless before her. He is not merely motionless; he is dead. She has killed him. In response to Stevie's fatal development of political ideas, Winnie's own political ideas have also developed. They have led to a seizure of power. With one stroke of her carving knife, she has destroyed what she regarded as an outmoded "contract with existence." As a consequence, action has stopped. Time has stopped. She is "free":

> She had become a free woman with a perfection of freedom which left her nothing to desire and absolutely nothing to do. . . . [S]he did not think at all. And she did not move. She was a woman enjoying her

[113]Ibid., p. 133.

[114]Ibid., pp. 133, 200.

> complete irresponsibility and endless leisure, almost in the manner of a corpse. She did not move, she did not think.[115]

Winnie has achieved the condition to which every political figure in *The Secret Agent* aspires. She has abolished scarcity. She has nothing left to "desire," and nothing, therefore, to "do." She is beyond the world of human action. She might just as well be dead; and that, of course, is the significance of this moment in her life. A really successful metaphysical rebellion would entail the elimination of human action. It would mean something more than stopping the Cab of Death; it would mean death.

But Winnie has not yet arrived at the condition of her husband. He is dead and can remain that way without doing anything more about it. That is an objective fact. Winnie, however, cannot remain as she is without taking some action. That is an irony. It is also an objective fact. No matter what anyone thinks about the evolution of social and economic conditions, no condition of human existence will allow people to repudiate their contract with human existence itself, and live to enjoy the effects. So far as human beings are concerned, existence means action; we are, in Mises's words, not merely "*homo sapiens*" but "*homo agens*."[116] And all human action occurs in a context of scarcity.

An historian of economic thought has said that before the development of marginal utility theory, economists "never fully assimilated" scarcity into their systems.[117] Strange: one might have expected them to start with that concept and its implications. Scarcity provides the basic terms of the praxeological contract on which all economic and social contracts are based. Only by ceasing to exist can one withdraw from that original contract, which is more primitive and authentic than any marriage contract, or any social contract in Locke, Rousseau, or Hume.

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[115]Ibid., p. 198.

[116] Mises, *Human Action,* p. 14.

[117]Eric Roll, *A History of Economic Thought*, 5th ed., rev. (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 354.

Winnie discovers this philosophical truth in a curious manner. Resting in silence and immobility, "car[ing] nothing for time," she nevertheless discovers a sign of motion. There is a sound: "Tic, tic, tic." It picks up speed; it comes "fast and furious"; it becomes "a continuous sound of trickling"; it is "blood!" Verloc's body is leaking blood "like the pulse of an insane clock."[118] With that realization, the world of time, space, and matter—the whole context of human action—comes rushing back around her, all its features as real and permanent as Greenwich Observatory or Sir Ethelred's clock. The context is completely objective and inescapably knowable. Winnie cannot ignore it; if she tries, it will return to her. It has done so.

With it comes a perception of the world of economics that exists inside the world of praxeology. This economic world is full of subjective desires and valuations, and hence of unpredictably fluctuating scarcities and surpluses. A few minutes ago, Verloc was worth something, at least to Winnie and himself. Now, as she thinks, he is "nothing. He [is] not worth looking at."[119] His worth, in fact, is less than nothing. There is far too much of him on hand. He is a liability from which she would like to escape. No doubt she would pay a good price to have him quietly removed.

Too much of one thing usually means too little of another. It seems to Winnie that her environment contains far too much matter of every kind—that body over there, this "maze" of London buildings that surrounds and imprisons her—and far too little time to get away from it. Where can she go? Even if her mother could help her, she is miles away: "too far"![120] Too little time, too much space; and, from another, admittedly subjective, point of view, too *little* space. Winnie remembers what the newspapers say about the hangman's procedures: "The drop given was fourteen feet."[121]

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[118]*Secret Agent*, pp. 198–99.

[119]Ibid., p. 200.

[120]Ibid., pp. 203, 202.

[121]Ibid., p. 201.

As she returns to the world of action, and therefore to the world of relative valuations and marginal utilities, the value that she places on the successive moments of her life increases dramatically. Moments are precious to her again, because they offer the faint but all-important hope of doing something to save herself from what she fears the most. For the same reason, even Comrade Ossipon, whom she formerly loathed and attempted to avoid, begins to seem enormously valuable. When, by accident, Ossipon appears, she seizes the moment and binds herself to a new contract: if he will help her escape from England, she will give herself to him. That is the bargain she is now willing to strike.

But Ossipon keeps his contract with Winnie no more faithfully than Verloc kept his. Ossipon is sincere about only one thing, his devotion to the collectivist program of extracting wealth from people who have it and distributing it to people who don't. Implementing this program in the most direct way possible, he takes Winnie's money and gives it to himself. He also abandons her, just at the moment when she is leaving on the last train for the Channel. The walls of scarcity contract; Winnie has no help, no money, and almost no time. She uses the little time she has to buy a last measure of freedom, freedom from the hangman. She finds her way onto the Channel steamer and, in midjourney, drowns herself.

This praxeological parable is similar to the parable of Stevie and the cab. The moment at which Winnie kills Verloc is a moment in which time and action seem to stop; its result is an explosion of action and an implosion of time. By denying her "contract with existence," she succeeds only in confirming her contract with the fundamental conditions of existence. Like her brother, she can withdraw from those conditions only by surrendering the full price of withdrawal, existence itself.

XII.

If Conrad's purpose is to vindicate the existence of an objective framework of human action against all metaphysical objections and rebellions, he has certainly accomplished that purpose. But that is only one of his aims. He has something more to say about

freedom of choice, which he has made to appear, in Winnie's case, such a pathetically limited thing.[122] An author who is sensitive to Conrad's dislike of certain bourgeois values has said that "Conrad does not sentimentalize freedom. . . . Still, he shows freedom as clearly preferable to its lack."[123] Freedom is also, in Conrad's view, an essential part of any explanation of human action. He makes the final action of his story an argument for the existence and importance of individual freedom, for the ability of individuals to do what Cather said they could do—write their own stories.

The last chapter of *The Secret Agent* emphasizes this point. Ten days have passed since Winnie's death, but Ossipon is still meditating on a newspaper report of her suicide: "An impenetrable mystery seems destined to hang for ever over this act of madness or despair."[124] Nobody but Ossipon knows the identity of the woman who disappeared from the Channel steamer; nobody but he can guess her motives; and as *we* know, even he sees only a fraction of the story that his decisions helped create. But, oddly enough, considering his earlier air of insufferable self-sufficiency, he understands enough to regret his dogmatism about the force of material conditions.

That dogmatism was pronounced. While Winnie hysterically expressed her feelings about the prospect of being hanged, Ossipon's "sagacity" had been "busy in other directions. Women's words fell into water, but the shortcomings of time-tables remained. The insular nature of Great Britain obtruded itself upon his notice in an odious form."[125] Women's words are

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[122]So limited that one can understand the mainstream critical view, as expressed, for example, by Jan Verleun and Jetty de Vries (*Conrad's The Secret Agent and the Critics: 1965–1980* [Groningen: Bouma's Boekhuis, 1984], p. 253), who say that the novel "almost completely denies" Winnie the "possibility of free choice," that it pictures her as "predominantly a creature of milieu and circumstance." But this kind of generalization breaks down when the specifics of Winnie's actions and decisions are observed.

[123]Najder, *Conrad in Perspective,* pp. 150, 132.

[124]*Secret Agent*, p. 228.

[125]Ibid., p. 212.

merely the signs of their personal intentions, and what do intentions matter? Ossipon was above such individual and subjective considerations. They had no economic or scientific relevance. Only the material context counted, the world of the time-table. But Winnie was not killed by a time-table. She died by her own intention. Constrained by circumstances, constrained still more by the scarcity of something entirely individual and subjective—hope—Winnie yet retained the power to write her own death scene.

The image of women's words falling into water turns out to be ironic. Winnie's body fell into the English Channel, but her words did not. Those faint verbal signs of her intentions, her consciousness, her existence as something more than a body, survived her death. They linger as unwelcome guests in Ossipon's mind. He escaped from the shortcomings of time-tables by getting Winnie to the train station, taking her money, and running away. He thus escaped from certain forms of scarcity. But he could not escape from consciousness. He could not expel the memory of his conscious choice to betray a woman who chose to trust him. His thinking has changed in unpredictable ways. It's marginal utility again: he no longer values additional units of his life; he doesn't really want any more. And he has learned that even the value of money is dependent on individual states of mind. He no longer sees the cash that he liberated from Winnie as an asset; he tries to give it away. What matters is the private economy of his mind. The state of that economy can easily be summarized in business terms: "It was ruin."[126]

Winnie's suicide was a sad, residual demonstration of her freedom of choice. Ossipon makes a similar demonstration. He chooses death—preceded, in his case, by drunkenness and the closest thing to slavery that the capitalist system has to offer, "the leather yoke of the sandwich board."[127] He thus demonstrates that the individual consciousness, that deeply economic thing, is a permanently significant, though a permanently mysterious, fact; and that consciousness has very efficient means of producing

[126]Ibid., p. 231.

[127]Ibid.

other significant facts, such as death. How this happens is often as mysterious as anything else. Through their choices, Ossipon and Winnie decide their fates, and only omniscient readers can fully understand the effects of their collaboration. But Ossipon has seen enough to know that human action results from choice, not determination, and that choice can entail responsibility.

The last chapter of the novel is mainly concerned, however, with the choices of the Professor. From the beginning, he has prided himself on his ability to face the facts about human action. He has a boundless contempt for people who refuse to face them. He considers Michaelis particularly contemptible. As he explains to Ossipon, he saw the manuscript of Michaelis's great book, and he dismissed it at a glance: "The poverty of reasoning is astonishing."[128] The Professor tries to be objective about his own work as a revolutionist. He knows that it depends on hard choices, the assumption of risks, and what he calls "character."[129] He believes that the police will hesitate to arrest him if they think he has enough of that commodity to blow himself up—and, more to the purpose, blow them up—if he is ever threatened with arrest. So he carries explosives with him at all times, and a detonator. He is gambling, so far successfully, on the importance of individual differences and subjective states of mind. Because he has more "character" than the police, he has a chance of survival. So far, his praxeological insights have proven sound. He is still alive.

His program of self-insurance was introduced in his conversation with Ossipon in chapter 4. There he cold-bloodedly described the process of self-explosion. He would simply press a little rubber ball, which would activate a detonator, which would produce certain other effects. . .

> "It is instantaneous, of course?" murmured Ossipon, with a slight shudder.
>
> "Far from it . . . A full twenty seconds must elapse from the moment I press the ball till the explosion takes place."

[128]Ibid., p. 225.

[129]Ibid., p. 56.

> "Phew!" whistled Ossipon, completely appalled. "Twenty seconds! Horrors! You mean to say that you could face that? I should go crazy— "
>
> "Wouldn't matter if you did."[130]

Perhaps it wouldn't. At certain moments, a slight scarcity or surplus of something in the material world—a scarcity of time to escape from a bomb explosion, a surplus of time to wait for it to happen—may be enough to make personal reactions and valuations seem irrelevant.

Nevertheless, this particular combination of surplus and scarcity would still be the product of the Professor's personal choice, just as Ossipon's abundance of guilt and scarcity of means to assuage it are products of his preceding, quite personal choices. Choices matter, despite the fact that this is an "imperfect world" in which consequences cannot be certainly predicted.

Unlike Sir Ethelred, the Professor is capable of admitting that fact. No detonator, he concedes, can be "absolutely fool proof," especially when entrusted to a fool like Adolf Verloc. Perfection is something "[y]ou can't expect."[131] And yet—here is the contradiction in the Professor's applied praxeology—he is spending his time trying to invent "a perfect detonator," a little machine that will allow him to transcend the limitations decreed by time and space and the risks of other people's meddling.[132] His scientific objectivity is clearly not complete, unless you mean by "objectivity" a complete independence from normal human life.

It is that latter kind of "objectivity" that permits him to experiment without any moral compunctions. Stevie died in one of the Professor's experiments with detonators: "They must be tried, after all."[133] They *must* be tried, because the Professor feels a personal *need* to try them. He has the freedom to make that kind of moral choice. Yet his own special concept of freedom remains controversial. Its status needs to be clarified. The only

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[130]Ibid.

[131]Ibid., p. 63.

[132]Ibid., p. 57.

[133]Ibid., p. 61.

kind of freedom that the Professor recognizes is the freedom actually to satisfy his self-defined needs. To Conrad, however, this is freedom that has been confused with power, absolute power over human action. Give the Professor a detonator, or—as he tells Ossipon in their final conversation—a terroristic "lever" of "madness and despair," and he will use it to "move the world."[134] Conrad's last chapter shows the defects of this conception of freedom-as-power.

Consider the Professor's image: the lever. It is a hackneyed image. It is as old as Archimedes, and its use has not been confined to geometry texts. It has appealed, in one way or another, to every solitary theorist who has ever advocated a comprehensive change in the conditions of life. All the profound political thinkers in *The Secret Agent* amuse themselves with this conceit. Viewing the world from a distance, they decide that its course must be changed and that all they need to effect the mighty alteration is a political tool that will multiply their power over other individuals. The chosen instrument may be "history" or "science" or "terror." In any event, a lever will descend from the sky, and the world will be changed. The authors of the transformation will then be permanently free from the burden of other people's imperfect judgments and valuations. They will have what they believe they are entitled to.

But there are other kinds of levers, and other ways of regarding them. When Cather thinks about the means of gaining leverage on life, she thinks of the pen and the plow, the archetypal tools of individual skill. She thinks, indeed, of occasions when an author's pen is "fitted to [his] matter as the plough is to the furrow."[135] She values the kind of human action that responds to the challenges of circumstance, not the kind that tries to decree their end. Anybody who has ever plowed a field can tell you that plowing is not an exercise of political or social power. Neither is it an effect of material forces or (strange as this may seem) of mere "labor." It consists of countless individual decisions about

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[134]Ibid., p. 230.

[135]Cather, *My Ántonia*, in *Early Novels and Stories* (New York: Library of America, 1987), p. 877.

risks and opportunities, about the limitations and advantages of equipment and terrain—decisions whose success is never guaranteed but that may, despite the risks, succeed.

The Professor's image of the one lever that will move the world is a great deal simpler. It is brutally simple. It does not even suggest that the tools meant to transform human action should be fitted to human action itself. It implies that they must be operated from someplace outside, beyond this earth. And it complacently accepts the consequence of using such tools. The consequence would not be evolution, reform, or somebody's idea of social democracy. It would be the removal of the earth from its orbit. This is indeed a fatal conceit, and the Professor knows it. He raises his glass and offers a toast. "To the destruction of what is," he says "calmly."[136]

The Professor has particularly advanced views, but his desire to make the world stop and obey him establishes his similarity to the other politicians in *The Secret Agent*. The problem for all of them is how to make the world stop without being stopped oneself, how to engineer a decisive change without being destroyed by the crash that follows. The Professor's literary image neatly dispenses with that problem. He himself will be standing at the *far* end of the lever, the end that is *beyond* the world. He will not be hurt. Only one difficulty remains: there is no such place.

Certainly the Professor does everything he can to get beyond the world of other people. But he can oppose himself to their system of action only by acting within it. In reality, he has no tools that exist apart from it. In the final chapter, Ossipon emphasizes that irritating fact. His opportunity comes when the Professor announces that he needs just one thing to complete his work: "The time! Give me time!"[137] But time is a condition of this world; if the Professor needs it, he must be in this world too, and unable to live in any other—as Ossipon tauntingly points out.

Suppose, Ossipon says, that science eventually attains the ability to lengthen the human lifespan:

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[136]*Secret Agent*, p. 228.

[137]Ibid., p. 226.

> Just now you've been crying for time—time. Well! The doctors will serve you out your time—if you are good. You profess yourself to be one of the strong—because you carry in your pocket enough stuff to send yourself and, say, twenty other people into eternity. But eternity is a damned hole. It's time that you need. You—if you met a man who could give you for certain ten years of time, you would call him your master.[138]

The Professor denies it. Besides, he suggests, that is merely a hypothetical situation. He is wavering. He confesses disappointment at his inability to get any leverage with the "mediocre" people who surround him. Every one of them—Ossipon, Verloc, "everybody"—is too mediocre to *do* anything.[139] At this point, the Professor is merely rebelling against one form of scarcity rather than another—scarcity of allies rather than scarcity of time; and rebellion against one leads very naturally to rebellion against the other. If enough people shared his values, he could do what he wanted without further loss of time. There would be no scarcity. But "[t]ime is pressing," as Camus says. "Persuasion demands leisure . . . thus terror remains the shortest route to immortality."[140] That is why the Professor's chosen lever is "madness and despair." It's quicker that way.

If he can just get that tool! *Then* he will have the right leverage on the praxeological material. He retains his hope. Ossipon, however, knows more than the Professor about madness and despair. He knows that human emotions are exactly like time in one respect: they are an inextricable part of the web of human action. They cannot simply be abstracted from the lives of individuals and used as tools for some external purpose. Winnie died of despair, the last victim of the explosion that the Professor helped to engineer. But her suicide was irrelevant to the Professor's goal; it was a fatal reflex of her will to self-preservation, and its effects were wholly unpolitical. He himself has no information about the matter.

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[138]Ibid., p. 227.

[139]Ibid., pp. 226, 230.

[140]Camus, *The Rebel*, p. 247.

"Mankind," he declares in a "self-confident" way, "does not know what it wants." He thinks that mankind needs to be told. But Winnie proved him wrong. She knew what she wanted. That is why Ossipon can say with authority, "Mankind wants to live—to live."[141] Yet Winnie's suicide, the suicide of someone who wanted to live, but only upon her own terms, shows that Ossipon isn't entirely correct. "Mankind" isn't one thing, and it doesn't want any one thing. If it did, it might actually be able to provide people like the Professor with a tool that would be simple and strong enough to accomplish some of their aims. But mankind wants an uncountable number of things, because mankind consists of an uncountable number of individuals responding to an uncountable number of situations. Their diversity of wants and needs is a fundamental praxeological fact. One of Conrad's commentators has said that "the central theme of *The Secret Agent*" is the "contrast between what is fully human and affirmative toward life and what is wretchedly less than human and revolted by life"—meaning the Professor.[142] True; but human life, as the action of the novel shows, is always the life of individuals. It does not exist en masse.

This is not a thought that the Professor wants to entertain. He prefers to think of other people as an undifferentiated mass. It is a terrible thought, but less terrible than the thought of their individuality. After arguing with Ossipon, he vaingloriously toasts "the destruction of what is"; then he considers how hard the existing course of human action is to destroy.

> The thought of a mankind as numerous as the sands of the seashore, as indestructible, as difficult to handle, oppressed him. The sound of exploding bombs was lost in their immensity of passive grains without an echo. For instance, this Verloc affair. Who thought of it now?[143]

He envisions himself surrounded by millions of passive, interchangeable grains of sand, as determined by "conditions" as any inert physical target.

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[141]*Secret Agent*, p. 227.

[142]Hay, *The Political Novels of Joseph Conrad,* p. 252.

[143]*Secret Agent*, p. 228.

But that's not right. That's merely the arrogant way in which he chooses to visualize all those human lives that are immune to his dream of total power. What he hates and fears is precisely the spontaneous, unpredictable freedom of human action. What drives him to madness and despair is the fact that other people are active instead of passive, planning instead of planned. The variety of their plans and motives denies him control, imprisons him in a world that is always being shaped by a multitude of levers of its own invention—far too many levers for him to "handle." That is why he wants to bring it all to a stop.

XIII.

The Professor leaves his debate with Ossipon before it can pose more danger to his morale. We see him receding into the perspective of a busy street, "averting his eyes from the odious multitude of mankind" that surrounds him:

> He walked frail, insignificant, shabby, miserable—and terrible in the simplicity of his idea calling madness and despair to the regeneration of the world. Nobody looked at him. He passed on unsuspected and deadly, like a pest in the street full of men.[144]

And that is the end of *The Secret Agent*. It is a striking end for a novel that has been focused on the Professor and his fellow revolutionaries (of both left- and right-wing varieties) as if they were anything but "insignificant," as if, indeed, the big story were about them and not about the world that they want to "regenerate," the process of human action that they struggle to dominate or destroy. The final moment comes with the force of a revelation: what is most significant is the life of the busy street, of the multitude whom the Professor is pleased to consider "odious," and not the Professor himself, or anyone like him. He is

[144]Ibid., p. 231.

"deadly," but the street is alive; he can kill, but it can heal; he is a "pest," but it is "men."[145]

Compare *The Secret Agent* with a contemporary political novel that also has an unexpectedly epiphanic end: Frank Norris's *The Octopus* (1901). Both authors are interested in the principles of human action, but they see them differently. Norris's novel is an attempt at a comprehensive realization of a collectivist philosophy. For 650 pages, it details the complicated and, to Norris, sinister methods by which capitalism works. Using the example of wheat farmers beset by banks and railroads, Norris shows the money power monopolizing land, despoiling labor, killing its individual opponents, trampling all collective opposition. He shows the people victimized by a bourgeois government that will do nothing to stop these depredations. He describes these things as if they happened naturally and in accordance with the laws of economic history. He shows an essentially hopeless situation. If ever there was a novel that begged for some final, redemptive irony, some dramatic revelation of the multitude's self-regenerative power, that novel is *The Octopus.*

And the redemptive irony comes; but when it does, it is not about people at all; it's about an economic product. Norris suddenly, triumphantly, announces that regardless of anything his characters may have done or had done to them, "*the WHEAT remained*. Untouched, unassailable, undefiled, that mighty world-force, that nourisher of nations, wrapped in Nirvanic calm, indifferent to the human swarm, gigantic, resistless, moved onward in its appointed grooves."[146]

It is one of the great sentences of modern literature, the grandest effect of Norris's remarkable powers of abstraction and

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[145]Fleishman, in *Conrad's Politics,* agrees rather oddly with my assumption of a favorable ending of the novel—oddly because he regards the ending as a vision of "the value of human community" (p. 212), not the value of individual human action, and because he previously interpreted the Professor's vision of people swarming like industrious insects as Conrad's own vision of "whatever is inimical to genuine social life" (pp. 200–201).

[146]Frank Norris, *The Octopus: A Story of California* (New York: Doubleday, 1901), p. 651.

intensification. He has spent his whole novel trying to demonstrate that the means by which the wheat is produced and distributed are vicious, oppressive, and destructive; now he declares, in that thrilling final sentence, that the wheat is good, its production is good, its distribution is good. Compared with the godlike wheat, so active and yet so nirvanically calm, the people whom one had supposed to be the heroes of the novel amount to nothing more than a "little, isolated group of human insects," bugs in the human "swarm."[147]

We have arrived at a destination far beyond the realm of human action. In this strange, modern Eleusis, the priest holds up the miraculous stalk of wheat and tells the initiates . . . what? Not that they have been reborn after their symbolic deaths, but that they are and always will be the nothings that they were before.

Meanwhile, Norris makes sure that his embodiment of evil, an investment capitalist, is drowned like a bug in the miracle wheat. He bought it, and it kills him. But his death is not a comment on the risks of doing business; it is something more—a judgment handed down from an abstract court of moral justice, a court that is preoccupied with the transactions of this world but that operates at an "unassailable" distance above it. A lever descends from the courts of theory, and the vile S. Behrman is no more.

The end of *The Secret Agent* involves no such revelation of *a priori* powers. No economic values are imposed from a location beyond economics. No "grooves" of enterprise are "appointed" without human beings to appoint them. Here we discover no material objects that possess the power to transcend risk, banish scarcity, triumph over space and time. We discover only people, the same people who perform, in their imperfect, non-nirvanic way, whatever actions take place in this world, and who feel the effects of their actions. These people are the plow and the furrow, the authors and the story, the means of action and the shape of action—and, in their capacity for enjoyment, the goal of action, too. They are "the wheat."

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[147]Ibid., p. 651. This is not the only place where Norris's people become insects; see also p. 180.

9

Hyperinflation and Hyperreality: Mann's "Disorder and Early Sorrow"

Paul A. Cantor

One may say that, apart from wars and revolutions, there is nothing in our modern civilizations which compares in importance to [inflation]. The upheavals caused by inflations are so profound that people prefer to hush them up and conceal them.

—Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*

I have always regarded the German inflation as a kind of mirage, a witches' sabbath, that vanished, leaving nothing behind it but headaches and regrets. In the summer of 1923 the Inflation, like the legendary witches' dance, became wilder and wilder, the figures rose faster and faster. Then suddenly the cock crowed, the night was over, and the witch, exhausted and disillusioned, found herself back in her old kitchen.

—Thomas Mann[1]

[1]"Inflation: The Witches' Sabbath," Ralph Manheim, trans., *Encounter* 44, no. 2 (Feb. 1975): 63. The German original can be found under the title "Erinnerungen aus der Deutschen Inflation" in Thomas Mann, *Über mich selbst: Autobiographische Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1983), p. 368. Manheim's translation is abridged; for the passages he omitted, the translations are my own (as are the other translations from German in this essay, unless noted otherwise).

I.

As a modernist writer, Thomas Mann was a master of irony and ambiguity. It should come as no surprise, then, that it is very difficult to pin down his views on economic issues. His most sustained attempt to articulate a social philosophy, *Confessions of a Non-Political Man* (1918), is a Romantic critique of capitalist modernity that seems to place Mann in the conservative or reactionary camp. But later in life, particularly in response to the rise of fascism, Mann became sympathetic to socialist views.[2] Yet his socialism remained tinged with his aestheticism; characteristically, in a 1928 essay "Culture and Socialism," he hoped for a "union and pact of the conservative culture idea with revolutionary social thinking, between Greece and Moscow," as he put it, and he went on to wish that Karl Marx had read the German idealist poet Friedrich Hölderlin.[3] Yet even while Mann indulged in fantasies of a Marxism with a German idealist face, he wondered if socialism would allow him to live in the style to which he had become accustomed under capitalism. He was very much the product of the bourgeois world and capitalism was very good to him. In a 1921 essay called "Spirit and Money" ("Geist und Geld"), he admitted: "I am personally obligated from early on to the capitalist world order, and therefore it would never be fitting for me, as is the fashion, to spit on it."[4] Torn between socialism and capitalism, Mann was tempted to embrace the middle path of the welfare state, a market economy managed by government intervention. In the 1930s he became a great admirer of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and many critics have viewed his *Joseph and His Brothers* as a celebration of the American New Deal and its model of a managed economy. As Henry Hatfield writes,

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[2]For a discussion of Mann's attitude toward socialism, see Keith Bullivant, "Thomas Mann and Politics in the Weimar Republic," in *Culture and Society in the Weimar Republic* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1977), pp. 24–38. Bullivant argues that Mann's socialism was essentially aesthetic in nature.

[3]"Kultur und Sozialismus," *Politische Schriften und Reden* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1968), vol. 2, p. 173.

[4]*Über mich selbst*, p. 477.

> Joseph proceeds to build up a welfare state on a grand scale. It is typical of the "mediator" Joseph that his economic dictatorship is an adroit combination of capitalism and socialism. In his attack on the power of the Egyptian barons, his solicitude for the poor, his popularity, and his happy blending of cunning and benevolence, Joseph "is" Franklin Roosevelt, mythically speaking.[5]

The Marxist literary critic Georg Lukács found a way to cut through the Gordian knot of Mann's bewilderingly contradictory statements on economic issues. Lukács readily admitted that Mann was a bourgeois writer, but he argued that the author of *Buddenbrooks, The Magic Mountain*, and *Doctor Faustus* could nevertheless be used for Marxist purposes. For Lukács, Mann was the great representative in the twentieth century of what he called critical realism in literature. In the tradition of holding the mirror up to nature, Mann's fiction offers a remarkably accurate representation of life in the modern bourgeois world. Thus, it did not matter to Lukács what Mann himself said about this world in his own voice. All that mattered to Lukács was that Mann had succeeded in embodying in his works a true reflection of the contradictions in bourgeois society. Lukács felt that he could read Marxist lessons out of Mann's fiction—if Mann realistically represents the modern bourgeois world, then anything Marx says about that world should be equally true of Mann's fictional universe. Thus, despite Mann's bourgeois roots and sympathies, Lukács viewed him as more useful to the cause of socialism than many writers openly working on its behalf:

> Thomas Mann occupies a special position in the history of critical realism. While the great bourgeois realists, say from Fielding to Tolstoy, presented bourgeois life itself, Thomas Mann gives us a totality of the inner problems of contemporary bourgeois life. Obviously not in an abstract, conceptual form; Mann always presents living people in real situations. However, the particular position he takes vis-à-vis the present and

[5]Henry Hatfield, *Thomas Mann* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1951), p. 113.

> future of bourgeois society makes him choose his characters and plots from the standpoint of these inner problems rather than directly from everyday life. Thus the class struggle between proletariat and bourgeoisie is not reflected immediately in his work. But the ideological, emotional and moral problems, all the typical reflexes of bourgeois society upon which class struggle leaves its mark emerge as a result in a more complete, more comprehensive totality. . . . Posterity will be able to recapture from his work with equal freshness how the typical figures of present-day bourgeois society lived, with what issues they wrestled.[6]

In short, for Lukács Mann as a realist accurately represents economic phenomena in his fiction and hence one can use Marxist economic theories to analyze his works. The way Lukács reads Mann has served as a model for much Marxist literary criticism ever since. But Lukács's approach to Mann obviously rests on the premise of the truth of Marxist economics. If one challenges that premise, as we have been doing in this book, the case of Mann begins to look very different. Perhaps his fiction can be interpreted in light of Austrian economics, and the problems he portrays in bourgeois society may be traced to government intervention in the economy, rather than to the unfettered working of capitalism. To explore this possibility, I will discuss a short story Mann wrote in 1925, "Unordnung und frühes Leid," or, as it is known in English, "Disorder and Early Sorrow."[7] Set in Weimar Germany during the time of the hyperinflation, this story takes on new meaning once it is analyzed in terms of Austrian theories of money and banking. With Mann's uncanny ability to mirror economic and social reality in his fiction, he succeeds even without any knowledge of Austrian economics in bringing out the psychological ramifications of an inflationary environment with a subtlety of insight Mises and

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[6]Georg Lukács, *Essays on Thomas Mann*, Stanley Mitchell, trans. (London: Merlin, 1964), pp. 162–63. See also Lukács, *Realism in Our Time*, John and Necke Mander, trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), pp. 78–79.

[7]I quote "Disorder and Early Sorrow" in the translation of H.T. Lowe-Porter, from Thomas Mann, *Death in Venice and Seven Other Stories* (New York: Vintage, 1989). For the German original, see Thomas Mann, *Gesammelte Werke*, 13 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1974), vol. 7, pp. 618–57.

Hayek would have admired. Moreover, as we analyze "Disorder and Early Sorrow" in light of the Austrian theory of inflation, we will see that the story has larger implications for our understanding of twentieth-century cultural history.

II.

At first sight, "Disorder and Early Sorrow" may appear too insubstantial to bear up under the weight of any kind of sustained analysis.[8] Mann tells the tale of an apparently average day in the life of Dr. Abel Cornelius, a professor of history. His teenage children, Ingrid and Bert, are holding a party for their friends, a typical cross-section of youthful acquaintances, including students and entertainers. Everyone enjoys the party, especially the professor's younger children, Ellie and Snapper (Lorchen and Beißer in the original German), who relish the opportunity to spend time with the grown-ups. Finding his routine disturbed by the presence of all the young people, the professor is nevertheless attracted to them and their modern way of life. He wanders in and out of the party, tries to get some work done in his study, and eventually goes out for his daily walk. He returns to find his house in an uproar. His five-year old daughter is throwing a tantrum, as a result of feeling spurned by an engineering student named Max Hergesell, for whom she rather precociously developed a crush while he playfully danced with her. Upset that Hergesell cannot be her brother, little Ellie is not consoled until at the end of the story Max gallantly comes to her room to wish her good night.

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[8]Although "Disorder and Early Sorrow" has been popular with readers, and is frequently reprinted and anthologized, it has attracted little attention from critics. Few essays have been devoted to it specifically, and most general studies of Mann mention it only in passing. If they discuss it at all, critics usually choose to concentrate on the autobiographical aspects of the story. Evidently, Mann based the story largely on a party actually given in his own household in Munich. See the account of his son: Michael Mann, "Truth and Poetry in Thomas Mann's Work" in Harold Bloom, ed., *Thomas Mann* (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), pp. 292–93, as well as Ronald Hayman, *Thomas Mann: A Biography* (New York: Scribner, 1995), pp. 355–56 and Anthony Heilbut, *Thomas Mann: Eros and Literature* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), pp. 446–49.

Although seemingly slim in substance, "Disorder and Early Sorrow" presents the kind of world familiar to us from famous texts of literary modernism such as Eliot's *The Waste Land* or Mann's own "Death in Venice." The story charts the dissolution of authority, as we watch a social order breaking down and see the confusions that result. In particular, Mann portrays a world in which parents are losing their authority over their children. Viewing their parents as old fogies, the children think of their own generation as smarter than their predecessors. Mann portrays a world that has gone mad in the worship of youth. As a sign of the resulting confusion, we are introduced to the "big folk" ("die Grossen") in the first paragraph,[9] only to discover in the second that the term applies to the teenagers, not, as one would expect, to their parents. The little children already call their father by his first name. As a story of people growing up too fast, "Disorder and Early Sorrow" appropriately concludes with the incident of Ellie's infatuation with Max. The image of a five-year old girl having her first love affair becomes Mann's way of crystallizing our sense of the bewildering pace of development in this world.

In "Disorder and Early Sorrow" all categories are breaking down. While the children behave like adults, the adults start behaving like children. In order to play with Ellie and Snapper, Cornelius "will crook his knees until he is the same height with themselves and go walking with them, hand in hand."[10] This image of a "diminished Abel"[11] points to the broader collapse of hierarchy in Cornelius's world, especially any sense of social distinctions. He has a hard time telling his son and his servant apart; they dress alike and are prone to the same youthful fads and fashions.[12] The world of "Disorder and Early Sorrow" has become so confusing that it is difficult for the characters simply to tell what is real anymore, a development emphasized by the presence of actors throughout the story. Mann highlights elements of imitation and parody; Ingrid has "a marked and irresistible talent for

[9]"Disorder," p. 179.

[10]Ibid., p. 191.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Ibid., pp. 179–80, 203.

burlesque,"[13] which she and her brother love to put to use: "They adore impersonating fictitious characters; they love to sit in a bus and carry on long lifelike conversations in a dialect which they otherwise never speak."[14] When an actor named Ivan Herzl shows up at the party in heavy makeup, he provokes Cornelius into thinking about how people no longer are what they seem: "You would think a man would be one thing or the other – not melancholic and use face paint at the same time."[15] Mann creates a pervasive sense of inauthenticity in the story; the modern world is a counterfeit world.

With all stable points of reference gone, the only law of "Disorder and Early Sorrow" appears to be perpetual change. Against this instability, Mann sets his central character. As a professor of history, Cornelius is always searching for something solid to grab hold of in the midst of all this mutability, and he wistfully contrasts the fixity of the past with the ever-changing world of the present: "He knows that history professors do not love history because it is something that comes to pass, but only because it is something that has come to pass; that they hate a revolution like the present one because they feel it is lawless, incoherent, irrelevant – in a word, unhistoric; that their hearts belong to the coherent, disciplined, historic past. . . . [He seeks] the temper of eternity."[16] Thus, like *The Waste Land*, "Disorder and Early Sorrow" counterpoints the coherence of past eras with the incoherence of modern times.

III.

Thus far Mann's story sounds like many other modernist works, chronicling the breakdown of order in twentieth-century life. But when one looks in the story for Mann's sense of what is responsible for this breakdown, the distinctive character of "Disorder and Early Sorrow" begins to emerge. Modernists have put forward many explanations for the incoherence of twentieth-century life.

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[13]Ibid., p. 179.

[14]Ibid., p. 183.

[15]Ibid., p. 196.

[16]Ibid., p. 186.

In *The Waste Land*, for example, Eliot correlates the disorder of the modern city with a failure of religious faith and a loss of the traditional myths that used to give coherence to life. But in "Disorder and Early Sorrow," Mann explores another possibility, correlating his portrait of modern life with a specific historical event—the German inflation of the 1920s, an economic catastrophe of almost unimaginable proportions.[17] The German government had begun to inflate its currency during World War I in a desperate and deceptive attempt to meet its enormous financial obligations without raising taxes. The post-war government developed an even greater mania for deficit financing and printing money, given its new need to fund the reparations to the Allies and the social benefits promised by the democratic Weimar regime. As a result, the value of the German mark plummeted. As Mann points out in his 1942 memoir on the inflation, by 1923 the mark was reduced to less than one-trillionth of what it had been worth before the war.[18] With the German printing presses running at capacity and around the clock, by the end of 1923 there were approximately 500,000,000,000,000,000,000 marks in circulation.[19] The absurdity of printing paper currency in such quantities is crystallized in one anecdote: "A story is told of two women carrying to the bank a laundry basket filled to the brim with banknotes. Seeing a crowd standing round a shop window, they put down their basket for a moment to see if there was anything they could buy. When they turned round a few moments

[17]For an account of the German inflation, see William Guttmann and Patricia Meehan, *The Great Inflation: Germany 1919–1923* (Westmead, U.K.: Saxon House, 1975). For a useful casebook on the German inflation, including many primary documents in English translation, see Fritz R. Ringer, *The German Inflation of 1923* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969). For the most comprehensive treatment of the German inflation in English, see Gerald D. Feldman, *The Great Disorder: Politics, Economics, and Society in the German Inflation, 1914–1924* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993). Feldman mentions "Disorder and Early Sorrow" in passing; he calls it "certainly the most famous but also the most detached and even Olympian work of fiction dealing with the inflation" (p. 11).

[18]*Über mich selbst*, pp. 361–62.

[19]Guttman and Meehan, *Great Inflation*, p. x.

later, they found the money still there untouched. But the basket had gone."[20]

The disaster of the German inflation is a classic illustration of one of the fundamental principles of Austrian economics—the danger of a purely paper currency, severed from any link to a commodity like gold. Inflation has been blamed on many factors, but for the Austrians, as for several other economic schools, it is a product of money and credit expansion. Inflation is a giant illusion, often exploited by governments. What appears to be a general rise in prices is in fact simply a fall in the value of money, resulting from a sudden increase in its supply, usually engineered by government fiscal policies. To be sure, inflation can happen even with a commodity-based currency. A sudden and increased flow of gold into an economy, as happened for example in Spain as a result of its conquests in the New World in the sixteenth century, can have a pronounced inflationary effect. In the first half of the sixteenth century, prices in Spain roughly doubled as a result of what can be called gold inflation.[21] But obviously a currency losing half its value over a fifty-year period pales in comparison with what happened to the mark in Weimar Germany. With a commodity-based money, inflation will be comparatively gradual and moderate. Moreover, since gold is a commodity–and is therefore subject to fluctuations in demand for both its monetary and non-monetary uses—its value can go up as well as down, and thus its price will tend to average out over time.[22] Inconvertible

[20]Ibid.

[21]See Marjorie Grice-Hutchinson, *The School of Salamanca: Readings in Spanish Monetary Theory 1544–1605* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 1.

[22]For example, as incredible as it sounds to us today, during the "golden age" of the gold standard in Britain, the value of the British pound, as measured by its purchasing power, was actually greater in 1900 than it had been in 1800. See E.J. Hobsbawm, *Industry and Empire* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1969), p. 354 (diagram 37). David Hackett Fischer makes the point effectively in terms of the life of Queen Victoria: "The purchasing power of the pound sterling was actually greater on Diamond Jubilee Day [1897] than it had been in 1819 when the old Queen was born." See his *The Great Wave: Price Revolutions and the Rhythm of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 180. For the Austrian defense of the gold standard, see Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1949), pp. 468–73.

paper currencies, by contrast, have historically moved in only one direction—they inexorably go down in value over time.[23] All the examples of a currency being inflated so rapidly and so inordinately that it eventually became worthless have involved inconvertible paper money, for example the infamous continentals during the American revolution ("not worth a continental") and the equally infamous *assignats* of Revolutionary France.[24] Unlike a commodity-based money, a pure paper currency is *infinitely* inflatable. Hence only under a paper money regime can inflation turn into what has come to be known as *hyperinflation*.[25]

And that is the phenomenon Mann explores in "Disorder and Early Sorrow." He suggests that if we seek an explanation for the dissolution of authority in the world he is portraying, we should look to the monetary madness of the Weimar Republic.[26]

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[23]For example, in the course of the twentieth century, the US dollar lost roughly 95 percent of its value in terms of purchasing power, almost all of that after it was no longer convertible to gold. See the charts in Fischer, *Great Wave*, pp. 182–83.

[24]For a history of these episodes and other examples of paper currency mismanagement, see John F. Chown, *A History of Money: From AD 800* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 201–71.

[25]I realize that the fact that pure paper currencies are subject to hyperinflation is not a sufficient argument against them, since hyperinflation may be regarded as the exception rather than the rule in the history of paper money. But still, an episode like the German inflation illustrates the more fundamental argument of the Austrian School in favor of commodity-based currency—it is the only way to take control of the money supply out of the arbitrary hands of governments and subject it to market discipline. See Mises, *Human Action*, pp. 470–71.

[26]Although some have acknowledged in passing the fact that "Disorder and Early Sorrow" is set in the time of the German inflation, it is surprising how little critics make of the importance of economic factors in the story. Hans Eichner, *Thomas Mann: Eine Einführung in Sein Werk* (München: Lehnen, 1953), p. 64, relates Ellie's tantrum to "the general confusion of the inflation years," but says nothing further. The most substantial discussion in English of the story I have been able to locate mentions inflation just once, and then as only one of many examples of disorder in the story (Sidney Bolkovsky, "Thomas Mann's 'Disorder and Early Sorrow': The Writer as Social Critic," *Contemporary Literature* 22 [1981]: 221). One literary critic who does discuss the importance of the German inflation for the story at some

As he shows, inflation eats away at more than people's wealth; it fundamentally changes the way they view the world, ultimately weakening even their sense of reality. In short Mann suggests a connection between hyperinflation and what is often called hyperreality.[27] Everything threatens to become unreal once money loses its reality. I said that a strong sense of counterfeit reality prevails in "Disorder and Early Sorrow." That fact is ultimately to be traced to the biggest counterfeiter of them all—the government and its printing presses. Hyperinflation occurs when a government starts printing all the money it wants, that is to say, when the government becomes a counterfeiter. In a hyperinflation, the distinction between real money and fake money begins to dissolve.[28] That is why hyperinflation has such a corro-

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length is Alan Bance, "The political becomes personal: *Disorder and Early Sorrow* and *Mario and the Magician*" in Ritchie Robinson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Mann* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 107–10. The most thoroughgoing discussion I have found of "Disorder and Early Sorrow" in light of the German inflation is in a work of cultural history, Bernd Widdig, *Culture and Inflation in Weimar Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 169–78. In a brief essay on the story, Mann himself stressed its personal and psychological elements, but he also expressed his satisfaction that it had appeared in French translation under the title "Au temps de l'inflation," which he says is "in accord with the author's intention and meaning" ("Unordnung und frühes Leid," *Gesammelte Werke* 11, p. 621). When Mann described the story in a letter, he called it: "'Unordnung und frühes Leid,' eine Inflationsgeschichte"—"an inflation story" (Letter to Hans Heinrich Borcherdt, March 3, 1926, as quoted in Esther H. Lesér, *Thomas Mann's Short Fiction: An Intellectual Biography* [Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1989], p. 304, n. 50).

[27]The terms *hyperreality* and *hyperrealism* originated in art criticism. They refer to a style of painting so photographically realistic that it in fact makes the work look unreal. The terms have been given a broader meaning in contemporary discourse by such writers as Jean Baudrillard, who sees the whole world we live in as hyperrealistic in its pervasive artificiality: "The unreal is no longer that of dream or of fantasy, . . . it is that of a *hallucinatory resemblance of the real with itself*"; "*It is reality itself today that is hyperrealist*" (italics in the original; *Simulations*, Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman, trans. [New York: Semiotext(e), 1983], pp. 142, 147). For a more popular account of the contemporary idea of hyperrealism, see Umberto Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, William Weaver, trans. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1986), pp. 3–58.

[28]Mann said of the inflationary period: "The concept of counterfeiting necessarily went out of fashion." See *Über mich selbst*, p. 367; this is my

sive effect on society. Money is one of the primary measures of value in any society, perhaps the principal repository of value. As such, money is a central source of stability, continuity, and coherence in any community. Hence to tamper with the basic money supply is to tamper with a community's sense of value. By making money worthless, hyperinflation threatens to undermine and dissolve all sense of value in a society.

Thus Mann suggests a connection between hyperinflation and nihilism. Perhaps in no society has nihilism ever been as prevalent an attitude as it was in Weimar Germany; it was reflected in all the arts, and ultimately in politics. It would of course be wrong to view this nihilism as solely the product of an inflationary environment. Obviously Weimar Germany faced many other problems, particularly as a result of World War I and the Treaty of Versailles. And the nihilism of its culture grew out of the German intellectual tradition of the nineteenth century, particularly Nietzsche's corrosive critique of European civilization. But as Mann's story reminds us, we should not underestimate the role of inflation in creating the pervasive sense of nihilism in Weimar Germany. A glance at the back of an American dollar bill shows two phrases: "United States of America" and "In God We Trust." Somehow our money is closely bound up with our political and even our religious beliefs.[29] Shake a people's faith in their money, and you will shake their other faiths as well. This problem has become particularly acute in the modern world, because ours is the age of paper money, money that has to be taken on faith alone. That is why we have to put "In God We Trust" on the back of our dollars; nobody really trusts the Chairman of the Federal Reserve. In "Disorder and Early Sorrow," Mann invites us to consider what happens to our lives when we are forced to take our money purely on faith and that faith is betrayed by the government.

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translation of "Der Begriff des Geldfälschens kam damals notwending aus der Mode"; Manheim translates "Geldfälschens" as "forgery" ("Inflation," p. 62), but "counterfeiting" seems called for in the context.

[29]On this point, see Jean-Joseph Goux, *The Coiners of Language*, Jennifer Curtiss Gage, trans. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), pp. 133–34.

Some economists and historians have been confused about the cause of inflation,[30] but Mann seems to be aware that government fiscal policies are the source of the trouble. It cannot be an accident that the historical subject Cornelius is studying is precisely the beginning of modern central banking and deficit financing, and hence the origin of inflation as a tool of modern public policy: "First he reads Macaulay on the origin of the English public debt at the end of the seventeenth century; then an article in a French periodical on the rapid increase in the Spanish debt towards the end of the sixteenth."[31] Financial details chronicling the absurdity of hyperinflation are scattered throughout the story, indicating clearly that the Weimar government was flooding the German economy with paper money. For example, Cornelius

[30]For example, in his *Weimar Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), the historian Peter Gay typically mistakes the effects of inflation for the causes: in his view the Weimar inflation was "caused by a shortage of gold, adverse balance of payments, and the flight of capital" (p. 152); only later in his account does he even refer, and then merely in passing, to the government's "printing of money" (p. 154). For this widespread misconception, see Mises, *Human Action*, pp. 420–21. For a historical account of Weimar Germany that confirms the Austrian view of the inflation, see Stephen A. Schuker, *American "Reparations" to Germany, 1919–33: Implications for the Third-World Debt Crisis* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 20.

[31]"Disorder," p. 192. The relevant passage in Macaulay can be found in chapter 19 of his *History of England* (*The Works of Lord Macaulay* [rpt. AMS, 1980; London: Longmans Green, 1898], vol. 5, pp. 335–49). That Mann had recently been reading this section when he wrote "Disorder and Early Sorrow" is suggested by a verbal echo; at one point Macaulay speaks of "the lamp of Aladdin" (p. 346), while in the German Mann refers to "Aladin mit der Wunderlampe" (p. 646); the parallel seems weaker in the translation, where Lowe-Porter merely speaks of "Aladdin" (p. 204). In this section of his history, Macaulay discusses the moment when the British Parliament created the national debt to deal with the budget deficits it had incurred, chiefly in financing wars. Mann undoubtedly saw the parallels to the situation in Germany during World War I. Macaulay praises deficit financing as a wonderful contrivance for national prosperity; Mann had less cause to be this sanguine about its effects (we have already seen how Shelley criticized deficit financing in Britain). On Macaulay and the issue of national debt, see Patrick Brantlinger, *Fictions of State: Culture and Credit in Britain*, 1694–1994 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 133–34.

is making a million marks a month, but that is merely "more or less adequate to the chances and changes of post-war life."[32]

Under these insane conditions, people become obsessed with the economic facts of life and must devote all their energy just to trying to stay above water.[33] Frau Cornelius feels disoriented in the most basic tasks of daily life: "The floor is always swaying under her feet, and everything seems upside down. She speaks of what is uppermost in her mind: the eggs, they simply must be bought today. Six thousand marks a piece they are, and just so many are to be had on this one day of the week at one single shop fifteen minutes' journey away."[34] Here we see how one government intervention in the economy immediately leads to others. Having produced scarcities in the market with their inflationary policies, the authorities introduce new regulations to try to deal with the irrationality they themselves created. But faced with the rationing of goods, the people in Mann's story learn to get around the government's tampering with the market: "For no

[32]"Disorder," p. 182.

[33]As for the impact of the German inflation on Mann's own household, Hayman recounts several representative incidents: "Thomas's seventy-one-year old mother, who'd come to recuperate from an illness in his house, insisted on paying for her meals, without understanding that the banknotes she handed over had lost their value" (*Mann*, p. 338); "By mid-February [1923], when Thomas earned 50,000 marks for a reading in Dresden, prices had risen so steeply that he'd have made a loss if he hadn't been able to stay with friends" (p. 340). The precipitous decline in the value of the German mark led Mann to seek ways to earn hard currency from foreign countries (chiefly the United States). In September 1922, he wrote to his German publisher: "Without foreign money I should not be able to manage these days with a family like mine. Like everyone else, I am considering how to earn something extra" (Heilbut, *Mann*, p. 358). No wonder Mann greeted the return to monetary stability in Germany in 1924 and was happy to be paid once more in a currency linked to gold; in a February 13, 1924 letter to Carl Helbing, he announced: "Deutschland zahlt in Goldmark" ("Germany pays in gold marks")—quoted from Yvonne Schmidlin, Hans Bürgin, and Hans-Otto Meyer, eds., *Die Briefen Thomas Manns: Regesten und Register* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer, 1976), vol. 1, p. 368. For the complicated way in which the German mark was relinked to gold, see Guttman and Meehan, *Great Inflation*, pp. 203–23.

[34]"Disorder," p. 183.

single household is allowed more than five eggs a week; therefore the young people will enter the shop singly, one after another, under assumed names, and thus wring twenty eggs from the shopkeeper for the Cornelius family."[35] Mann presents the characteristic inauthenticity of the world he is portraying as a direct response to government intervention in the market, which forces people to assume false identities.

Mann portrays one of the moments during an inflation Mises highlighted, the flight into real goods:[36] "Before the young people arrive [Frau Cornelius] has to take her shopping-basket and dash into town on her bicycle, to turn into provisions a sum of money she has in hand, which she dares not keep lest it lose all value."[37] With the value of money diminishing virtually hour by hour, people desperately search for some way to hold on to value, and that means they rush to exchange their largely fictitious money for something real, a real commodity. As Mann later depicted the dilemma of the customer in an inflationary world: "you might drop in at the tobacconist's for a cigar. Alarmed at the price, you'd rush to a competitor, find that his price was still higher, and race back to the first shop, which may have doubled or tripled its price in the meantime."[38] Thus inflation serves to heighten the already frantic pace of modern life, further disorienting people and undermining whatever sense of stability they may still have.

Mann also shows how inflation disrupts the social order by producing a huge underground transfer of wealth. People who had worked hard and put their money in the bank saw their savings become worthless almost overnight.[39] Mann documents the

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[35]Ibid.

[36]In German, "die Flucht in die Sachwerte"; see Mises, *Human Action*, pp. 424–25. Mann himself uses the phrase in his account of the German inflation (*Über mich selbst*, pp. 365, 368).

[37]"Disorder," p. 192.

[38]"Inflation," pp. 61–62 (*Über mich selbst*, pp. 366–67).

[39]The same thing happened to Mann himself. In his memoir on the inflation, he says that it caused him to lose his "own modest fortune, the product of [his] work and that of [his] father, grandfather, and great-grandfather" (*Über mich selbst*, p. 362). On the social disruptions caused by inflation in "Disorder and Early Sorrow," see Widdig, *Culture and Inflation*, pp. 172–74.

fall of the middle class in the case of the Hinterhofers: "two sisters once of the lower middle class who, in these evil days, are reduced to living '*au pair*' as the phrase goes and officiating as cook and housemaid for their board and keep."[40] Mann shows how hard it is for these women to live with their sense of economic degradation; he portrays the shame and bitterness of Cecilia Hinterhofer:

> Her bearing is as self-assertive as usual, this being her way of sustaining her dignity as a former member of the middle class. For Fräulein Cecilia feels acutely her descent into the ranks of domestic service. . . . She hands the dishes with averted face and elevated nose —a fallen queen.[41]

A society composed of embittered people like the Hinterhofers is soon going to face major political problems, as the rise of fascism in Germany was to show.

While many people lost everything during the German inflation, some made their fortunes by taking advantage of the new economic conditions. Mann includes among the cast of characters the kind of speculators who profited from inflation:

> They lead . . . that precarious and scrambling existence which is purely the product of the time. There is a tall, pale, spindling youth, the son of a dentist, who lives by speculation. . . . He keeps a car, treats his friends to champagne suppers, and showers presents upon them on every occasion.[42]

Those who know how to exploit an inflationary situation can gain while others lose.[43] As a result, inflation creates a topsy-turvy world. The fact that people are losing and making fortunes overnight is responsible for all the social confusions in "Disorder and Early Sorrow," such as Cornelius's inability to tell his son

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[40]"Disorder," p. 191.

[41]Ibid., p. 202.

[42]Ibid., p. 204.

[43]Mann discusses this process in his inflation memoir (*Über mich selbst*, pp. 365–66). For Mises's account of how inflation benefits some at the expense of others, see *Human Action*, pp. 409–10.

from his servant. In a world in which all distinct categories begin to dissolve, a pervasive sense of relativism develops. Cornelius's convictions begin to weaken and he feels unable to take a stand against the opinions of the younger generation. When faced with the fanaticism of youth, the history professor retreats into academic skepticism, trying to make his lack of conviction masquerade as a form of broadmindedness:

> For in one's dealings with the young it behooves one to display the scientific spirit . . . in order not to wound them or indirectly offend their political sensibilities; particularly in these days, when there is so much tinder in the air, opinions are so frightfully split up and chaotic, and you may so easily incur attacks from one party or the other, or even give rise to scandal, by taking sides.[44]

Worried about taking any sort of stand, Cornelius begins to question his most fundamental certainties: "And is there then no such thing as justice?"[45] Mann thus shows how inflation ultimately has a political effect, eating away at the basic beliefs that ground a social order. By undermining all sense of stability and value in Weimar Germany, inflation ultimately led to the rise of Hitler and Nazism.[46] Mann himself later wrote: "A straight line runs from the madness of the German Inflation to the madness of the Third Reich."[47]

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[44]"Disorder," p. 207.

[45]Ibid.

[46]It may seem extreme to blame the rise of Hitler on the German inflation, but see Hayman, *Mann*, pp. 334–35, 343–44. For an insightful discussion of the connection between inflation and Nazism, see Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, Carol Stewart, trans. (New York: Seabury, 1978), especially pp. 187–88. Canetti even links the devaluation of human life represented by the Holocaust directly to the German inflation. For Mises's account of Weimar politics, and the role of inflation in the rise of Nazism, see his *Omnipotent Government: The Rise of the Total State and Total War* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1944), pp. 193–228. For specific connections between the German inflation and Hitler's attempted coup in Bavaria in 1923, see Ringer, *German Inflation*, pp. 163–218.

[47]"Inflation," p. 63 (*Über mich selbst*, p. 370). Mann goes on to explain his claim in a very interesting fashion:

IV.

Mann is as insightful in portraying the psychological effects of inflation as he is in portraying the economic, social, and political effects. Inflation fundamentally changes the way people think, forcing them to live for the moment. There is no use planning for the future, since inflation, especially hyperinflation, makes future conditions wildly uncertain and unpredictable.[48] As Mises demonstrated, one of the most insidious effects of inflation is that it makes economic calculation much more difficult, if not nearly impossible.[49] It thereby weakens the Protestant ethic, which ever since Max Weber has been viewed as linked to capitalism. What is the use of saving one's money if that money will soon become worthless as a result of inflation? As Mann shows, in a period of hyperinflation, the rational strategy is to spend your money as fast as you make it. Thus, inflation works to shorten everyone's time horizons, destroying precisely those attitudes and habits that normally make the middle class hard workers and prudent investors, that lead them to restrict their present consumption for the sake of increasing future production.

This effect of inflation explains why youth has come to dominate the world of "Disorder and Early Sorrow," and why the older generation has lost its authority. The young are more adaptable to changing conditions, while the old are set in their ways. Hence the young cope better with inflation:

> It was during the Inflation that the Germans forgot how to rely on themselves as individuals and learned to expect everything from "politics," from "the state," from "destiny." They learned to look on life as a wild adventure, the outcome of which depended not on their own effort, but on sinister, mysterious forces. The millions who were then robbed of their wages and savings became the "masses" with whom Dr. Goebbels was to operate. Inflation is a tragedy that makes a whole people cynical, hardhearted and indifferent. (p. 63)

[48]Hyperinflation obviously causes greater problems than ordinary inflation does. Nevertheless hyperinflation ultimately only reveals in extreme form the way any inflation undermines an economy and a people's way of life.

[49]See Mises, *Human Action*, pp. 421–22.

> the upper middle class . . . look odd enough . . . with their worn and turned clothing and altered way of life. The children, of course, know nothing else; to them it is normal and regular. . . . The problem of clothing troubles them not at all. They and their like have evolved a costume to fit the time, by poverty out of a taste for innovation: in summer it consists of scarcely more than a belted linen smock and sandals. The middle-class parents find things rather more difficult.[50]

Mann notes that inflation even changes the way people dress, but, more importantly, he sees that it alters the dynamic between the generations in society, giving the young a distinct advantage over the old. Having experienced only economic instability, the youth of Germany are more able to go with the inflationary flow.

In the person of Cornelius's servant, young Xaver, Mann portrays the perfect child of the inflationary era, the embodiment of its virtues and its vices:

> He is the child and product of the disrupted times, a perfect specimen of his generation. . . . The Professor's name for him is the "minute-man," because he is always to be counted on in any sudden crisis, . . . and will display therein amazing readiness and resource. But he utterly lacks a sense of duty and can as little be trained to the performance of the daily round and common task as some kinds of dog can be taught to jump over a stick.[51]

Xaver has the adaptability to changing conditions demanded by the era of inflation, but the price he pays for that is the total loss of the discipline once prized in German society. His lack of feeling for the past of course disturbs his master, the history professor; as a child of inflation Xaver is constantly plunging into the future: "Dr. Cornelius has often told him to leave the calendar alone, for he tends to tear off two leaves at a time and thus to add to the general confusion. But young Xaver appears to find joy in this activity."[52]

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[50]"Disorder," p. 102.

[51]Ibid., pp. 202–03.

[52]Ibid., p. 203. On the importance of this moment, see Widdig, *Culture and Inflation*, p. 176.

In a world in which the young are leaping into the future two days at a time, the old become increasingly irrelevant. Economists have long recognized that inflation is particularly cruel to the elderly in society, especially retired people who live on fixed incomes, which cannot keep pace with inflation. But Mann shows something psychologically more debilitating happening to the older generation. In an inflationary environment, all the normal virtues of the old suddenly start to work against them, while all the normal vices of the young suddenly seem to look like wisdom. Conservatism and a sense of tradition make it impossible to respond to rapidly changing economic conditions, while the profligacy of youth becomes paradoxically a kind of prudence in an inflationary environment. Mann shows the human reality of inflation, how it alters not just economic conditions but the very fabric of everyday life, right down to the psyches of young children.[53] Ellie's premature infatuation with Max is the emotional equivalent of inflation.[54]

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[53]Mann was of course not the only writer of his day who portrayed the effects of inflation, although it is surprising how little attention literary critics have paid to this phenomenon. One article that deals with the depiction of the 1920s inflation in literature is Friedrich Achberger, "Die Inflation und die zeitgenössiche Literatur," in Franz Kadrnoska, ed., *Aufbruch und Untergang: Österrichische Kultur zwischen 1918 und 1938* (Vienna: Europa, 1981), pp. 29–42. Achberger lists 33 Austrian literary works with the inflation as their theme, including works by such well-known authors as Heimito von Doderer, Robert Musil, and Stefan Zweig. From Achberger's descriptions, these works evidently have much in common with "Disorder and Early Sorrow." Achberger mentions that Mann's brother, Heinrich, also wrote a novella dealing with the inflation period, called *Kobes* (1925); Hugo Stinnes, the German industrialist who profited heavily from the inflation, provided the model for Kobes. Rolf Linn remarks: "This makes 'Kobes' unique, for the vast literature about the turbulent post-war years in Germany—all but forgotten with the exception of Thomas Mann's 'Disorder and Early Sorrow'—deals largely with the victims of the rapid devaluation of the mark" (*Heinrich Mann* [New York: Twayne, 1967], p. 83).

[54]For historical accounts of the psychological and cultural impact of the German inflation, which parallel many of the details of Mann's story, see Widdig, *Culture and Inflation* and Guttman and Meehan, *Great Inflation*, especially pp. 173–202. The fullest account I have found of the cultural impact of the German inflation is Martin H. Geyer, *Verkehrte Welt: Revolution, Inflation und Moderne: München 1914–1924* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck &

V.

In addition to all its economic, social, political, and even psychological consequences, inflation in Mann's view works to undermine the basic sense of reality.[55] In an inflationary world reality begins to attenuate. For a variety of reasons, prices cannot always be raised to keep pace with inflation; hence producers are forced

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Ruprecht, 1998), which does a thorough job of relating the inflationary environment of Weimar Germany to the development of modernism. For the complex relation of the devaluation of money to the revaluation of values—"(Geld-)Entwertung und Umwertung"—see especially pp. 382–88. As Geyer's subtitle indicates, he concentrates on Munich, which he regards as the focal point of the revolutionary transformation of traditional Germany. In view of the fact that Munich provides the setting for "Disorder and Early Sorrow," it is surprising that Geyer mentions Mann's story only in passing (pp. 269–70).

[55]An interesting literary parallel can be found in the third part of Hermann Broch's trilogy *The Sleepwalkers*, Willa and Edwin Muir, trans. (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964). His character Huguenau finds his world unhinged by the process of inflation:

> Currency hitherto accepted becomes incalculable, standards fluctuate, and, in spite of all the explanations that can be adduced to account for the irrational, what is finite fails to keep pace with the infinite and no reasonable means avail to reduce the irrational uncertainty of the infinite to sense and reason again. (p. 640)

Economics had represented the world of rationality to Huguenau, but inflation turns that rationality into irrationality:

> even that most characteristic mode of the bourgeois existence, that partial system which is hardier than all others because it promises an unshakable unity in the world, the unity that man needs to reassure his uncertainty—two marks are always more than one mark and a sum of eight thousand francs is made up of many francs and yet is a whole, a rational organon in terms of which the world can be reckoned up—even that hardy and enduring growth, in which the bourgeois desires so strongly to believe even while all currencies are tottering, is beginning to wither away; the irrational cannot be kept out at any point, and no vision of the world can any longer be reduced to a sum in rational addition. (p. 641)

to cheapen their products, to adulterate them. Mann portrays a pervasive cheapening of the world in "Disorder and Early Sorrow." Even an eight-thousand-mark beer is watered down.[56] Cornelius thinks of himself as a gentleman, but in his straitened circumstances, he cannot help cutting corners, even when offering cigarettes to his guests: "He . . . takes a box from his supply in the cupboard: not the best ones, nor yet the brand he himself prefers, but a certain long, thin kind he is not averse to getting rid of — after all, they are nothing but youngsters."[57] Typically in this inflationary environment, things end up in a state of disrepair, as normal economic channels become disrupted: "The basin has been out of repair for two years. It is supposed to tip, but has broken away from its socket on one side and cannot be mended because there is nobody to mend it; neither replaced because no shop can supply another."[58]

The opening of the story is emblematic of the world Mann is portraying: "The principal dish at dinner had been croquettes made of turnip greens. So there follows a trifle, concocted out of those dessert powders we use nowadays, that taste like almond soap."[59] Cornelius and his family live in a world in which they do not have desserts anymore; they have dessert substitutes. Forced to economize by inflation, these people can no longer afford the real thing: "These consult together meantime about the hospitality to be offered to the impending guests. The Professor displays a middle-class ambitiousness: he wants to serve a sweet —or something that looks like a sweet."[60] We are all familiar with this kind of food substitute, an artificial product that is often presented as superior to the real thing, but that is in fact merely cheaper (and perhaps less fattening). Such substitutes are characteristic of life in the twentieth century, and Germany, with its advanced chemical industry, led the way in developing them, so

[56]"Disorder," p. 184.

[57]Ibid., p. 198.

[58]Ibid., p. 193.

[59]Ibid., p. 179.

[60]Ibid., p. 182.

much so that we have taken the German word for substitute, *Ersatz*, into our language.[61]

Thus, in his ultimate indictment of the monetary policies of the Weimar Republic, Mann shows how inflation contributes to the ersatz reality of the twentieth century. We have come to live in a world of plywood rather than mahogany. Things are not real anymore; we are surrounded by clever (and cheap) substitutes, mere simulacra of the real things. Mann fills up the story with artificial substitutes, from the false teeth of the children's nurse[62] to the fake leather in Hergesell's shoes: "They are the tightest I've ever had, the numbers don't tell you a thing, and all the leather today is just cast iron. It's not leather at all."[63] The artificially heightened pace of the inflationary economy produces more and more irrationalities, including increasing deception in the marketing of commodities. Much of what is traditionally and mistakenly regarded as the duplicity of capitalism is in fact the result of government intervention in the market in the form of tampering with the money supply.[64]

To be sure, one cannot blame everything on inflation. Already in the nineteenth century, Alexis de Tocqueville had noted the tendency of democracies to produce a cheapening of products:

> The handscraftsmen of democratic ages not only endeavor to bring their useful productions within the reach of the whole community, but strive to give to all their commodities attractive qualities that they do not in reality possess. In the confusion of all ranks everyone hopes to appear what he is not. . . . To satisfy these

[61]As with inflation itself, the development of ersatz products in Germany was spurred by the economic exigencies of World War I. See Bance, "*Disorder*," p. 107. On the substitute reality in Mann's story, see Widdig, *Culture and Inflation*, p. 171.

[62]"Disorder," p. 189.

[63]Ibid., p. 195.

[64]For this "inflation effect" leading to "the decay of business morals" and the impulse to "defraud," see Ludwig von Mises, *A Critique of Interventionism*, Hans F. Sennholz, trans. (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1977), p. 32. I owe this reference to Robert Higgs.

> new cravings of human vanity the arts have recourse to every species of imposture.[65]

Thus, even before the paper money inflations of the twentieth century, one could detect a movement of the modern economy toward the simulacrum in place of the real thing. Tocqueville reminds us that economic developments often have political causes, and many of the tendencies Mann portrays in "Disorder and Early Sorrow" can be attributed to the abrupt democratization of Germany after World War I. But Mann shows how inflation works to hasten and heighten these tendencies, forcing people to economize by accepting substitutes in a desperate attempt to maintain the shadow of their former standard of living.

With his novelist's feel for the texture of everyday life, Mann senses the connection between the world of inflation and the world of the modern media.[66] The government creates an illusion of wealth by tampering with the fiduciary media; the communication media similarly contribute to the creation of an all-pervasive world of illusion. Writing in the 1920s, Mann is already aware of how modern technology and the increasingly mediated character of modern life create new possibilities of deception. Every medium of communication is potentially a medium of miscommunication. In the masquerades of Bert and Ingrid, the telephone has become an important medium:

> The telephone plays a prominent part: . . . they ring up any and everybody – members of government, opera singers, dignitaries of the Church – in the character of shop assistants, or perhaps as Lord or Lady Doolittle. They are only with difficulty persuaded that they have the wrong number.[67]

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[65]Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Henry Reeve, Francis Bowen, and Phillips Bradley, trans. (New York: Vintage, 1959), vol. 2, p. 53. For further thoughts on the connection between democracy and the simulacrum, see Baudrillard, *Simulations*, pp. 78–79. On Tocqueville's view of democratic culture, see my essay "Postmodern Prophet: Tocqueville Visits Vegas," *Journal of Democracy* 11 (2000): 111–18.

[66]On this point, see Widdig, *Culture and Inflation*, p. 174.

[67]"Disorder," p. 184.

The telephone is an example of how the modern communication media create an illusion, the illusion of immediacy. Bert and Ingrid enjoy the sensation of seeming to be in touch with the great public figures of their day, but in a sense, they are as much deceived as the people they try to fool. They think that they are dealing directly with these famous people, but in fact the telephone stands in between them; otherwise their deception would not work. Thus any relationship they establish over the phone is inevitably phony; as the German idiom for "wrong number" more forcefully suggests, they are "falsch verbunden,"[68] falsely connected.

In a telephone conversation, one does not see the person one is talking to, but one has the illusion of being in his presence. Similarly, in a paper money economy, one does not see gold anymore, but the currency gives the illusion of the presence of wealth. The increasingly mediated character of the modern economy, especially the development of sophisticated financial instruments, allows the government to deceive its people about the nature of its monetary policy. As we saw in discussing Percy Shelley, when a government tries to clip coins or debase a metal currency, the results are readily apparent to most people. By contrast, the financial intermediation involved in modern central banking systems helps to shroud monetary conditions in mystery. Initially the techniques of deficit financing and monetization of debt conceal from the public what is happening to the money supply. Just as the jokes of Bert and Ingrid work only because the people they call cannot see them, the Weimar government's inflation worked only because it was hidden behind the smokescreen of modern central banking; with paper money one cannot at first see how the currency is being debased.

Mann sees the pervasive inauthenticity of the modern world even in the music of the young people, who listen not to real live performances, but to mechanical reproductions on the gramophone. In the "new world" created by the gramophone,[69] music from all over the globe begins to blend together, and one loses

[68]Mann, "Unordnung," *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 7, p. 624.

[69]"Disorder," p. 198.

sight of national origins,[70] or the distinction between authentic folk songs and popular hits.[71] Seeming to make music from the whole world simultaneously available, the gramophone creates a false aura of cosmopolitan sophistication and thus adds to the sense of cultural relativism: "They move to the exotic strains of the gramophone . . . : shimmies, foxtrots, one-steps, double foxes, African shimmies, Java dances, and Creole polkas."[72] Everywhere one looks in "Disorder and Early Sorrow," one sees illusions substituting for reality. The flight from the world of reality is evident in Xaver's fanciful escape into the world of the cinema:

> With his whole soul he loves the cinema. . . . Vague hopes stir in him that some day he may make his fortune in that world . . . — hopes based on his shock of hair and his physical agility and daring. He likes to climb the ash tree in the front garden. . . . Once there he lights a cigarette and smokes it as he sways to and fro, keeping a lookout for a cinema director who might chance to come along and engage him.[73]

Here Mann anticipates what was to become the Hollywood myth of being discovered in Schwab's drugstore. Such dreams are bred by an inflationary economy, which corrupts the ambitions of youth. The young man fantasizes about making his fortune in the movies because he can imagine becoming wealthy only by making one big killing. In an inflationary environment, one must dream of becoming an overnight success because the slow steady way of amassing a fortune by working hard and saving simply will not work. As Mann senses, the moving picture is the perfect art form for the age of inflation: a kinetic art for a kinetic era. He shows how the movies are already saturating everyday life; in his choice of cigarettes, Xaver smokes "a brand named after a popular cinema star."[74] In the illusory world fostered by inflation, an image on a screen now works to shape a man's desires.

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[70]Ibid., pp. 198, 199.

[71]Ibid., pp. 200, 201.

[72]Ibid., p. 204.

[73]Ibid., p. 203.

[74]Ibid., p. 180.

VI.

The references to telephones, gramophones, and motion pictures in "Disorder and Early Sorrow" build up a sense of how mediated modern life has become, how much we are surrounded by artificial reproductions and representations of life. Ultimately the issue of representation becomes central in Mann's story. He is portraying the reconception of representation that occurred in the twentieth century, a major shift in ways of thinking that can be correlated with the shift to paper money and inflationary policies. In the older sense of money, a banknote referred to something outside itself. Under the gold standard, a dollar bill represented a fixed amount of gold, on deposit somewhere and obtainable on demand. That is what it meant to have a currency backed by gold—a paper banknote was redeemable in terms of a real commodity, namely gold, something that had independent value. But in the modern era of paper money, a banknote just represents another banknote. One dollar bill can merely be exchanged for another dollar bill, but such a transaction has no point anymore, once no real commodity backs the currency. In the modern paper money system, money does not represent anything outside itself; money only represents itself.[75]

This change in the concept of representation in paper money sounds like the prototype for the new concept of representation in modern art. Modern artists pride themselves on their discovery of the principle of non-representational art. Ask a modern painter what his scrawls on the canvas represent and he will likely reply: "My painting doesn't represent anything external to it; it represents itself." Growing out of the nineteenth-century idea of art for art's sake, this attitude in modern art denies that the artist need refer to the external world; his works can exist within the self-contained world of art itself. The world of modern paper money is a similarly closed system. A currency with no commodity like gold

[75]To be sure, as long as people have faith in a given paper currency, it can be exchanged for real commodities, and in that sense can still be said to represent value. But as the quick collapse of paper currencies like that of Weimar Germany shows, their "reality" is highly attenuated compared to that of gold-backed currencies.

backing it thus provides the model for the self-referentiality on which modern art prides itself.

In a case like this it is difficult to determine cause and effect. It would be simplistic to claim that once the world went off the gold standard, modern art became non-representational.[76] One

[76]As far-fetched as this claim may sound at first, it has been taken seriously by an increasing number of critics. I do not have the space to deal in detail with the significant body of commentary that attempts to link the gold standard to representational art; I can mention only some of the highlights. Probably the most important book in this area is Goux, *Coiners of Language*, which centers on André Gide's modernist novel *The Counterfeiters*. Goux offers this challenge at the beginning of his book:

> Was it purely by chance that the crisis of realism in the novel and in painting coincided with the end of gold money? Or that the birth of "abstract" art coincided with the shocking invention of inconvertible monetary signs, now in general use? Can we not see in this double crisis of money and language the collapse of guarantees and frames of reference, a rupture between sign and thing, undermining representation and ushering in the age of the floating signifier? (p. 3)

For a compressed statement of Goux's thesis, see his essay "Cash, Check, or Charge?" in Mark Osteen and Martha Woodmansee, eds., *The New Economic Criticism: Studies at the intersection of literature and economics* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 114–27 and especially p. 115:

> The fact that our century has experienced what has come to be called the dematerialization of money, leading to a radically nominalist conception of the monetary instrument and culminating in inconvertibility and floating exchange rates, and that this same century is also marked by an unprecedented rupture in the mode of representation as well as by a deepening concern with the nature of the sign and the philosophical status of language, is certainly not a simple coincidence.

Along similar lines, John Vernon, in his *Money and Fiction: Literary Realism in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), states his thesis this way: "my most persistent analogy is the comparison between the novel's claim to represent reality and paper money's claim to represent things of (presumably) enduring value: gold and silver" (p. 7). Jochen Hörisch, in his *Heads or Tails: The Poetics of Money*, Amy Horning Marschall, trans. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000), evaluates the theories of Goux and Vernon (p. 71) and also discusses

suspects that both developments have their roots in something deeper in modern life, perhaps the democratization Tocqueville traces. Still, it is worth considering that a change as fundamental as the switch from a commodity-based currency to inconvertible paper money might have widespread implications for a society, and might even affect basic cultural attitudes. As money ceases to refer to anything real anymore, the traditional idea of referentiality is undermined. And once art becomes severed from reality, artists turn to such notions as the surreal and the hyperreal. The movement known as postmodernism grew out of the non-representational turn in modern art.[77] We would have to go well beyond the boundaries of Mann's story to explore fully the relation between inflation and postmodernism.[78] One of

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an article by Ralf Schiebler on "modern art and the gold standard" that appeared in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, April 29, 1995; Schiebler argues "that those times in which the currency has a high percentage of gold are times of pronounced realism in art" (quoted by Hörisch, p. 178). Brantlinger, *Fictions of State*, pp. 205–06, critically evaluates Goux's thesis and offers this important caution:

> Goux's insistence on the importance of the shift from the gold standard to inconvertible "token money" is perhaps simplistic, in part because it suggests a monocausal explanation of cultural change not much different from the old Marxist base/superstructure paradigm (money changes, so culture changes). As Britain's early paper money era (1797–1821) suggests, the movement away from the gold standard for most modern nation-states has been gradual and uneven, rather than a sudden, turn-of-the-century affair. (p. 206)

Brantlinger's objections to Goux's thesis are well-taken and equally qualify my claims about the cultural importance of the German inflation. Finally, on the subject of relating the gold standard to literary realism, see my discussion of Walter Benn Michaels in note 84.

[77]For a discussion of postmodernism, particularly its connection to democracy, see my essay "*Waiting for Godot* and the End of History: Postmodernism as a Democratic Aesthetic," in Arthur M. Melzer, Jerry Weinberger, and M. Richard Zinman, eds., *Democracy & the Arts* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 172–92, 201–06.

[78]In *The Post-Modern Aura: The Act of Fiction in an Age of Inflation* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1985), Charles Newman attempts to relate postmodernism to the prevalence of inflation in the twentieth century. This book is the most serious attempt I know of to discuss the

the central notions of postmodernist theory is the idea of the simulacrum, which we have already seen developed in "Disorder and Early Sorrow." According to one definition, a simulacrum is a copy for which there is paradoxically no original.[79] But that is exactly the concept of paper money. Under the gold standard, the dollar bill used to be the representation, for which a fixed amount of gold provided the original. In this situation, one could easily distinguish the representation from the original—the original was bright and shiny, while the representation was green and crumpled. But that kind of distinction is no longer possible in the world of pure paper money. One dollar bill merely represents another dollar bill—we are in a world of all copies and no originals.[80]

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cultural implications of inflation; see especially pp. 6–7, 187–90, and his summary statement (p. 184):

> In cultural matters, inflation abstracts anxiety, suspends judgment, multiplies interpretation, diffuses rebellion, debases standards, dissipates energy, mutes confrontation, undermines institutions, subordinates techniques, polarizes theory, dilates style, dilutes content, hyperpluralizes the political and social order while homogenizing culture. Above all, inflation masks stasis.

Unfortunately the book is weakened by Newman's failure to understand the economics of inflation, which he claims "is primarily caused not by . . . monetary policy or government spending . . . but by inflationary assumptions anticipated by the entire culture" (p. 167). This is another case of mistaking the effects of inflation for the cause.

[79]In *Simulations*, Baudrillard defines the simulacrum as "the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (p. 2), "a liquidation of all referentials . . . substituting signs of the real for the real itself" (p. 4).

[80]That is of course why a pure paper currency is easier to inflate than a gold-backed currency. To see how close this situation is to the world of simulacra conceived by Baudrillard, consider his characterization: "The relation between them is no longer that of an original to its counterfeit . . . objects become undefined simulacra one of the other" (*Simulations*, p. 97). That Baudrillard himself senses a connection between his notion of the simulacrum and paper money is shown by the fact that he often speaks of the *circulation* of simulacra; his description of Los Angeles, for example, is an apt characterization of the modern money supply: "a network of endless, unreal circulation" (p. 26; see also pp. 11, 32). Baudrillard makes the connection explicit when he compares the process of simulation to "the floating of currency" (p. 133). It is a curious historical coincidence that the poststructuralists' obsession in the 1970s with what they called "free-floating signifiers"

This is exactly the kind of world Mann portrays in "Disorder and Early Sorrow," a world in which reality is constantly threatening to dissolve into mere representations of reality. Cornelius is distressed by his son's admiration for and imitation of the actor, Ivan Herzl:

> Bert has entirely succumbed to Herzl's influence, blackens the lower rim of his eyelids . . . and with youthful carelessness of the ancestral anguish relates that not only will he take Herzl for his model if he becomes a dancer, but in case he turns out to be a waiter at the Cairo he means to walk precisely thus.[81]

In choosing an actor as his model, Bert ends up imitating an imitator, and thus threatens to become a mere simulacrum of a human being. What strikes Cornelius about Herzl is his total lack of authenticity; as an actor, he always seems to be putting on a show, and hence not to have any reality of his own: "It all, no doubt, comes from his heart, but he is so addicted to theatrical methods of making an impression and getting an effect that both words and behavior ring frightfully false."[82] Already in the 1920s, Mann prophetically saw the inauthenticity coming to pervade modern society and modern culture. He linked this development to the modern communication media, but understood its link to fiduciary media as well. Indeed, his model for the loss of authenticity in the modern world is the loss of the reality of money that hyperinflation causes.

I can offer one particularly apt example to try to corroborate the connection I have been drawing between the epistemology of twentieth-century art and debates over paper money. At the core of postmodernism is the tendency to make the act of representation problematic. Postmodern images call attention to themselves, to the fact that they are merely images. In traditional art, the medium is as it were transparent; the artist wants us to look

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roughly coincided with the end of the gold-exchange standard, which resulted in the free floating of national currencies, wholly uncoupled from any tie to gold.

[81]"Disorder," p. 180.

[82]Ibid., p. 197.

Figure 1
"This Is Not A Pipe"

Source: Original title *La Trahison des Images* (*Ceci n'est pas une Pipe*). René Magritte. Oil on canvas 60 x 81.3 cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

through his act of representation to the thing being represented, and hence does everything possible not to call our attention to his medium. But the postmodern artist throws a wrench into the process of representation, foregrounding his medium and thus making us concentrate on the act of representation itself, on the fact that we are watching something being represented. A famous example of this technique among the Surrealists, forerunners of postmodernism, is René Magritte's *This Is Not a Pipe* (figure 1). One of the many ways of reading the inscription on this clever painting is: "This is not a pipe; this is merely a representation of a pipe." Magritte short-circuits any tendency we might have to confuse the representation of a thing with the thing itself by explicitly calling attention to his act of representing the thing.[83]

[83]For a discussion of this painting, and others like it by Magritte, see Suzi Gablik, *Magritte* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1985), pp. 124–31. The importance of this painting to postmodernism and poststructuralism is shown by the fact that Michel Foucault wrote a long essay about it, published in English as *This Is Not a Pipe*, James Harkness, trans. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983). Foucault connects Magritte's painting to the idea of the simulacrum: "Resemblance predicates itself upon a model it must

Figure 2
Milk-Tickets for Babies, in Place of Milk

Source: David Wells, *Robinson Crusoe's Money; or, the Remarkable Financial Fortunes and Misfortunes of a Remote Island Community* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1876), p. 57.

The painting leaves us with a lingering sense of the inadequacy and even the duplicity of all acts of representation.

Magritte's painting, done in 1928–29, seems a perfect example of avant-garde art, the kind of work that one would think could only be produced in the twentieth century. And yet it bears a striking resemblance to a famous cartoon by Thomas Nast, drawn as an illustration to David Wells's book, *Robinson Crusoe's Money*, first published in 1876 (figure 2). Wells's book attacks the paper money inflation brought about by the American Civil War. He uses a Crusoe fable to expose the folly of the common people's belief in the reality of paper money:

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return to and reveal; similitude circulates the simulacrum as an indefinite and reversible relation of the similar to the similar" (p. 44). Once again, this is a peculiarly apt characterization of the illusory world of paper money.

> But the latter term was conceded to be but a mere fiction of speech and a bad use of language, for every intelligent person at once saw that a promise to deliver a commodity . . . could not possibly be the commodity or the thing itself, any more than . . . the picture of a horse [is] a horse.[84]

Nast's illustration brilliantly captures the heart of this argument by surrealistically confusing things with representations of things. Like Magritte, Nast reminds us that a picture of a cow is not actually a cow, but he is not making a merely aesthetic statement. He is drawing a more serious analogy between the duplicity involved in artistic representation and the duplicity involved in the way governments print money and forcibly establish it as legal tender, an analogy embodied in the parallel: "This is a Cow By the Act of the Artist" and "This is Money by the Act of Congress."[85] Experiencing the Union Greenback inflation, Nast was led to question the reality of representation

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[84]David A. Wells, *Robinson Crusoe's Money; or, the Remarkable Financial Fortunes and Misfortunes of a Remote Island Community* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1876), p. 57. This book presents a view of the evolution of money very similar to that developed by Austrian economics, and offers a cogent defense of the gold standard, comparable to what we saw in Percy Shelley and William Cobbett (unfortunately Wells's argument is weakened by his clinging to the labor theory of value and his ignorance of the law of marginal utility). I learned of this book from reading Walter Benn Michaels, *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 145–47. Michaels develops an intriguing argument about the relation between the gold standard and the concept of representation in nineteenth-century America, in some ways similar to the line I am pursuing, but without accepting any of the traditional arguments in favor of a commodity-based money.

[85]Thinking along the same lines, and trying to find an image for the misrepresentation involved in an inflated currency, Wells is led to imagine the twentieth-century world of the simulacrum, foreseeing the creation of ersatz products: "the painted cotton, silk, wool, and leather could be made to look so exactly like the real articles, that it was only when the attempt was made to exchange the representation for the real that the difference was clearly discernible" (*Crusoe's Money*, p. 94). For another critic who discusses Wells and Nast in conjunction with Magritte, see Marc Shell, *Art & Money* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 75–84.

without benefit of having read Nietzsche or any of the other theorists who led to postmodernism. As in "Disorder and Early Sorrow," an inflationary environment raises the issue of the authenticity of representation in a way that provokes an artist to think about the illusions involved in his own craft.

VII.

It turns out, then, that Georg Lukács was right about Thomas Mann. His ability to portray bourgeois life in his fiction extends to an ability to portray its economic foundations and preconditions.[86] And thus Mann's work can be analyzed in terms of sophisticated economic theory. But in the case of "Disorder and Early Sorrow," we have seen that the problems in bourgeois society Mann portrays are not the ones typically analyzed by Marxist economists, but rather those the Austrians highlight. With his attention to the consequences of inflation for daily life, Mann provides a useful supplement to the Austrian economic analysis of the phenomenon. Mises and Hayek help us understand the economics of what happened in Weimar Germany; Mann gives a sense of how it felt to ordinary people, and in that way may serve to convince readers of the full horror of inflation.[87] The story portrays the same world that modernist texts usually do, but offers a different explanation of the characteristics of that world. Mann traces the feeling of modern man that the ground has been pulled out from beneath his feet, not to some metaphysical principle of human life itself, but to the effects of a specific government policy, namely inflation. Moreover, he suggests that the inauthenticity of

[86]Lukács is thus correct to associate Mann with the great nineteenth-century tradition of realism. As we have seen, Mann is very modern and perhaps even postmodern in the way he explores the problematics of representation in the twentieth century. And yet Mann's own art remains fundamentally representational. In his fiction, he paradoxically gives a representation of the movement toward non-representation in modern art and life.

[87]As Mann says in his memoir on the German inflation: "I am perhaps in a position to give a somewhat more personal commentary on the statistics of the German inflation. For, believe me, to experience a situation oneself is something completely different from reading the most basic statistics about it" (*Über mich selbst*, p. 362).

modern life, which has often been blamed on capitalist practices such as advertising, is more properly viewed as the result of the inflationary environment created by government. An analysis of "Disorder and Early Sorrow" in light of Austrian economics shows that many of the problems characteristic of modern life are not, as literary critics tend to claim, the product of free enterprise, but rather of that very government intervention in the economy opponents of capitalism are always demanding.

The twentieth century could be called the Age of Inflation,[88] and "Disorder and Early Sorrow" suggests how this fact is related to the prevailing sense of inauthenticity in the modern world, the sense of a lack of reality and a loss of value. It would of course be wrong to attribute this development purely to the effects of inflation. After all, we can find a sense of unreality in the literature of countries which never went through anything like the German hyperinflation. But it would be impossible to find any modern country unaffected by inflation, not even Switzerland; in the modern world, we are always talking only about *relative* rates of inflation; inflation is the most pervasive economic fact of our time. "Disorder and Early Sorrow" thus leads us to ask how much of an impact this all-pervasive economic phenomenon has had on modern literature and ways of thinking. Taking our cue from Mann, we begin to question whether inflation may in fact be an even more insidious phenomenon than we have realized, fundamentally altering our world and the way we view it. Thus, in a way very different from Marxist approaches,[89] Mann suggests a connection between the spiritual history of the twentieth century and the economic, making us wonder whether the world began to seem unreal when, in the inflation generated by governments, money began to lose its reality.

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[88]This name has been given to the twentieth century by Jacques Rueff, *The Age of Inflation*, A.H. Meeus and F.G. Clarke, trans. (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1964); see especially p. 1.

[89]Mann himself drew this distinction in a public address: "one does not have to be a materialistic Marxist in order to grasp that the political feeling and thinking of the masses is largely determined by their economic condition" ("Deutsche Ansprache: Ein Appell an die Vernunft," *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 11, p. 871).

10

The Capitalist Road: The Riddle of the Market from Karl Marx to Ben Okri

Chandran Kukathas

It is capitalism which pitches every value into question, dissolves familiar life-forms, melts all that is solid into air or soap opera; but it cannot easily withstand the human anxiety, nostalgia and deracination which such perpetual revolution brings in its wake, and has need of something called culture, which it has just been busy undermining, to take care of it. It is in the logic of late capitalism to breed a more fragmentary, eclectic, demotic, cosmopolitan culture than anything dreamt of by Matthew Arnold—a culture which is then a living scandal to its own firmly Arnoldian premises. Postmodernism then simply inverts this contradiction, seeking to undo the metaphysical, monological aspects of the system with something of its own heterogeneity. At its most callow, such theories complacently underwrite the commodity form, and do so in the name of an opposition to elitism. Nothing could in fact be more offensively elitist, more aloofly academicist, than this cynical celebration of the market-place, which for ordinary men and women has meant homelessness and unemployment rather than random libidinal intensities, and which globally speaking means war as well as cosmopolitan cuisine.

—Terry Eagleton[1]

[1]"The Crisis of Contemporary Culture," An Inaugural Lecture delivered before the University of Oxford on November 27th 1992 (Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 9–10.

> *Then, suddenly, with the sun burning itself into evening, with so many people around, everyone active, everything moving, I was overcome with a strange panic. I couldn't see a single familiar face in that jostling universe. And then just as suddenly, in flashes of lightness and dark, I began to see Mum everywhere. I saw her writhing in the basin of eels. I saw her amongst the turtles in the plastic buckets. I saw her among the amulets of the sellers of charms. I saw her all over the market, under strange eaves, in the wind that spread the woodsmoke and the rice-chaffs; I felt her everywhere, but I couldn't break the riddle of the market's labyrinths where one path opened into a thousand faces, all of them different, most of them hungry in different ways.*
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> —Ben Okri[2]

To many it would appear to be in bad taste to rehearse the arguments against Marxist economics. Outside of American Departments of English, and a few of History, Politics, and Sociology, it is hard to find anyone who takes such ideas seriously—even in the academy. For the analytical Marxists, Marxist *economics* is simply an embarrassment: something best left unmentioned out of regard for the great man. For most economists, Marx is no better than a minor Ricardian socialist, who left little of more than curiosity value. For the modern intellectual—or the general reader—Marxist economics is simply an irrelevance. The disintegration of socialist economic systems over the decades preceding their political demise is no longer a contested issue. The poverty of Marxist economics has been laid bare by the demonstration that it is an economics of poverty.

But in spite of the refutation of Marxism in practice (and Marxism, remember, claimed to be above all a practical philosophy), and its repudiation by all who had any experience of the consequences of its grip on material life, it continues to exercise a significant influence among the denizens of one corner of the academy: in literary criticism. To be sure, not all are unreconstructed Marxists (indeed, some have been deconstructed and then constructed anew); and not all are Marxists of the same stripe. Yet they remain Marxists nonetheless, committed to the

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[2]*The Famished Road* (London: Vintage, 1991), p. 162. *Songs of Enchantment*, a sequel to *The Famished Road*, appeared in 1994.

use of the tools of Marxist analysis to interpret and illuminate texts and the processes of their production; convinced that capitalism is an epoch through which humankind cannot pass quickly enough to leave the realm of exploitation and oppression; and as insistent as ever that their inquiries are not merely efforts of understanding but contributions to the process of social transformation.

The purpose of this essay is to suggest that it is high time these commitments and convictions were reconsidered. The reason, ultimately, is that Marxism has never been able to solve "the riddle of the market's labyrinths." Its approach in all forms of social inquiry has thus been bedeviled by basic misunderstandings, as have been its readings of literature. It is simply untrue that

> the fundamental strength of Marxist thinking is its ability—indeed its determination—to make all the connections and to put back together all those separate fields—economics, say, and literature—that middle class thought had been so intent on keeping apart.[3]

To say this is not only to claim more for Marxism than it has ever been able to deliver but also to reveal a profound ignorance of other, more powerful, systems and traditions of thought. Worse than this, it is to embrace a form of thought which is more hostile to, and contemptuous of, human diversity than any other in the modern world. Less tolerant than any religion, it is a form of thought whose commitment to Lukács's category of "Totality"

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[3]Fredric Jameson, "Beyond the Cave: Demystifying the Ideology of Marxism," in Francis Mulhern, ed., *Contemporary Marxist Literary Criticism* (London: Longman, 1992), p. 172. Jameson here is alluding to Georg Lukács's suggestion that the fundamental category of Marxist thinking is Totality. For Jameson,

> bourgeois ideology, or, in our present terms, the middle-class method of repressing reality, is not so much an affair of distortion and of false consciousness in the sense of outright cynicism or lies . . . but rather, primarily and constitutively, of leaving out, of strategic omissions, lapses, a kind of careful preliminary preparation of raw material such that certain questions will never arise in the first place. (p. 172)

bespeaks not a desire (let alone a capacity) to embrace the diversity of human life, but a conviction that that diversity is a manifestation of human unfreedom—and indeed, all that is wrong in the human condition.

The object of Marxism's scorn is, quite simply, civil society. But it is civil society, more than anything else, which it has never been able to understand. And for this reason it is incredible that literary critics have thought Marxism could provide any guidance in our efforts better to understand either those works of literature (canonical or otherwise) which offer us some insight into human society and the human condition, or those less ambitious works which are nonetheless products, and reflections, of civil society. Marxism is not the lens through which we should look at literature because it is not the lens through which we should look at the world. For it is, in the end, not the means of demystification its proponents claim, but simply another Western, bourgeois myth—though, tragically, one whose power has so gripped its political adherents that it has inspired a brutality unmatched in its scope even by the worst twentieth-century nationalisms.[4]

How then should we look at literature? Or, more precisely, what other systems of thought might offer us better guidance or insight? This essay argues that there is an alternative in the tradition against which Marx, and other socialists, railed. This is the tradition of classical liberalism, at whose heart may be found an economic theory that has been given expression most helpfully (at least for our purposes) by the Austrian School of economics. The first important—and decisive—criticisms of Marx's economics, as it happens, were offered by the Austrians, notably in Böhm-Bawerk's 1896 study: *Karl Marx and the Close of His System*. But aside from this, the Austrian School, more than any other, offers an understanding of the economic and social world that rivals Marx for its comprehensiveness, and supersedes it for its grasp of and insight into the human condition. The reason for this, ultimately, is that Marx's theory is disabled by a thoroughly implausible theory of history—an eschatological doctrine that leaves it incapable of understanding the economic world of capitalism, and, so,

[4]If examples are needed, the Soviet gulags and the Chinese Great Leap Forward should suffice.

modernity. The Austrian view, by contrast, embodies an understanding of history that is at once more prosaic and yet surer in its grasp of the nature of social transformations. Most of all, it offers a sounder understanding of the nature of human freedom—a topic on which Marx's (and Marxism's) pronouncements are most seriously in error.

To see this we should first take a closer look at Marx's ideas, before turning to explore more carefully the Austrian alternative. Then I want to illustrate the power of the alternative by examining the philosophic vision offered by Ben Okri in his novel, *The Famished Road*. A Marxist reading of Okri can only lead us astray, because *The Famished Road* presents us not only with an understanding of human freedom which is profoundly true, but also with a view of the human condition which reveals both how much Marxism has misunderstood it, and how much Marxism itself is no more than one of the petty mythologies peddled in the marketplace.

MARXISM, FREEDOM, AND CIVIL SOCIETY

Karl Marx was fundamentally a Rousseauean in social philosophy—one who reacted against the *Philosophy of Right* of Hegel to become a critic of civil society. Civil society ("bürgerliche Gesellshaft") in Marx's conception is bourgeois society, market society, and it is dominated by relations of self-interest and economic calculation. In this society, he argued, the one thing that can never be found is human freedom. Indeed, this form of society is nothing if not destructive of that freedom. In turning all human relations into mere money relations it will never allow men to attain the autonomy in which real freedom consists. Civil society—capitalism—will sustain only heteronomy in a world of class conflict.

What one finds in such a society, Marx argued, is simply the satisfaction of particular, private interests—at the expense of other particular interests. But, unlike Hegel, Marx rejected any sort of solution that attempts to reconcile these interests. Hegel thought that the state would turn out to embody the general interest, reconciling the particular interests found in the family and civil society. For Marx, however, only the abolition of particularity is an acceptable solution. The state, he argued, turns out

to be nothing more than the agent of particular interests masquerading as the embodiment of the general interest. Politics in such circumstances is merely a conflict among particular concerns. The political rights or freedoms sought by those who would reform the state cannot, in the end, bring freedom because "mere" political emancipation—the making of one's political attributes independent of the features of one's civil life (wealth, birth, religion)—is an illusory emancipation: "the *state* can free itself from a restriction without man being *really* free from this restriction."[5] Not only is political emancipation illusory, but it also brings about a fundamental division in human life:

> Where the political state has attained its free development, man—not only in thought, in consciousness, but in *reality*, in *life*—leads a twofold life, a heavenly and an earthly life: life in the *political community*, in which he considers himself a *communal being*, and life in *civil society*, in which he acts as a *private individual*, regards other men as a means, degrades himself into a means, and becomes the plaything of alien powers.[6]

Civil society is thus an expression of man's separation from his community and from his real self, an expression of his alienation. The only bond that holds men together in civil society, Marx argued, "is natural necessity, need and private interest, the preservation of their property and their egoistic selves."[7] The political sphere is simply subordinated to private interest. Pointing out that the state is based on the contradiction between *public* and *private life*, on the contradiction between *general interests* and *private interests*, Marx maintained that politics cannot solve the social problem because it itself expresses that problem. Only a social revolution can bring about true change, overcoming the division of state and civil society and making politics entirely unnecessary.

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[5]Karl Marx, "On the Jewish Question," in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), vol. 3, p. 152.

[6]Ibid., p. 154.

[7]Ibid., p. 164.

As an advocate, Marx encouraged revolutionary activity, but as a "scientist" he averred that revolutionary transformation is inevitable. Capitalism is merely the latest and penultimate stage of human development, and, indeed, an epoch in which the conflicts that bedevil humanity will come to a head and demand resolution. Socialism will offer that resolution, ushering in the epoch of human freedom. Yet for all his criticisms of capitalism, Marx insisted not only on its importance as an era in world-historical terms but also on its productive power as an economic system. Indeed, it is the abundance that capitalism generates that will make socialism ultimately possible. Socialism will resolve not only the political contradictions of capitalism but also the problem of waste that characterizes the capitalist mode of production.

For all its productive power, capitalism for Marx is a crude, even if not entirely chaotic, system of coordination of productive activities. It is a system of partial coordination of separate decision makers; and the alienation of these decision makers from one another is the source of the discoordination that besets all markets. The plans of producers and consumers are always made in ignorance of one another. Competitors struggle against each other to bid prices up and down in an ever-continuing cycle of disappointed plans and windfall gains. And by its very nature, the exchange economy necessitates the appropriation of surplus value by private owners of capital. Intervention in this whole affair by legislation to eliminate unearned income will not work if the system is to be left intact. Private appropriation of profit is necessary for the capitalist mode of production, and fiddling with wages and prices will not alter this situation. Only the complete replacement of capitalism by a new mode of production in which men take conscious control of the productive process can bring about an improvement in productive capacity. In this new mode, the rivalry of producers and consumers will be replaced by the conscious direction of a central plan. Then, rather than being guided by prices in a competitive market, production will be guided by central planners, who will save the costs spent in circulation, including expenses for sales, advertising, and inventories. Capitalism, while undeniably efficient at enforcing economy on each individual business, creates in its anarchical system

of *competition* the most flagrant waste—squandering labor-power while at the same time creating work that is entirely unnecessary.

For Marx, the direction of all social production according to a single, coordinated plan would eliminate the waste generated by capitalism. But more than this, such a form of production would be entirely inconsistent with the production of mere commodities. Socialism, for Marx, means above all the abolition of market relations. The expropriation of the expropriators would mean both the elimination of the anarchic and rivalrous aspects of private production and the reestablishment of the bond between the producers and their means of production.

With the once oppressed proletariat finally in control of production, the profit motive would be abolished, and economic activity would be subordinated to social needs. In such conditions, class antagonisms would disappear, and the institutions of political rule would become unnecessary. All that would be required is "the administration of things."

> As a result, not only will the split between the social and personal functions of individuals be healed, but so will the division between subject and object of historical process (transparence of social relations, control of associated individuals over their life processes, and so on), between man and his natural setting, between desires and duties, and between essence and existence.[8]

All this is consistent with what came to be called Marx's *historical materialism*—the theory that serves as the basis of his analysis of society. Marx presents the crucial formulation of the central hypothesis of historical materialism in a now famous passage in the preface to his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

> In the social production which men carry on they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will; these relations of production

[8]Leszek Kolakowski, "The Myth of Human Self-Identity: Unity of Civil and Political Society in Socialist Thought," in C. Kukathas, D.W. Lovell and W. Maley, eds., *The Transition from Socialism: State and Civil Society in the USSR* (London: Longman, 1991), p. 48.

> correspond to a definite stage of development of their material powers of production. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society—the real foundation, on which rise legal and political superstructures and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production in material life determines the general character of the social, political, and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary their social existence determines their consciousness.[9]

If human beings are to become free, it is necessary not just to change the legal and political superstructure but also to transform the foundations on which they rest. Relations of production are shaped more by the fundamental features of the economic base—for ideas and institutions do not have any life of their own except within the boundaries set by material life. (And ruling ideas reflect the ideas of the ruling class.) Freedom can come not through a revolution in consciousness but only through fundamental social transformation.

But how will social transformation bring about freedom? The key to Marx's answer to this question is in his assumption that freedom is not possible until conflicts of interest disappear. Conflict makes impossible the perfect unity of the personal and communal life of every individual. Until conflict is abolished, all cannot be free; and until all can be free, no one can be free. This conviction lies at the heart of Marx's work—and arguably, at the center of Marxist thinking more generally.[10] The task he set himself in his philosophy was to explain that this is the nature of freedom, but his greater desire was to bring it about: not to explain the world, but to change it.

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[9]Quoted from Lewis S. Feuer, ed., *Basic Writings on Politics & Philosophy: Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1959), p. 43.

[10]See for example, G.A. Cohen, "The Structure of Proletarian Unfreedom," in Alan Ryan, ed., *The Idea of Freedom: Essays in Honour of Isaiah Berlin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 9–26.

ECONOMICS, HISTORY, AND FREEDOM: THE AUSTRIAN ALTERNATIVE

Though less well known than Marxism in the history of modern thought, the Austrian School is no less difficult to describe, and its ideas no easier to summarize. Like any living tradition, it is marked by differences—indeed, conflicts—of understanding and interpretation.[11] And, again like many traditions, it has its adversaries; in the Austrian case, its intellectual battles have been waged on the very different fronts of neoclassical or mainstream economics on the one hand, and Marxist socialist economics on the other. For our purposes here, however, it may be best to begin a consideration of Austrian economics by comparing and contrasting it with the Marxist schools.

Such prominence as the Austrians have achieved is due largely to debates in the 1920s and 30s over the possibility of socialism as an economic system, and to the writings of Ludwig von Mises and F.A. Hayek in particular. Mises argued that socialism is strictly impossible because rational calculation is not possible in an economy without money. The variant of socialism which was the object of Mises's attack, Marxist socialism, does not recognize that economic value is subjective: "Valuation can only take place in terms of units, yet it is impossible that there should ever be a unit of subjective use-value for goods."[12] Judgments of value do not measure but establish grades or scales and, in the exchange economy, the "objective exchange-value" of commodities becomes the unit of economic calculation. In a monetary exchange economy *money* is the good used as the unit in terms of which exchange-values are defined. While the value of money may fluctuate (its value in relation to other goods constantly changes),

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[11]For an historical account which attempts to explain just what Austrian economics is, see Karen I. Vaughn, *Austrian Economics in America: The Migration of a Tradition* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1994). For a helpful investigation of selected topics in Austrian economics, see Nicolai Juul Foss, *The Austrian School and Modern Economics: Essays in Reassessment* (Copenhagen: Handelshøjskolens Forlag, 1994).

[12]"Economic Calculation in the Socialist Commonwealth," in F.A. Hayek, ed., *Collectivist Economic Planning: Critical Studies in the Possibilities of Socialism* (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1935), p. 96.

monetary calculation "fulfils all the requirements of economic calculation" because it enables us to judge the relative values of all goods and so to make production plans involving processes stretching over long periods of time.[13] Mises's criticism of socialism, in a nutshell, is that without a free market there can be no pricing mechanism and that, without that, given the defects of calculation in terms of labor rather than money, there can be no economic calculation—and no coordination of production.

To appreciate the depth of this insight it is important to understand how much it strikes at the core of Marx's economics and, so, his entire social theory. Marx was convinced that capitalist production, for all its power, could be improved upon by central planning. The elimination of class conflict and of the competitive process would, he thought, eradicate the wastefulness that is characteristic of the market economy. But Mises made clear (though, as it turned out, not clear *enough* to Marx's followers!) that the concept of central planning is "utopian" in Marx's own sense of the word: "demonstrably unworkable, as is revealed through an analysis of the way the existing capitalist economy works."[14] Advanced technological production is too complex to be subsumed under a conscious plan and has to be broken up into smaller plans. Yet without money, there can be no common denominator for the quantitative calculation necessary to coordinate these different plans. Marx assumed that the problems facing a central planning board are of the order of complexity of the problems facing Robinson Crusoe commanding an economy of one producer. Mises showed that this assumption does not hold up. Commodity production is now a complex and time-consuming process that integrates the whole world in a structure marked by a complex division of labor. It is beyond the control of any single planner or planning board.

The truth of the matter is that those elements Marx saw as the wasteful side effects of capitalism are simply vital parts of the processes of production. The very rivalry and competition that

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[13]Ibid., pp. 98–100.

[14]Don Lavoie, *Rivalry and Central Planning: The Socialist Calculation Debate Reconsidered* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 60.

Marx found abhorrent are the engines of coordination that make production possible. One could no more improve the quality (or quantity) of production by ending rivalry than one could improve the quality of tennis by forbidding opposing players to compete to win. Competition is a form of cooperation that is vital to economic coordination.

This point was lost on those of Marx's followers who tried to confront Mises's arguments. To be sure, they conceded his point to the extent that they tried to develop models of "market socialism" that include mechanisms that mimic the price system. Oskar Lange and H.D. Dickinson, who were the most important figures in this movement, went so far as to suggest that under a market socialist model a Central Planning Board might even have a much wider knowledge of what is going on in the whole economic system than private producers, and might therefore reach equilibrium prices by a shorter series of successive trials than a competitive market does. But this approach represented, more than anything else, a failure to grasp Mises's insight into the function of competition. Possibly this was a result of the distinctiveness of the Austrian argument for competition compared with that of neoclassical economics. The neoclassical model of static competitive equilibrium places emphasis on viewing the market as a condition of harmony resulting from the pursuit of self-interest. There is, in principle, perfect coordination in long-run equilibrium. The Austrians, however, have consistently stressed that there is an element of conflict in competition. Some competitors win, as some buyers squeeze out other buyers and some producers eliminate other producers. Market socialists, working in the equilibrium models of neoclassical economics, thought they had solved the problem of socialism when all they ever attempted was, in fact, the solution to some theoretical questions in the neoclassical paradigm. In short, they tried to show how a central planning board could behave like a Walrasian auctioneer, surveying the marketplace, and altering prices as changes in the quantities of commodities supplied and demanded became known. They seem never to have been struck by the practical absurdity of the idea of such a board trying to operate in a complex economy with innumerable buyers and sellers.[15]

[15]For a fuller account of the theoretical inadequacies of their solutions, see Lavoie, *Rivalry and Central Planning*, chap. 5.

For the Austrians, however, the guidance that brings about economic coordination (and production) is supplied, ultimately, by competition in the market made up of producers disciplined by the need to make profits, and by buyers and sellers operating with a knowledge of prices. But there is, according to the Austrians, even more to the matter than this. The economic problem, they argue, is not a matter of simply working out or constructing a rational economic order using all relevant information about individual preferences and factors of production. Such information can never be made available. The economic problem, as Hayek in particular argued, is, rather,

> determined precisely by the fact that the knowledge of the circumstances of which we must make use never exists in concentrated or integrated form but solely as the dispersed bits of incomplete and frequently contradictory knowledge which all the separate individuals possess.[16]

Economic knowledge is not a given. It is not always easily identified, or even capable of being articulated by those who possess it. It is embodied in skills and practices as often as it is found in propositions. And it is sometimes fleeting—as is the case of knowledge of economic (or other) opportunities—opportunities that may last only moments. In such circumstances, the economic question is how to make the best use of our dispersed knowledge.

The answer the Austrians had always offered is "the competitive market." But Hayek took the matter still further. Given the limited nature of our knowledge, what competition offers is not simply a coordination by the matching of known wants to available goods but knowledge itself. Competition is a "discovery procedure." What is most significant about human society, Hayek argued, is not that individuals differ in their tastes or preferences but that they differ in their circumstances and knowledge. The problem posed by this condition is economic in the widest possible sense of the term, for the fundamental economic problem is not one of calculating how scarce resources are to be

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[16]Hayek, "The Use of Knowledge in Society," *Individualism and Economic Order* (Chicago: Midway, 1980), p. 77.

allocated to those who require or desire them. The more basic problem is to *discover what is scarce or valuable in the first place*. The price mechanism is one aid to the solution of this problem, since prices direct attention to the relative scarcity of goods. This has some obvious advantages, encouraging us to economize on scarce (expensive) resources. Moreover, the tendency of the market to disappoint the expectations of those who fail to produce goods sought by others eliminates practices that waste human and material resources. But most important of all, a condition in which individuals are free to produce and market their wares or purchase the creations of others enables individuals to discover values which no one may have realized existed before. Individuals do not always know what they want, or where their interests lie—any more than producers always know what consumers want. In a competitive market producers compete not just to satisfy known demands but also to persuade people of the existence of new and different values.

This point was made most powerfully by Hayek in his critique of John Kenneth Galbraith who, in 1962, revived the Marxist critique of wasteful capitalism in his book *The Affluent Society*. The price system, according to Galbraith, does not serve consumers' wants because consumers' desires are not their own but created—largely by advertising and sales techniques which seek to create wants that did not previously exist. The market process wastes scarce resources on producing goods for which people have no desire, and wastes even more persuading people to buy them. Hayek's response was to argue that the assertion that artificial wants are somehow less worthy is simply a non sequitur. Wants created by the process by which they are satisfied are no less important than other wants. Most of our wants and needs are of this sort, created by the production processes of civilization. If some are harmful, others are surely worthy, including artistic creations, whose supply creates their own demand, extending the scope of our activity, our feelings, our aesthetic understanding, and even our self-knowledge.[17]

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[17]See Hayek, "The Non Sequitur of the 'Dependence Effect,'" *Studies in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), pp. 313–17.

Once again, the characteristically Austrian point is that it is out of the very conflict and rivalry characteristic of competition that things of value are produced. More than this, it is out of this very conflict that value itself becomes known to us. Such knowledge is not given to us, but is created by our own efforts, even though in the end the overall process of discovery is the product neither of our intention nor of our design.

Out of this outlook comes, then, a view of human history—and of human freedom—very different from that offered by Marx. For Marx, history is a story not only of class struggle, but also of social transformation brought about by changes in material conditions. The progressive movement from one epoch to another brings with it changes in legal and political institutions and the development of new forms of consciousness. But that movement of history is an ineluctable lurching from crisis to crisis until a final resolution is reached in the overcoming of the contradictions inherent in the penultimate stage of human history: the era of capitalism. This resolution is the point at which men cease to be the playthings of alien powers and take conscious control of their own collective destiny—thus achieving freedom.

The Austrian view dismisses entirely both the coherence and the worth of the notion of conscious collective control. While Marx thought there would come a stage in human history when man would acquire the capacity to control social processes, Austrians like Hayek concede no more than that, in the course of history, men may come again and again to believe that they can do so. They will, however, inevitably be disappointed; worse, Hayek suggests, this ambition "may well prove a hurdle which man will repeatedly reach, only to be thrown back into barbarism."[18] The limited powers of human reason make the goal of controlling society simply unattainable, but the consequences of the attempt could be nonetheless disastrous.

The Austrian view of history differs from Marx not only in this regard, however, but also because it denies the existence of

[18]*The Counter-Revolution of Science: Studies in the Abuse of Reason* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, 1979), p. 163.

any final stage toward which human development is moving. Indeed, it has little or no use for the idea of stages of history, or of historical progress. The human world, in Austrian social theory, is populated by innumerable individuals who operate in myriad contexts, governed by different sets of rules, and motivated by different purposes. Their lives are shaped by different historical and geographical circumstances, as well as by different mores. They are at once creative experimenters and cautious conventionalists, largely ignorant of most of the things which affect them, but generally motivated by the desire to improve their lives—despite being, for the most part, ignorant of what would make for, or even count as, improvement.

The history of such a species is, to put it simply, a series of accidents. While there are elements of regularity, and developments that reveal the path-dependence of particular outcomes, the twists and turns make clear why the future is always so uncertain to individuals and communities. Things could just have turned out very differently. An invention, a war, a missed opportunity, a lucky discovery, or a legal interpretation could put a society on a different track.

What this outlook rejects in Marx even more importantly, however, is the assumption that it is material life that drives history and shapes human consciousness. This assumption, which has generated endless debate among Marxists about the nature of the economic base and its relation to the superstructure of society's institutions and ideas, makes no sense from an Austrian point of view. What we see in Marx's distinction is a dualism that serves no purpose except to distort or occlude our understanding of a phenomenon that is, above all, a single whole. Social life does not determine consciousness any more than consciousness determines social life: there is only one phenomenon. Economic conditions cannot be described without reference to the ideas that define them: laws, particular understandings of property, moral beliefs, political rights. The superstructure cannot be sensibly distinguished from the economic base in the way that Marx and (many of) his followers have thought. Even if the superstructure of ideas is defined more narrowly to include only those "political institutions, legal forms and moral or religious ideologies which most effectively *sanction* [society's] system of social

relations,"[19] Marx cannot be rescued. To the extent that ideas are closely tied to the system of production relations, they shape and define them and, so, are part and parcel of the economic base. Insofar as they are independent of that system, they can just as easily be critical of or hostile to that system—Marxist ideas for example. But in fact what we have is something much more like a world of diverse and conflicting ideas and practices, shifting into different patterns depending on all kinds of circumstances. Neither the ideas nor the material conditions are determining; for they are one and the same. Social existence and consciousness are simply aspects of each other, or, better, aspects of one whole.

In the Austrian view of history, freedom cannot be understood as something to be gained once the ways of the world have been transcended or overcome. The kind of transcendence Marx hoped for is simply illusory. Freedom is not to be found in the world to come, in some realm of unity without conflict. That world will never come, for conflict is an ineradicable feature of the human condition. Freedom has to be found in this world, in the interstices of human endeavors and human conflicts.

THE FAMISHED ROAD

This insight supplies the theme of Ben Okri's 1991 Booker Prize-winning novel, in which a spirit child tells the story of his entry into the material world of human beings, and of his decision to forsake that other realm for life in the messy and difficult region that is the earth. Like all "abiku" or spirit children, Azaro (so named by his parents who were afraid to call him Lazarus) did not look forward to being born, for in their own world spirit children "knew no boundaries":

> There was not one amongst us who looked forward to being born. We disliked the rigors of existence, the unfulfilled longings, the enshrined injustices of the world, the labyrinths of love, the ignorance of parents, the fact of dying, and the amazing indifference of the

[19] Allen Wood, *Karl Marx* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 86; emphasis added.

> Living in the midst of the simple beauties of the universe. We feared the heartlessness of human beings, all of whom are born blind, few of whom ever learn to see. [20]

Yet in spite of these misgivings Azaro is born—many times to many parents—and dies again and again, until, breaking his pact and outwitting his companions, he decides to stay, perhaps for no better reason than that he "wanted to make happy the bruised face of the woman who would become [his] mother."[21]

Azaro is born to a couple in a town in Nigeria on the eve of independence: a father who strays in and out of work as a laborer, and a mother who earns even less selling what she can as a trader in the market. The world they inhabit is the world of the market, both literally and figuratively; but the time they spend in that world is only a moment in history, which is the road on which they find themselves: a road "without end, with too many signs, and no directions."[22]

The road, which supplies the ruling metaphor of the book, is time; but it is time not as an abstraction, but as history, along which travel real people who journey on, build, and are eventually consumed by the road. "In the beginning," the novel opens, "was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry."[23] That road, Azaro later discovers when he lies near death, is one which people have been building for two thousand years. "But they haven't gone far at all," he observes to a spirit, who concedes that, yes, they have only built two feet of the road. But why are they building it, and working so hard? The spirit's answer brings us to the heart of Okri's story: "Because they had a most wonderful dream."

> They had been living for eternity as faces on the great tree. They got tired of eternity. They were the ones that the sun didn't melt into precious water. They became

[20] *The Famished Road*, p. 3.

[21] Ibid., p. 5.

[22] Ibid., p. 115.

[23] Ibid., p. 1.

> beings, people in masks. One day their prophet told them that there were worlds and worlds of people high up. The prophet spoke of a particular people. A great people who did not know their own greatness. The prophet called the world Heaven and said they should build a great road so that they could visit those people, and that those people could visit them. In this way they would complete one another and fulfill an important destiny in the universe.[24]

The road is nothing less than the Tower of Babel. And like the Tower, it can never be finished—for the moment it is finished the builders will perish.[25] They will perish because "they will have nothing to do, nothing to dream for, and no need for a future. They will perish of completeness, of boredom. The road is their soul, the soul of their history."[26] Whenever it looks as if it might be finished, "landquakes happen, lightning strikes, invisible volcanoes erupt, rivers descend on them, hurricanes tear up their earth, the road goes mad and twists and destroys itself, or the people become distorted in spirit and start to turn the road into other things, or the workers go insane, the people start wars, revolts cripple everything and a thousand things distract them and wreck what they have built and a new generation comes along and begins again from the wreckage."[27]

This view of the human condition presents it as an endless history whose meaning is not to be found in any goal or destination, however much that illusion of a final resolution—the quest for a Holy Grail—might motivate each individual. The truth of the matter, Okri suggests, is simply more prosaic: it is only in the striving that there is anything of value, for in time everything will be lost, and each generation will have to begin anew.

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[24]Ibid., p. 329.

[25]For two interesting views of the Tower of Babel, see Michael Oakeshott's essays of that name, the first in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Liberty Fund, 1992); and the second in *On History and Other Essays* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984).

[26]*The Famished Road*, p. 329.

[27]Ibid., p. 330.

The book depicts life on one section of that road. The people on it, the community into which Azaro is born, have no idea that they are builders on a road they are destined never to finish because, like all people, they "have the great curse of forgetfulness" and "are deaf to the things they need to know most."[28] Azaro, however, sees everything as he explores the world of the living, and comes to understand something of it. What he comes to understand above all is the strange and contradictory nature of the freedom which is life in this dimension of existence—the dimension he reluctantly (or at least, hesitantly) entered.

The question that needs to be answered, however, is: what precisely is the nature of that freedom? Slowly, but surely, *The Famished Road* works toward an answer. But to grasp it, Okri has to show how Azaro comes to comprehend it.

The people who comprise the community into which Azaro is born do not enjoy the freedom of spirits: freedom without boundaries. Indeed, they live burdened by all the hardships that make for mundane existence. They live in and depend upon the marketplace, a realm of exchange which is indifferent to their existence, and which lies beyond their control, and into which come, from time to time like little plagues of disease, the interventions of politics: visitations by the thugs of the Party of the Rich, and by those of the equally brutal Party of the Poor. Some, like Madame Koto the bar-owner, become lucky and go on to fortune (though that too carries a price in the tribute that must be paid to the Party in control); others, like the creditors and landlords, find it harder, having to extract payments from clients as poor as they. Dad—Azaro's father—earns what he can as a beast of burden, lifting sacks in the marketplace, out of sight of Azaro, who never knows where he goes until one day he stumbles upon him, and discovers for the first time "one of the secret sources of [his] father's misery."[29]

Mum, however, struggles in the heart of the market itself: a realm of confusion, a place of strange voices and "invisible hands"[30] that leaves Azaro bewildered and blinded. In that place,

[28]Ibid.

[29]Ibid., p. 149.

[30]Ibid., p. 167.

that "labyrinth," he is unable to locate his mother. Invisible hands push and pull him; and the voices which answer his questions cannot distinguish his mother from the market, which is all the same to them. If she is a trader, she is the market—one who takes their money, as well as their power, their dreams, their sleep, their children.[31] Finally, when a bright wind suddenly makes the paths clearer, and leads Azaro "in a spiral through the riddle of the market to the centre," he comes only to an empty well in which he sees the moon and realizes that there is nothing at the center. From here he comes to recognize the market's indifference to all that goes on within it, even to the injustices. For he sees a woman struggling there against the odds.

> Further on, deeper into the night, I saw three men in dark glasses pushing over a woman's flimsy stall of provisions. They threw her things on the floor and she patiently picked them up again. She cleaned the soiled goods with her wrapper and put them back on the table. The men tipped over the table. The woman cried for help, cried out her innocence, but the marketplace shuffled on, went on with its chaos, its arguing, its shouting and disagreeing, and no single voice, unless it were louder than all the voices put together, could make the market listen.[32]

One of the reasons for her struggles in the marketplace is politics. "If you don't belong to our party you don't belong to this space in the market," she is told by the men who tip her table over again.[33] Her protestations that she has paid her dues and rented the space make no difference, and she is hassled until she is driven to violence and attacks her attackers with a machete. She is then asked to leave the market, along with her tormenters, by the market people, who cannot tolerate such disruptions. The woman Azaro does not recognize until all the commotion is over is, of course, his mother. In the market, everyone becomes something different, takes on other identities, becomes indistinguishable

[31]Ibid., p. 166.

[32]Ibid., p. 168.

[33]Ibid.

from the others, becomes a part of the market itself. But the market has no identity, no center; it has no preferences or feelings or sense of justice and injustice, even though within it all of those things are to be found.

What is most striking about all this is Okri's depiction of life in the market, which is also life on the great road. For in this great allegory nothing is alien. In the marketplace itself, everything—both good and bad—is to be found: from fresh fruits to rotting vegetables, roasted meat to stinking fish, "the feathers of wild birds and stuffed parrots, the wafting odors of roasted corn and fresh-dyed cloth, cow dung and sahelian perfume." And "just as there were many smells, so there were many voices, loud and clashing voices which were indistinguishable from the unholy fecundity of objects."[34] In that fantastic confusion everything is sold— from the most basic necessities to the most improbable trinkets—patterned cloths, coral charms, and magic love mirrors. The commodities sold might (at least some of them) appear to be fetishes; but "commodity fetishism" in Marxist terms is not Okri's point. For in this world, the zany is no less real and vital than the object of sober desire.[35]

Even politics must be accepted, although in Okri's depiction of its workings there is nothing that ought to inspire affection for it. Set in the period of Nigeria's move to independence (c. 1960), the novel is anything but sanguine about the dark side of politics.[36]

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[34]Ibid., p. 161.

[35]"Learn to drink, my son," Dad tells Azaro. "A man must be able to hold his drink because drunkenness is sometimes necessary in this difficult life" (p. 35).

[36]This is clear, for example, in Okri's poem "Darkening City, Lagos 1983," in his *An African Elegy* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992), p. 38, where he writes:

> Acids boil outside
> Crooked towers of state
>
> Where politicians disgorge our lives
> In vomitoriums of power.
>
> We rush through heated garbage day
> With fear in morbid blood-raw eyes:
>
> Mobs in cancerous slums
> Burn the innocent and guilty
>
> At noon.

Early in his time of travail, Dad discovers that side. Struggling all day like a beast to earn a modest living, he returns home to complain: "They have begun to spoil everything with politics. . . . Now they want to know who you will vote for before they let you carry their load."[37] And when the politicians finally come, they come in the form of the Party of the Rich, laden with promises, blaring out from their van's loudspeakers offers of electricity, schools, hospitals, and riches in the future, and free milk immediately. "On and on they went, crackling abundant promises on the air, launching future visions of extravagant prosperity, till they broke down the walls of our skepticism" and the "compound people abandoned their doubts and poured over to the van."[38] As it happens, Dad refuses the milk out of pride, and the milk turns out to be rotten, poisoning half the compound; but the "rotten milk of politics" is no sooner forgotten than the Party of the Poor descends upon the people, with a commitment never to poison the people high on its list of promises.

In Okri's account, the two parties are indistinguishable; but the people are caught up in the contest of promises, and before long are partisans of one side or the other. The landlord tells his tenants: "Anybody who wants to live in my house under this roof that I built with my own hands, should vote for my party."[39] Politics makes Dad stubborn: "What right does the landlord have to bully us? . . . We may be poor, but we are not slaves."[40] And it makes Mum fearful, and in particular afraid to go to the market, where party thugs become violent. But there is no escape from its irrationality, as Dad insists, nonetheless, that he will vote for the Party of the Poor—even though its thugs beat up traders in the marketplace, and even though it has done nothing for him. Nor is there escape from its corruption, as Madame Koto, in her pursuit of prosperity and progress, entangles her business interests with the fortunes of the Party of the Rich.

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[37]*The Famished Road*, p. 81.

[38]Ibid., p. 123.

[39]Ibid., p. 198.

[40]Ibid., p. 203.

Yet for all this, politics is not condemned. For it is not, in Okri's account, an excrescence, or an epiphenomenon, or some kind of superstructural projection shaped by other more basic forces. While it may not be romanticized, it cannot be denied; for it is no less a part of the life of the road, and the life of the market, than anything else. The key to understanding this is offered in a passage describing the party "thrown to celebrate Madame Koto's attainment of new powers, the installation of electricity, the consolidation of her party connections, and to widen the sphere of her influence in this and that realm."[41] At this time,

> The most bizarre rumors circulated about what had been really happening at night when we slept, and during the day when we, as always, were unaware of the changes taking place in constellations of energies and alignments. New spaces were being created while all we saw were the mundane events of thugs and canvassing vans and the violence of political struggles. New spaces which we couldn't name, and couldn't imagine, but only hint at with unfinished gestures and dark uncompleted proverbs. The rumors invested everything with a higher significance. Fabulous noises floated on the air. Ground-nut sellers, corn-roasters, fortune-tellers, tyre-menders, beer-traders, all gathered outside the bar, looking in from a respectable distance, doing business, while the bar resounded with drinking noises and laughter and the occasional piercing ritual cries.[42]

The critical point here is that "new spaces" are being created all the time—spaces generally not comprehended by the living. Out of the energy of human efforts, unknown things emerge, and newness comes into the world. They come not simply as physical objects but, more importantly, as realignments—of thought, of attitude, of vision. In the end, there is no market, or economy, simpliciter. There is only what the Austrians would call a "catallaxy": a realm of human interaction that does not exist separately from (and cannot be abstracted from) the

[41]Ibid., p. 449.

[42]Ibid., pp. 449–50.

processes of social life more generally. The catallaxy embraces the activity of human exchange in a structure that is shaped, not just by the demand for and supply of goods, but by the laws, by power, by human values. As these change, so do the spaces within which people operate change and re-form.

In this world, as Okri makes clear, all kinds of things may be found. Among them are oppression and exploitation, as the strong try to subjugate the weak, the powerful the defenseless, the rich the poor. None of this may be swept under the carpet. For one thing, there simply isn't enough carpet. But neither does it make much sense to round up the usual suspects: capitalism, colonialism, the West, or the ruling class. Nor is there any hope that injustice will one day be swept away: that may simply be the greatest illusion of all. It is the illusion to which Dad falls victim when he finally finds success as a boxer: the unvanquished "Black Tyger." Success brings delusions of power; and Dad is convinced that he can change the world for the better—if only everyone would listen and follow his lead. "We can change the world!" he cries. "That is why the road is hungry," he hollers. "We have no desire to change things."[43] Yet, for all their gullibility in the presence of real politicians, the people send Dad packing, and his dreams of ridding the world of injustice remain just dreams.

> Dad was redreaming the world as he slept. He saw the scheme of things and didn't like it. He saw the world in which black people always suffered and he didn't like it. He saw a world in which human beings suffered so needlessly from Antipodes to Equator, and he didn't like it either. He saw our people drowning in poverty, in famine, drought, in divisiveness and the blood of war. He saw our people always preyed upon by other powers, manipulated by the Western world, our history and achievements rigged out of existence. He saw the rich of our country, he saw the array of politicians, how corruptible they were, how blind to our future, how greedy they became, how deaf to the cries of the people, how stony their hearts were, how

[43]Ibid., p. 451.

> short-sighted their dreams of power. He saw the divisions in our society, the lack of unity, he saw the widening pit between those who have and those who don't, he saw it all very clearly. . . . He saw the wars in advance. He saw the economic boom in advance, saw its orgiastic squander, the suffering to follow, the exile in strange lands, the depleting of the people's will for transformation. He saw the emergence of tyrants who always seem to be born from the extremities of crisis. He saw their long rule and the chaos when they are overthrown. He argued in three great courts of the spirit world, calling for justice on the planet. He argued with fantastic passion and his case was sound but he was alone.[44]

Azaro sees all this because, as an abiku, he can follow Dad into his dreams. However, he can also see those things Dad cannot. Dad did not see "the mighty multitudes all over the world in their lonely solidarities, pleading cases in the supreme courts of spirits, pleading for justice and balance and beauty in the world, for an end to famishment and vile wars, destruction and greed."[45] Dad is alone precisely because he does not see the others—the "multitudes of dream-pleaders, invading all the courts of the universe." But he does not see them because he is also "struggling in the real hard world created by the limitations in the minds of human beings."[46]

Okri's vision here is startlingly Austrian. The world is the product not of justice or of beneficent design, but of human limitations. Out of ignorance, and in the chaos of conflict, the world is built and rebuilt. And Okri's point is that this just has to be accepted for what it is. There is no progress in the sense of the word that saw Marx yearn for progress. If there is any progress, it is only in the sense that Hayek employs when he argues in *The Constitution of Liberty* that competition fosters progress. Hayek admits quite candidly that while the "cumulative growth of

[44]Ibid., p. 492.

[45]Ibid., pp. 492–93.

[46]Ibid., p. 493.

knowledge and power over nature" is the result of the "successful striving for what at each moment seems unattainable," this will not ultimately make us any happier or better off. But that, he notes, just "does not matter." What matters is the striving: "It is not the fruits of past success but the living in and for the future in which human intelligence proves itself. Progress is movement for movement's sake, for it is in the process of learning, and in the effects of having learned something new, that man enjoys the gift of his intelligence."[47] The impossibility of progress in any larger sense is not, however, cause for despair, or at least, not for the worldly philosopher. The absence of a golden age, whether in the future or in the past, is not worth regretting, for it is in this world that we live, and to this world that we must attend. This does not mean that injustice does not matter (or that poverty is good, or that ignorance and superstition should be romanticized); it only means that we should not look upon those caught up in the world, or at the world itself, with the disdain of utopians.

Once this truth is grasped, it becomes possible to understand the real nature of freedom in this world. And it is this that *The Famished Road* reveals. Human liberty is not the liberty of the spirit world—liberty without boundaries. It is not the liberty that comes when conflicts are ended and differences disappear. Azaro sees this when he reflects on his friend Ade, another spirit child, who does not want to remain on the earth. Azaro, unlike Ade, comes to prefer life on earth, and the peculiar liberty that is possible there. "I was a spirit-child rebelling against the spirits, wanting to live the earth's life and contradictions. Ade wanted to leave, to become a spirit again, free in the captivity of freedom. I wanted the liberty of limitations, to have to find or create new roads from this one which is so hungry, this road of our refusal to be."[48] Azaro may have made his choice because this way was less difficult: "it may be easier to live with the earth's boundaries than to be free in infinity."[49] But he also made his choice because

[47]*The Constitution of Liberty* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960), p. 41.

[48]*The Famished Road*, p. 487.

[49]Ibid.

"these paradoxes of things, the eternal changes, the riddle of living while one is alive," all supply the challenges people need. The absence of an end to the process supplies "the probability that no injustice lasts forever, no love ever dies, that no light is ever really extinguished, that no true road is ever complete, that no way is ever definitive, no truth ever final, and that there are never really any beginnings or endings."[50]

Freedom comes not, as the Marxists (and others) have thought, with the attainment of unity with one's fellows, or with the achievement of the harmonious community, or with the elimination of oppression and exploitation. Freedom is to be had in spite of our failure to achieve these things. That is part of the reason why freedom is to be treasured. The freedom that matters, that is worth seeking, is the freedom that is found in a world of ineradicable conflict. The reason is simply that it is the only world we can possibly know.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

If Okri is right, not only has Marx misunderstood the human condition, but also Marxists ever since have misunderstood history and capitalism even more completely. Marx, for all his errors, at least had the good sense to declare that he was not a Marxist. Modern Marxists, however, have not been aware of the difficulty of their position, since Marxism was the most successfully marketed intellectual commodity of the twentieth century. Franchises have been established around the globe, and almost everywhere it has found its market niche. In some cases it has succeeded through the power of salesmanship; in the Western academies it continues to thrive because of the power of the guilds that control entry into professions. In most nations that embraced it, the preferred technique was the compulsory free sample, injected like a drug into the veins of unwilling users, who have been trying desperately to wean themselves off it ever since.

[50]Ibid., p. 488.

Where modern Marxists have held on to Marx's concepts, they have been led astray by the false dualism of the base-superstructure distinction. This is nowhere more evident than in the confusion that sees culture as something apart from (and, of course, undermined by) capitalism. There is a harsh irony in the accusation that capitalism has bred a "fragmentary, eclectic, demotic, cosmopolitan culture" when the Marxist promise is to offer a philosophy of (and, of course, for) modernity, and modernity is cosmopolitan by its very nature. The willingness of other Marxisms, both in theory and in practice, to accept the overwhelming and destruction of pre-capitalist societies in the name of the future and of the universal class, makes this particular objection sound even more hollow.

What needs to be pointed out more than anything else, perhaps, is how alien this philosophy of alienation is to anything vital in human experience. Its success has come because its mythology has been cast as one that offers us an insight—no, the deepest insight—into the human condition. But Okri's depiction of the political process suggests otherwise. In that process

> The political parties waged their battles in the spirit spaces, beyond the realm of our earthly worries. They fought and hurled counter-mythologies at one another. Herbalists, sorcerers, wizards and witches took sides and as the trucks fought for votes in the streets they fought for supremacy in the world of spirits. They called on djinns and chimeras, succubi, incubi and apparitions; they enlisted the ghosts of old warriors and politicians and strategists; they hired expatriate spirits.[51]

Marxism is just one, extraordinarily well-marketed, countermythology. In West African literary circles, it is an expatriate spirit whose foreignness to African traditions has been repeatedly revealed by the likes of Wole Soyinka, only for the messengers to

[51]Ibid., p. 495.

be denounced by those writers already hooked on this opiate of the intellectuals.[52]

What, in these circumstances, is to be done? If Okri is right, the answer is, very little. Far from Marxism being able to guide our understanding of the world, it will simply be consumed by it. It will, in time, be swallowed up by the famished road. The Marxist literary critics railing against capitalism, and viewing all art through the lens of the Marxist theory of oppression, will likewise be consumed by the works their tools are unable to open. There is little point in trying to change the thinking of the ruling elites, whether they be from the Party of the Rich or the Party of the Poor. Far better to bypass these critics altogether, and to look at the world through the eyes of the non-utopians.

After all, Marxists have for too long blundered along trying to change the world; the point, however, is to understand it.

[52]For Soyinka's perspective on West African developments, see his *The Open Sore of a Continent: A Personal Narrative of the Nigerian Crisis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

Notes on Contributors

Paul A. Cantor is Clifton Waller Barrett Professor of English at the University of Virginia, and has published widely on Shakespeare, Romanticism, comparative literature, and literary theory. He is known for his interdisciplinary work in political theory, economics, and popular culture. In 2007, he was Visiting Professor of Government at Harvard University, teaching courses on Shakespeare and politics. He attended Ludwig von Mises's NYU seminar in 1961–62 and has been active in the Mises Institute, giving a series of lectures on commerce and culture in 2006 (available at www.mises.org). His most recent book is *Gilligan Unbound: Pop Culture in the Age of Globalization* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2001).

Stephen Cox is Professor of Literature and Director of the Humanities Program at the University of California, San Diego. He is the author of *"The Stranger Within Thee": Concepts of the Self in Late-Eighteenth-Century Literature* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980); *Love and Logic: The Evolution of Blake's Thought* (University of Michigan Press, 1992); *The Titanic Story* (Open Court, 1999); *The Woman and the Dynamo: Isabel Paterson and the Idea of America* (Transaction, 2004); *The New Testament and Literature* (Open Court, 2006); and *The Big House: Image and Reality of the American Prison* (Yale University Press, 2009).

Darío Fernández-Morera teaches at Northwestern University. He holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature from Harvard University. He has written and edited books and articles on cultural practices in the humanities, the encounter between Europeans and Amerindians,

modern poetry, Modernism, Islamic Spain, and sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish literature, including Cervantes. Among his publications are *American Academia and the Survival of Marxist Ideas* (Praeger, 1996); *The Lyre and the Oaten Flute: Garcilaso and the Pastoral* (Tamesis Books, 1982); *Cervantes in the English-Speaking World*, ed. (Reichenberger, 2006); *Cervantes y su mundo II* (Reichenberger, 2005); *Fray Luis de Leon: Poesia*, ed. (Madrid: Alianza, 1986); and *Europe and the Encounter with the Amerindians*, ed. (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1985).

Chandran Kukathas holds the Chair in Political Theory in the Government Department at the London School of Economics. He is the author of *Hayek and Modern Liberalism* (Oxford University Press, 1989) and *The Liberal Archipelago: A Theory of Diversity and Freedom* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

Thomas Peyser is an English professor at Randolph-Macon College and a film critic for *Style Weekly*. He is the author of *Utopia and Cosmopolis: Globalization in the Era of American Literary Realism* (Duke University Press, 1998).

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STEPHEN COX is Professor of Literature and Director of the Humanities Program at the University of California, San Diego.

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