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## Contours of Capital in the Novel<sup>1</sup>

The recent economic crisis has reinforced the need for studying the economic realm across disciplinary divides. In this context, a poignant question for literary scholars has re-emerged with new urgency—the question of how literary texts may be said to contribute to a general understanding of the economic realm. Needless to say, before the recent crisis it was not uncommon in contemporary literary criticism to attribute special insightfulness to the literary (especially novelistic) imagination in matters related to our knowledge of the world. And while such assumptions may run into problems of legitimation (why a particular text deserves to be treated as representative or as possessing privileged insight against the vast multitudes of other texts), they cannot be avoided: if literature did not resonate with a cognitive potential in its relationship with our societies and our histories, it would be practically unintelligible. Of course, scholars do not readily agree on how a literary text performs cognitive work. For the sake of brevity, I will assume (rather than explain in detail), along the lines of the theory of the novel proposed more than half a century ago by Ian Watt, that *the novel*, a literary genre whose emergence and development coincides with the advent of epistemological and social modernity, features a cognitive function because of its inherent historicity.

What form novelistic cognition takes is a question that we can only cautiously address, and this necessarily varies depending on period and location.<sup>2</sup> It is great that we hear now, in the course of what many see as a great perturbation of the current economic order, from economists such as Thomas Piketty that much can be learned about economic issues from certain kinds of literature, and that literature provides a form of discourse about society that should complement the scholarly analysis of the social sciences and the humanities. It is not my ambition in this essay to tackle such propositions systematically, with an eye to a well-crafted argument. The tentative objects of

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<sup>2</sup> And here one should register another question: what social significance can novelistic insight have? Stipe Grgas comments on this question in his recent book on American studies (*Američki studiji danas: identitet, kapital, specijalnost*). While Grgas suggests in the book that novels by Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo present valuable insights into the operations of capitalism in American society, he also believes that these novels have (and are aware of having) only “tangential relevance” (324; translation mine) in the society in which they are written. We could add that there is a difference in the immediate social impact of a Dickens novel in the 1850s and a Pynchon novel in the contemporary period, but the ambition of novels to contribute to the understanding of the economic realm is important in its own right. One of the accomplishments of Grgas’s book (and his recent work in general) is that it has reaffirmed the need for studying the place of the economic in literary texts.

analysis here—capital on the one hand and the novel on the other—are intertwined in histories that are far too complex to delineate briefly. For one thing, it is not feasible to briefly address the many complex questions associated with the concept of capital and the historical rise of capitalist economy. What is capital, when does capitalist economy begin, what are the chief developments in its onset (in the case of England, for instance, economists and historians have often focused on the rise of agrarian capitalism in the early modern period; various innovations in the financial sector at the turn of the eighteenth century; the industrial revolution gaining momentum in the second half of the eighteenth century; the importance of imperial configurations; shifts in the broader, global context of economic relations in the early modern period, etc.), and how to periodize the history of capitalist economy—these are some of the central questions about capitalism that cannot be extensively handled here. Likewise, the many influential analyses of historical capitalism have furnished issues of perspective, terminology, and definition that can be said to have far-reaching analytical consequences (and often practical ones): for instance, Fernand Braudel’s differentiation between market economy and capitalism provides a very different historical and philosophical perspective than the Marxist analytical focus on the capital/labor relation. The very recent times have in turn foregrounded the issues of capital as money and capital as rent-seeking in an increasingly globalized economy, and many commentators see these developments as an occasion for a shift in analytical perspectives and paradigms. Rather than engaging these vastly important issues, I will limit my analysis to the assumption that novels do interact with historical capitalism, that is, with the various concrete, specific versions of capitalist economy. The conditions in which the novel “rose” in England, to use Ian Watt’s term, coincide historically with massive change in European civilization, in which the rise of capitalist economy was only one of several factors, albeit a very important one. This is indeed how Watt framed his analysis of the “rise of the novel”: speaking of individualism that he associated with the advent of modern society (and novelistic narrative), he did not offer a monocausal reading of modernity, but rather evoked a multiplicity of simultaneous historical processes, calling special attention (not unlike Max Weber) to economic individualism and the Protestant Reformation, but also to the philosophical reorientation towards individualism brought about by René Descartes and John Locke; and in that context, he did not see the rise of the novel simply as a result of such processes, but as one of the “parallel manifestations” (31) of the onset of the modern period.<sup>3</sup> Also, I shall assume that the rise of the English capitalist economy, albeit a historically pioneering form of capitalism in many respects (agriculture, finance, industry), has to be approached as the emergence of a historically contingent and specific form of capitalism, whose peculiar formation was the result of many complex dynamics, local as well as global.<sup>4</sup> Upon this perspective, the novel will

<sup>3</sup> See Ian Watt. *The Rise of the Novel*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957. Watt writes of the rise of the novel in England; of course, the question of the rise of the novel in Europe requires a much broader perspective, but one which must be equally considerate of the plurality of historical processes.

<sup>4</sup> Instead of assuming some logic of determinism that gave birth to *capitalism in England* as it emerged into modernity, I think it more productive to address the issue in the context of the specificities of historical

be understood here as a conceptual problem that requires constant re-historicizing of the kind that pays due attention to the manifold processes that affected the rise and buoying up of this historically new genre.

All this means that only brief and fragmentary glimpses into this complicated relationship between the novel and the economic realm can be attempted here. But the overarching idea is relatively simple: yes, Piketty is right when claiming that much is to be learned from novels about capitalist economy. It is important, therefore, to remember at this point that there must be other sides to this issue, which would suggest either that novels have little to say as cognitive devices, or, more importantly, that a true knowledge of capital(ism) is the cognitive privilege of a particular kind of analysis (such privilege is often claimed by Marxism and neoclassical economics, albeit in very different ways); it will have to suffice here to observe that such monopolization of knowledge is problematic for a number of reasons, and that it requires a separate analysis, in which the very issue of what it means to claim knowledge of the economic would be featured centrally. The present article will concern itself with a much more limited agenda: first, I will emphasize that novels (taken here as emblematic literary products of modernity) are always inherently engaged in dialoguing with historical realities. Secondly, I will seek to disentangle, in a cursory reading of narratives by two nineteenth century novelists, Jane Austen and Elizabeth Gaskell, the contours of complex ways in which their novels engage the economic and historical domain. In doing so, I will especially pay attention to the procedures of referentiality and re-cognition. Austen's novels are sometimes understood, as in a recent reading by Mary Poovey, as being deliberately elliptical in their relationship with historical reality; on the other hand, Gaskell's industrial novels are equally commonly read as examples of strategically intense referentiality. In reading such texts side by side this article will not seek to reconstruct a central historical narrative connecting the two time periods (much as that is a possible topic in its own right), nor will it seek to establish a firm generic connection between such ostensibly dissimilar novels as *Mansfield Park* and *North and South* (which is also possible). The point, rather, is to examine the employment of the theme of re-cognition as a particular device of social knowledge proposed by both novels.

### Piketty and literature

Speaking of periodic economic crises, one of which erupted in 2007, David Harvey writes, "So why does capitalism periodically generate such crises? To answer this we need a far better understanding of how capitalism works than we currently possess" (38). Explaining periodic shifts that plunge national and international economic or-

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situations, in the manner of Fernand Braudel (much as some of those specificities may appear structural upon the long run perspective). For instance, he interpreted England's economic power in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, before the industrial revolution, as the "result of a series of happy chances which placed England, without her always realizing it, on the road towards modern solutions" (375). It is the basic predicament of historiography to think contingency and particularity along with systemic trends.

ders into recessions and depressions has long been a theoretical problem for writers on economic history, including Marxists such as Harvey. In Harvey's rendition, as in the Marxist tradition of economic discourse in general, this particular question is underwritten by the assumption that the knowledge of how capitalism works is an elusive but ultimate form of social knowledge, with the implicit or explicit claim that Marxist thought is the only way to achieving the right kind of understanding of the operations of capitalism. And yet Harvey also suggests that the current state of our knowledge of capitalism is insufficient, which in turn leaves some doubt, regardless of Harvey's declarative adoption of the Marxist theoretical narrative, about his confidence in the ability of all and any accounts of capitalism so far to provide a sufficient understanding of it. The question of "understanding" capitalism has intensified recently, precisely in the wake of the crisis that erupted in 2007; the amount of different accounts of the crisis is quite overwhelming in its own right, and hopefully the crisis will have given a new impetus to the historical investigation of capitalism. However, we should remember that today the business of explaining capitalism takes place within a specific (global) academic marketplace of ideas, which produces the imperative of instant response to the present situation and the imperative of a distinctive claim to prediction about its resolution, the future of capitalism and of the present global civilization in general. To appreciate the scope and distinctiveness of this current topical fervor in the academic marketplace, we should go back to the 1980s and 1990s, when scholarly dealing with the economic coordinates of social life was not as widely felt to be a particularly acute need in the academic world. In that kind of retrospection, the current production of crisis clarification discourse may sometimes appear to be a rash academic fashion forming dramatically in the wake of social upheaval, in counter-distinction to the perspective of the kinds of analytical approach framed by the notion of *longue durée*.

A tremendous critical archive has emerged on the subjects of debt, financialization, and capitalism in general in recent years, sometimes as a call for a return to earlier discourses on similar subjects (notably Marxism), but more importantly, as an effort that seeks to refocus general academic debates across a range of disciplines around issues that are economic in character (such as globalization, contemporary capitalism, etc.). There is a great deal of variety in scholarly talk about capitalism today; perhaps a dominant intellectual perception of the recent crisis is one that insists on its severity and unmanageability (and sometimes, especially in reinvigorated Marxist discourse, on its finality); this perception is certainly fed by the actual economic context itself, but it cannot be fully understood outside the context of the current marketplace of ideas which sometimes favors instantaneous academic positioning on current affairs. In this regard, the title of Piketty's book may appear overly ambitious in its bid to address "capital in the twenty-first century" (he expresses in the book some reservations about its title<sup>5</sup>). Nevertheless, there is certainly much methodological appeal in

<sup>5</sup> Acknowledging his "total inability to predict what form capital will take in 2063 or 2113," he adds that "the history of income and wealth is always deeply political, chaotic, and unpredictable. How this history plays out depends on how societies view inequalities and what kinds of policies and institutions they adopt

Piketty's work, and it lies in the very premise that capitalism should be studied from a longer perspective, and that its present forms can be known, and known better, and in a more comprehensive way than mainstream economics sees it. Piketty's analyses of long-term trends in wealth distribution raise greatly important theoretical and practical questions. However, I will primarily deal in this article with his proposition that literature offers an understanding of the economic that is as intellectually relevant as some other types of discourse.

A scholar trained primarily in economics, Piketty is quick to point to insufficiencies of mainstream disciplinary economics, especially in "its childish passion for mathematics and for purely theoretical and often highly ideological speculation" (32). He maintains that his main focus of study, which is the question of the distribution of wealth, cannot be analyzed or explained solely in economic terms, since the very forms of inequality in the distribution of wealth are generated in the political sphere. Advising against "economic determinism in regard to inequalities of wealth and income," Piketty writes that "[t]he history of the distribution of wealth has always been deeply political, and it cannot be reduced to purely economic mechanisms" (20). For such reasons, "[i]f we are to progress in our understanding of the historical dynamics of the wealth distribution and the structure of social classes, we must obviously take a pragmatic approach and avail ourselves of the methods of historians, sociologists, and political scientists as well as economists" (33). Economics "should never have sought to separate itself from the other social sciences" (32).

In addition to this call for cross-disciplinarity, Piketty claims that much can be learned from a discourse not usually presented as a form of knowledge, and that is literature. Novels by Austen or Balzac contain important insight about inequalities of wealth distribution in their time periods and social contexts: "Film and literature, nineteenth-century novels especially, are full of detailed information about the relative wealth and living standards of different social groups, and especially about the deep structure of inequality, the way it is justified, and its impact on individual lives." While he does not speak in much detail about the representational logic of narrative texts in their depiction of social reality, the implication of his views on literature as a source of economic knowledge is twofold. On the one hand, nineteenth-century novels possessed an exploratory aspect, as they "grasped the hidden contours of wealth" (2), which proposition really means that the novels provided a heuristic perspective on economic issues, but it also raises the awkward question of explaining why and from what perspective the contours of wealth should appear hidden in the first place. On the other hand, Piketty seems to suggest that novelistic representation of the repercussions of wealth distribution on the lived experience of individual people may be said

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to measure and transform them. No one can foresee how these things will change in the decades to come." While stressing the importance of the study of the past "to help us to see a little more clearly what kinds of choices we will face in the coming century," he also suggests that the book "logically speaking should have been entitled 'Capital at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century'" (35).

to be particularly vivid and persuasive.<sup>6</sup> To literary scholars this may be nothing new: many practitioners of literary criticism (excluding various formalist approaches) routinely assume that literature is a valuable resource of information on social realities; take for instance the special place that literary texts have had in postcolonial studies. Piketty's claim contains a highly important proposition, one that is sometimes forgotten in exclusive and solitary preoccupation with internal disciplinary matters: different academic discourses (such as economics, history, sociology, political science, philosophy) deal with the common human experience, the knowledge of the totality of which clearly cannot be a matter of disciplinary specialization. In his view, it is the mutual dialogue of many disciplines that brings us closer to a better understanding of social and economic realities, with literature ascribed an important part in piecing together the big picture.<sup>7</sup>

### The novel as historical thought

Certainly, not all literature offers insights into the kinds of questions that interest Piketty (such as distribution of wealth). Nor does literature that is more economically minded offer the same kinds of insight. Nor do critics necessarily agree on what kind of insight a literary text may offer. Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* may serve as an illustration here. In the novel, as in other Austen novels, there is very little representation of the productive processes in society, and of the economic processes as such; rather, the focus is on the domestic life of the gentry. Of course, the wealth of the gentry had an economic basis, but this economic realm is seldom directly represented in Austen novels, partly because these narratives are focalized through female protagonists from the ranks of the gentry, whose domestic lives are kept apart from the conventionally male spheres of work and money. On the other hand, the mechanisms of social hierarchy and the functioning of social capital (status), especially on the borders between adjacent social ranks, is the kind of social topic these texts sought to dramatize intensely. Yet, *Mansfield Park* also features an interesting element of self-reflexivity about its own social optics: Fanny Price oversteps the conventionalities of gender by asking Sir Thomas Bertram about the slave trade, the kind of conversation his daughters do

<sup>6</sup> He writes that nineteenth-century novelists (such as Austen, Balzac and others) "depicted the effects of inequality with a verisimilitude and evocative power that no statistical or theoretical analysis can match" (2).

<sup>7</sup> Also, Piketty stresses that matters such as distribution of wealth are necessarily always subject to political differences. "Indeed," he writes, "the distribution of wealth is too important an issue to be left to economists, sociologists, historians, and philosophers. It is of interest to everyone, and that is a good thing ... Democracy will never be supplanted by a republic of experts— and that is a very good thing." But it is important to study the distribution of wealth "in a systematic and methodical fashion" (2). He states that "[s]ocial scientific research is and always will be tentative and imperfect. It does not claim to transform economics, sociology, and history into exact sciences. But by patiently searching for facts and patterns and calmly analyzing the economic, social, and political mechanisms that might explain them, it can inform democratic debate and focus attention on the right questions" (3).

not wish to participate in (aware of that, Fanny says: “I love to hear my uncle talk about West Indies . . . but then I am unlike other people, I dare say,” 165). For Edward Said, the episode of the Antigua trip testifies to the imperialist basis of the wealth of the novel’s protagonists: “The Bertrams could not have been possible without the slave trade, sugar, and the colonial planter class” (94), and Said places their story in the context of the historical decline of the absentee planter class, occasioned by a number of factors, including changing economic conditions and abolition of the slave trade. Franco Moretti suggested in response to Said that Sir Thomas’s trip is simply required by the narrative logic which calls for his absence from Mansfield Park, and that the status and wealth of the English gentry was not generally a result of colonialism: “I have been convinced by those historians for whom the colonies played certainly a significant, but not an *indispensable* role in British economic life” (24–25). There is, of course, the problem of what the novel actually says about the Bertrams, since it appears to say very little: was the Antigua plantation a source or a corollary of their belonging to the English landed elite? Is their baronetcy a recently acquired status? Are they representative of a historical class (say, colonial planters) and a historical process (for instance, Said reads the Bertrams’ story in the context of a decline of the absentee colonial planter class, p.94)? What does the novel suggest about the connection between domestic wealth and the empire in general? While a careful reading of the text trying to engage such questions could reveal much more than can be attempted here, suffice it to say that Said may have a point in connecting national and imperial affairs, just as Moretti may have a point in suggesting that the wealth of the gentry as a social class may not be directly or exclusively attributable to the Empire. Yet, even in its vagueness on this issue, *Mansfield Park* displays a *historical imagination* at work, at the very least by forcing its readers to ask such questions—questions whose complexity is such that they remain points of contention in critical and historiographic discourses.

The novel is an eminently modern historical form, as major theorists of the novel, from Georg Lukács to Ian Watt to Michael McKeon, have frequently maintained. Its historicity has to do not only with its point of origin at the beginning of the modern era, but also with its representational logic. As for the latter, Bakhtin’s writings provide a useful theoretical mediation here, inasmuch as his theory of the novel was greatly influenced by formalist thought that sought to explain how literature works chiefly at the level of the functioning of language. Bakhtin’s concept of heteroglossia, however, represents a step beyond formalist abstraction into the historicity of language itself: as such, it is a momentous contribution to the understanding of both language and literary text. If language is the stuff of the novel, Bakhtin points out that this stuff is always a multiplicity of genres and idioms of speech and writing, which also means that this heteroglot resource of literature is always social and historical. The corollary implication is that literary texts are always inhabited by history in a concrete way. Another concept that Bakhtin introduced to describe the historicity of literature is chronotope. The concept of literary chronotope is part of Bakhtin’s project of “historical poetics” (85), and it means several things, most commonly a concrete literary image that unites temporal and spatial elements, or an “intrinsic connectedness of temporal

or spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (84); a particular literary chronotope could be described as the specific way in which a literary text organizes (imagines) its relationship with historical reality. While Bakhtin analyzed examples of several literary images as chronotopes (those of the road, of the threshold, etc.), he also clearly stated that “any and every literary image is chronotopic,” and so is language as such (251). Chronotope on this view is the constitutive condition of language and literature, which can also be described as the concreteness and inseparability of historical space and time expressed in the medium of language (literature included). The point here is not that Bakhtin’s concept needs to be taken for granted in its specific analytical articulations, or that any such concept needs to be given special consideration because it was advanced by a literary theorist; rather, the point is that without such an insistence on historical concreteness the literary text is necessarily unintelligible to anyone, theorist or otherwise. Such a concept offers the advantage of avoiding the many awkward theoretical snags of various binarisms (reality/representation; world/text; base/superstructure). It could be remarked, and with good reason, that Bakhtin’s analyses of chronotopes greatly involve texts from the premodern period (from Greek romances to Rabelais), which raises the question of whether the history of narrative literature in his account involves an epistemological break as Lukács or Watt theorized in their different ways. A more detailed reading would demonstrate that Bakhtin, too, in his various works, discussed such a break; however, the usefulness of the concept of the chronotope lies primarily in its emphasis on the historical concreteness of literature as such.

But how is this historical concreteness of the literary text to be unpacked from the text as its representational narrative strategy? Texts of course construct very different strategies of their engagement with or evocation of historical realities: *Robinson Crusoe*, for instance, which was published at the dawn of the English novel, is famously radical in its claim to historicity: at the time when the novel as a genre does not even have a name or a cultural legitimacy that would be furnished by the subsequent centuries, in the Preface the “editor” presents the story as “a just history of fact” (7), a narrative convention that claims for this particular fiction an intensely historical character. One could unerringly state that the chief chronotopic image of the novel is the Atlantic world, inasmuch as the novel is illegible without an understanding of shifts in global trade, European colonialism, Atlantic trade routes, and the slave trade, but also the financial revolution in England at the turn of the eighteenth century, as well as a number of other historical events and phenomena that it draws into its own fabric. Such evocation of the concrete is not in this novel (and indeed cannot be) a matter of simple mimetic reconstruction; rather, it is a way of putting historical realities into a specific perspective, which forms the narrative work of introspection whose point is to allegorically narrativize, as Michael McKeon states, the internalization by Crusoe of a capitalist work ethic (Crusoe’s time on the island provides him with “the psychological equipment for possessive individualism,” 334). The autobiographical narrative format functions in the novel as the medium for a coherent articulation of a social ideology. On the other hand, there is a novel such as Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*,

which is just as densely informed by historical realities (of European imperialism in another era) and just as extensive in its geographic imagination, but it is also, as Patrick Brantlinger noted, informed by a modernist cultivation of ambiguity,<sup>8</sup> and this makes it difficult to readily ascertain what the novel “thinks” about imperialism. The narrative delivered by Marlow is going to be “one of Marlow’s inconclusive experiences” (10), as the frame narrator and one of his listeners anticipates: in this way, the text itself advertises its own work of skepticism and irony (the likes of which can hardly be found in *Crusoe*). Even so, a careful reading of Conrad’s text and its ambiguous narrative devices can certainly help us along in unraveling the question of what this text thinks—as a text—about the historical realities it engages.

Novels cannot be disengaged from historical reality: it is in fact this feature of the genre that Ian Watt called “formal realism,” the chief characteristic of the novel as a “full and authentic report of human experience” (32)—what Watt meant is not some measure of the mimetic achievement of a novel’s content, but the novel form itself, which—and here lies the gist of Watt’s theory—has to do with individuality of characters, particulars of time and place (or what could be called history and social geography), and referentiality of novelistic language. This armature of the modern imagination involves individuals acting in a historically imagined world, which is rendered through a language of social concreteness.

### Economic knowledge in *North and South*

To examine some of the ways in which literature might contribute to a (fuller) understanding of a specific historical version of capitalism, I propose to revisit an industrial novel from the 1850s, *North and South* by Elizabeth Gaskell.<sup>9</sup> My intention is to illustrate how this novel functions as a narrative in which the characters develop an improved grasp of the economic and social problems that they contend with; they do so not through a study of specialized discourse but through experience and dialogue, a process of learning or re-cognition featured as a quotidian part of their life in the world.<sup>10</sup> This novel was not always regarded by critics as important as *Mary Barton*, Gaskell’s 1848 novel, in which the Manchester working class has a more central place, and its condition is painted in dire terms. The later novel gave more prominence to

<sup>8</sup> Brantlinger states that “[t]he politics of Conrad’s story is complicated by the story’s ambiguous style” (256), which he attributes to Conrad’s modernist aesthetics.

<sup>9</sup> The analysis of Gaskell’s novel presented in this section may be read as a companion piece to an earlier article of mine, “The Novel as Cultural Geography: Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South*,” which analyzed the spatial imagination in the novel (as regards the domestic space, the regional space, the national space and the global space). Here, the emphasis is more directly placed on the novel’s discourse on economic matters, but the two perspectives are necessarily complementary.

<sup>10</sup> There are several mentions in the novel of the discourse of political economy (without references to actual authors), but the general stance of the novel is that political economy must be seen as just one in a series of public discourses about economic issues; and, in a sense, the novel claims for itself the role of orchestrator of social dialogue among socially opposed views.

an industrialist character, John Thornton, and his opinions on industrial relations, delivered mostly in conversations with the former Anglican clergyman Hale and his daughter Margaret. Their conversations occasionally read as miniature essays on political economy, probably more explicit and articulate as analytical disquisitions than anything else of the kind in mid-Victorian fiction, but still rendered as spirited dialogue of an everyday, non-specialized kind. The large middle section of the story deals with a workers' strike over wages, with the intractable Thornton refusing to consider their demands. Margaret and her father, who come from the south of the country and who are initially unfamiliar with class relations in the northern industrial city, very quickly develop a sense of social solidarity as they seek to intercede with Thornton in the name of promoting better inter-class understanding. Through their acquaintance and conversations with Thornton and the working-class Higgins family, the Hales (and Margaret in particular) also come to refine their understanding of the cotton industry in the north. On the other hand, towards the end of the novel, Thornton establishes dialogue with his workers, and implements a number of changes in his factory (although not as extensive as Robert Owen's at New Lanark), and an understanding—and accommodation—is reached among the two class positions clearly presented as antagonistic at the outset of the story.<sup>11</sup> What Thornton, originally an advocate of the self-regulating market, has to learn is that, to borrow the phraseology devised by Karl Polanyi, the market cannot be disembedded from society, meaning that the “economic system” should not be allowed to overwhelm the “social system.”<sup>12</sup> What the workers have to accept, according to the novel, is that they are in the same boat with the employers and need to work with them to weather inevitable economic storms.

To motivate Thornton's early refusal to negotiate with his workers, Gaskell's novel faced a number of ideological choices as it painted its vision of the complex world of mid-Victorian industrial relations. It could have attributed Thornton's intransigence to his personal traits or to his personal ideologies, which indeed it does to a point, since he is depicted as a man of a stern temper and strong Protestant views on work

<sup>11</sup> Thornton gradually builds up a relationship with Higgins, emblematic of an “intercourse, which though it might not have the effect of preventing all future clash of opinion and action, when the occasion arose, would, at any rate, enable both master and man to look upon each other with far more charity and sympathy, and bear with each other more patiently and kindly” (512-13). In a later comment, Thornton also emphasizes a cognitive effect of the new relationship: “we were both unconsciously and consciously teaching each other” (524).

<sup>12</sup> Polanyi's *The Great Transformation* suggests that the “political and economic origins of our time” (the subtitle of the book) were characterized by a transformation from the mercantilist order in which “markets were merely an accessory feature of an institutional setting controlled and regulated more than ever by social authority” (70) to the modern predicament of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with its “double movement” of market liberalism and the social responses seeking to assert the control of society over the market. Thornton's evolution in his relations with the workers can be said to illustrate this double movement; especially since Thornton seems to develop some views not unlike those of Robert Owen, whom Polanyi credits with a “discovery of society” (133), a view on the primacy of the social over the economic which classical political economists failed to articulate.

and self-making (he is a northern dissenter). On the other hand, Gaskell does much more than couch the social problems in terms of personality or social ideology: she evokes the kinds of concrete problems that emanate from the actual historical developments at the time and that play a part in the practical versions of the social ideologies. For instance, Thornton has to face a transformation in the cotton market: “the Americans are getting their yarns so into the general market, that our only chance is producing them at a lower rate . . . if we don’t get a fair share of the profits to compensate us for our wear and tear here in England, we can move off to some other country” (*North and South* 195).

Margaret asks Thornton at some point why he does not explain to his workers his reasons for “expecting a bad trade,” which Thornton refuses, saying that “[w]e, the owners of capital, have the right to choose what we will do with it” (164). His unwillingness to communicate with his workers changes over the course of the story. However, the point I wish to emphasize has to do (not with Thornton’s self-apology but rather) with the poignancy of the above-quoted description: international competition is driving the prices of cotton products down, and diminishing profits may force industrial capitalists like Thornton to “move off” or relocate their businesses in search of cheaper labor. The possibility of moving off may be interpreted here as anticipating what today would be called outsourcing of production, but it is more likely that Thornton is referring to the removal of the entire business to a different location; a flight of capital and capitalists, too. The method that Thornton actually uses to handle the problems of “bad trade” is to insist on employing cheap labor to replace the striking workers; in this case, his solution is the importation of workers from Ireland. Later in the novel, the narrator picks up the theme of the contemporary cotton economy the novel as the condition of “bad trade” for Thornton and the cotton manufacturers of Milton-Northern worsens; the terse account, which is a reconstruction of Thornton’s thoughts on the subject, dramatizes the problems that come with periodic upswings and downturns of business cycles:

But now had come one of those periods of bad trade, when the market falling brought down the value of all large stocks; Mr. Thornton’s fell to nearly half. No orders were coming in; so he lost the interest of the capital he had locked up in machinery; indeed, it was difficult to get payment for the orders completed; yet there was the constant drain of expenses for working the business. Then the bills became due for the cotton he had purchased; and money being scarce, he could only borrow at exorbitant interest, and yet he could not realise any of his property. (512)

There is much in this description that we encounter in economic downturns in the present-day world: a crisis in the stock market, falling demand, companies experiencing problems with liquidity caused by difficulties in collecting “payment for the orders completed” and rising interest rates on borrowing money—one important difference being that the story takes place before the introduction of limited liability in company

law in Britain; all of Thornton's possessions would be liable in the case of the failure of his mill.<sup>13</sup> The purpose of the above explanation in the novel is to underscore the specific situation of the mid-century cotton industry in England (which can easily be construed as one of the main focuses of the ideological work of the novel). Intertwined with this kind of perspective is another narrative focus, which is the novel's advocacy of the idea of mutual understanding and cooperation between the workers and the capitalists. Even in the hardest of economic times, the novel seems to say, or especially in the hardest of times, there should exist an appreciation of economic conditions, as a basis for mutual accommodation of labor and capital. That is the political argument of the novel. While the content of that argument could make for an interesting analysis, my point here is that the narrative of the novel makes no sense without the concreteness of its imagination of the economic field. And, as we turn to acknowledge the concreteness of this relationship, we also need to acknowledge the wider constellation of social discourse of which the Gaskell novel is a part. Catherine Gallagher discussed this constellation that is often referred to as the condition of England debate.<sup>14</sup> Gallagher's main focus was on industrial novels, but she placed them in the context of a miscellaneous array of texts in mid-nineteenth century Britain, including social and cultural criticism, political economy, religious writing, and a variety of other discourses, all of which had in common an attempt to make sense of tremendous social changes brought about by the advent of industrial capitalism. In this wider constellation, it makes sense to speak of the novel as a rather special form of purveying knowledge of the social. Let me briefly explain this claim: on the one hand, specialized academic knowledge of contemporary society did not exist at the time (just as the modern university as we know it today did not exist then), and the discourse of political economy, a rare example of scholastic discourse that dealt with the contemporary, even if it enjoyed some circulation among literate audiences, seemed more concerned with defining the central terms of its analysis (value, rent, etc.) than with the massive social effects of industrial capitalism in all of society. The novel, on the other hand, was under these circumstances better placed to construct imaginative worlds with the ambition of encompassing the totality of contemporary social experiences, and the novel as a genre could take upon itself this kind of mission, since it was beginning to speak of and for the nation at large to an ever-growing audience (albeit from a middle-class perspective).<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Legislation such as the Limited Liability Act of 1855 and the Joint-Stock Companies Act of 1856 introduced limited liability in Britain, and brought about a great change in the operations of joint-stock companies and capitalist economy in general. *North and South* was published in weekly parts between September 1854 and January 1855, and its story is set in the time before limited liability. Also, Thornton is the sole owner of his cotton mill, which means that he does not share the liability for a potential business failure with others.

<sup>14</sup> See Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction. Social Discourse and Narrative Form 1832-1867*. The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1985.

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of changes in the literary field that led to an increase in the social authority of professional middle-class novelists around mid-century, see the Introduction in my book *Figures of Finance Capitalism. Writing, Class, and Capital in the Age of Dickens*.

The concreteness of social vision in *North and South* can also be examined in terms of its historical imagination. “Seventy years ago, what was it? And now what is it not?” (124), muses Thornton about the relatively short history of industrial capitalism. This question expressly evokes the image of the enormous transformative power of industrial capitalism. And it is not a stretch to suggest that the novel in this way poses the question of where the Manchester cotton business will be seventy years thence, and later. It is interesting to remark in this regard that the novel is chronologically situated at the point of what we now know to have been the start of the long decline of British cotton manufacturing, or rather the decline of the near-monopoly position which it enjoyed globally in the first half of the nineteenth century. There is some prefiguration of that decline in the novel—the effects of international (American) competition, the intimation of the falling rates of profit in the English cotton business, the “realizing” of the capital of the Milton-Northern (that is, Manchester) millocracy at the end of the narrative. The novel’s historical imagination is significant precisely for its suggestion that the heyday of the English cotton industry with its almost unrivaled domination of the world market cannot be maintained as it was. Thus, the perception of the vast social transformation brought about by the cotton industry seems to be coupled in the novel with the emerging inkling that the cotton industry in England might be losing steam. Equally intriguing is the novel’s insistence on the dependence of British industrial capitalism on an economy of rentiership—namely, late in the story Margaret inherits from her godfather, Mr. Bell, the land on which Thornton’s factory stands, and becomes his landlord,<sup>16</sup> before the story ends with a scene suggesting the two characters are going to marry. And finally, the prospect of a transformation of British capitalism away from industry and towards a more speculative form of capital accumulation looms large over the end of the story, as Thornton appears rather a holdout in comparison with some of the industrialists who turn to speculation (like his brother-in-law). Again, the point is that the novel was able to deeply appreciate the complexities and tendencies of historical shifts, especially the fact that trends in British industrial capitalism could not be fully understood outside the quite concrete context of global economic relations, the quite concrete place of land-ownership in the industrial economy, and the quite concrete temptation of speculative money, all of which are quite concretely part of the novel’s fabric.

Raymond Williams thought *North and South* less interesting than *Mary Barton*, inasmuch as Gaskell’s first industrial novel strove to depict the living and working conditions and culture of the working class, while the second focused more on the attitudes of other classes toward the working class. On the other hand, wrote Wil-

<sup>16</sup> The fact that Thornton does not own the land on which his mill is located suggests that Gaskell did not view the contemporary class system in binary terms; her views may be said to coincide with David Ricardo’s identification of three classes in the economic sphere: “The produce of the earth—all that is derived from its surface by the united application of labor, machinery, and capital, is divided among three classes of the community, namely, the proprietor of the land, the owner of the stock or capital necessary for its cultivation, and the laborers by whose industry it is cultivated” (13).

liams, “Margaret’s arguments with the mill-owner Thornton are interesting and honest, within the political and economic conceptions of the period” (91). This somewhat cryptic remark is not accompanied by an explanation of what Williams would have considered as thinking outside “the political and economic conceptions of the period”—unless we chalk this up to the conventional Marxist idea of some revolutionary vision. Interestingly enough, Williams observed that both novels sought their resolutions outside the realm of labor and capital: *Mary Barton* by shipping some of its protagonists to Canada, and *North and South* through the mediation of the southern genteel habitus represented by Margaret Hale. At the most elementary level, it is misleading to construct such an inside/outside dynamic, since neither can the national stage be severed from the imperial stage, nor is it possible to ignore the fact that other social groups, ideologies, and tensions made up British society at that time, and not just industrial capital and labor. In fact, it could be argued that the most interesting thing about *North and South* is precisely its thematization of the forces that do not lie outside the national yet can be said to lie outside the purely economic.

Let us take another look here at Thornton’s habitus as an industrialist. In the early stages of his conversations with the Hales, he advocates a stark form of market liberalism: at the beginning of the process of industrialization, he states, everyone involved had the same opportunities, but due to differences in natural disposition (“motherwit”, 124) and application, there arose differentiation into “masters” and “hands.” Those among the “hands” who exert themselves can join the ranks of those who own or manage or help in the management of business. In other words, the suggestion is not far that the poor and the industrial workers have only themselves to blame for their social and economic position. Another contemporary industrial novel, Dickens’s *Hard Times*, satirized this kind of ideology poignantly: “This, again, was among the fictions of Coketown. Any capitalist there, who had made sixty thousand pounds out of sixpence, always professed to wonder why the sixty thousand nearest Hands didn’t each make sixty thousand pounds out of sixpence, and more or less reproached them every one for not accomplishing the little feat” (90).

Thornton does not remain married to such an ideology, as Gaskell has him strive to change his views “beyond the mere ‘cash nexus’” (525), and he abandons the fictions of laissez faire in the name of improving the relations between owners and workers. In fact, from the start the novel goes to great lengths to construct a motivation for Thornton outside the logic of mere capital accumulation, so that for him capitalist industrial production (the production of an industrial commodity) does not appear to be simply a pretext for making money. It was certainly possible then as it is now to regard capital purely as a vehicle for its own reproduction, and the actual technique of accumulation as a mere technicality dependent on historically available avenues of the most effective accumulation. So is it like that for Thornton? The novel insists that it is not, and it does so by equipping Thornton with an ethic of work (“I would rather be a man toiling, suffering . . . here, than lead a dull prosperous life in the old worn grooves . . . down in the South” 122). Thornton in fact rejects two models of wealth

accumulation and/or possession — inherited landed wealth as well as wealth acquired by speculation (the novel contains a cautionary tale about his father's failed speculations, as well as the story of Thornton's rejection of the temptation of speculation as the cotton industry begins to decline). In effect, Gaskell is constructing a view of capitalist economy which stresses that capital operates in conjunction with the social cultures which manage it and which are external to it. The novel's rejection of the cash nexus as the exclusive social regulator—i.e., the repudiation of the liberal project of disembedding the economic from the social—is coupled with a critique of the ethics of patrician rent collection and financial speculation. Indeed, what Williams saw as a limitation of Gaskell's vision in the novel can be interpreted as historical astuteness, since Gaskell refused to accept the view of the social totality in which an economic logic is the ultimately determining instance. At the same time she called for an ethics of social cooperation. Imagining the social realm in the narrative is presented through a series of possibilities (market liberalism vs. class cooperation, industry vs. speculation, dialogue vs. antagonism, etc.), and not as a simple unfolding of an iron logic of economic determinism. And finally, Gaskell posits the idea of economic knowledge not as a secret that needs to be illuminated by special intellectual expertise, but a discourse that falls within the competence and prerogative of everyday conversation and ordinary people.

### Inscriptions of money and the novel

In a masterly and compelling book on the “genres of the credit economy” in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Mary Poovey has suggested that these genres “initially performed a single function—they helped Britons understand and learn how to negotiate the market model of value” (25). The genres of the credit economy included imaginative writing (fiction), financial writing (analytical writing such as political economy), and monetary genres (or actual monetary instruments, such as bills of exchange, bank paper, checks). In other words, the credit economy was sustained by and expressed through a variety of different forms of written discourse, ranging from the actual representation of monetary value by various forms of inscribed paper through attempts at explaining the functioning of such an economy to different modes of narrativizing it as literature—the latter receiving its own discursive authority from the very assumption/claim that this kind of fiction is resonant with lived experience. Thus, Poovey's book can be described as an interdisciplinary (and almost ethnographic) analysis of inscriptions of the credit economy, which inventories various generic conventions that expressed the social mechanisms of what she calls “mediating value” in Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The book's analysis is underwritten by the claim that, as forms of inscription, the representations of value in inscribed paper and in imaginative writing formed a single cultural fact/fiction continuum. Other literary scholars before Poovey pointed to a close relationship between money and writing; for instance, Mark Shell observed that “[c]oins were the first widely circulating publications or impressions in history” (1978: 64), and there

is certainly much to be said about the history of this relationship.<sup>17</sup> However, Poovey's analysis is not informed by such a sweepingly long perspective; she primarily focuses on what she calls "normalization" of paper money, that is, "its increased invisibility *as* writing" (59), in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the foundations of the modern system of finance were laid. This process, which can also be understood as the process of standardization of (different forms of) money, cannot be properly analyzed without reference to important technological developments that facilitated the technical feasibility of paper money (such as its durability and resistance to counterfeiting), which Poovey's book also acknowledges while discussing the function of the other genres of the "credit economy" (political economy and literature) that helped shore up the normalization of (inscribed) paper as money.

As an interdisciplinary account of this complex historical process, Poovey's book provides a powerful analysis of the interplay between economy and culture, and in doing so it relies on an analytical perspective that comes with an advantage but also a potential weakness. The advantage is that it can help emphasize the conventional (or socially constructed) character of money as an economic instrument of mediating value sustained by a complex set of social conventions and arrangements that arose in a specific time period. This in turn may help reexamine the role that money (and, more broadly speaking, credit) as a form of value has had as a linchpin of capitalist economy over the last few centuries. The weaker point of her account lies in its openness to the temptation of overvaluing the significance of the literary end of the fact/fiction continuum. One of the social effects of literature may indeed have been to help "naturalize" the social functioning of money, but would it not be fair to say that such naturalization is endemic to the totality of practices of everyday life, and perhaps irrecoverable from (or irreducible to) just literary inscription? In addition, there are historical developments without which it is not possible to fully comprehend what Poovey calls the naturalization of money, and here I mean the broader economic arena that involves both nineteenth-century industrialization and the evolution of finance capitalism in general, as well as the rise of the modern state with a stake in the routinization of economic life (the very notion of legal tender is a concept hardly thinkable outside the standardization of state functions as well), imperial and global relations, exchanges and economies, evolution of the notion of citizenship, changing legislative environments, etc.

In her discussion of the functioning of literary texts in the context of the "credit economy,"<sup>18</sup> Poovey gives a special place to an analysis of what she calls Jane Austen's "gestural aesthetic" in *Pride and Prejudice*, by which she means a specific Austenian nar-

<sup>17</sup> Shell claims that "money talks in and through discourse in general"; his analysis of "the monetary information of discourse" (1982: 180) involves the assumption that language and thought must be studied historically in their relationship to money as a form of inscription.

<sup>18</sup> While Poovey's book does not offer a systematic discussion of the phrase "credit economy," what she has in mind is not so much a particular stage in the development of the British economy spanning most of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, but a specific aspect of the British economy in that time period, one involving money and credit.

rative strategy that manages the relationship between the text and historical reality. This gestural aesthetic takes shape as a strategy of reductive referentiality: “it gestures towards extratextual events but so carefully manages these allusions that the reader is invited back into the text instead of encouraged to go outside its pages” (363). One type of the gestural strategy in the novel, “foreclosure of reference” (363), is used in dealing with military characters in such a way that the real historical events (such as the war with France) are left largely unreferenced. The handling of the money plot (concerning the financial situation of the Bennets and some other characters) is an example of the second gestural strategy that Poovey identifies; there is studied indirection in the novel about the theme of money: “In the first three quarters of *Pride and Prejudice* money is mentioned only twice” (363), writes Poovey.<sup>19</sup> Of course, the money plot is central to the lives of the Bennet daughters, whose status and prospects in the marriage plot are severely limited by the circumstance of their family’s entailed estate. It is only in the final part of the novel, Poovey claims, that issues of money and debt are given a more prominent representation, as Wickham’s amorous exploits turn out to have been actuated for financial reasons. Thus, the gestural management of the topic of money for Poovey means the withholding of a more elaborate representation of the financial events (which are nevertheless alluded to), as well as “narrative direction of the reader’s attention,” or “controlling access to various plots and the information they contain” (363). In addition, Poovey attributes to the text yet another form of gestural strategy: “The best way I can describe this is a kind of translation, for, by a series of substitutions, Austen gradually replaces the money plot’s primary terms with a different set of terms that promise comfort instead of posing a threat. Thus, she transforms the fiscal jeopardy the Bennet girls face into a romantic threat, which, while potentially emotionally painful, can be solved within the domestic plot” (364). This narrative translation involves Wickham (whose pursuit of Elizabeth and then elopement with Lydia is motivated by heavy personal debt), as well as Darcy (whose ultimate act of paying off Wickham’s debts is readable as his acknowledgment of Elizabeth’s influence in the transformation of his own actions).<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> This is not exactly accurate; the word *money* is mentioned a few more times than that in the first three quarters of the book. But more importantly, amounts of money are mentioned quite often. For example, “Mr. Bennet’s property consisted almost entirely in an estate of two thousand a year, which, unfortunately for his daughters, was entailed, in default of heirs male, on a distant relation; and their mother’s fortune, though ample for her situation in life, could but ill supply the deficiency of his. Her father had been an attorney in Meryton, and had left her four thousand pounds” (27). Before that we find out that Bingley inherited property worth nearly 100,000 pounds, etc.

<sup>20</sup> A very specific historical event that Poovey summons as an “occasion” for the novel is the passage of the Bank Restriction Act in 1797, which temporarily suspended the obligation of the Bank of England to redeem paper money with gold (it remained in effect for more than two decades). Since the paper money issued by the Bank was based on the Bank’s promise of conversion to gold, Poovey attributed to the Act a “fiscal, political and epistemological uncertainty” (371), the repercussions of which seem to be analogous to the novel’s themes, while there is no evidence that the text itself directly refers to it. Poovey’s discussion of the similarity between money as promise and the theme of promises in interpersonal relationships in the novel is a little stretched, but it does raise the important issue of the political drama of the Act as one in the many pieces of history that surround the novel.

As is clear from the previous remarks, Poovey maintained that Austen's "gestural aesthetic" was, at least in part, a strategy of providing ideological comfort in the face of historical pressures, a way to provide her readership (presumably similarly placed in the world as her novels' protagonists) with symbolic narrative resolutions to (or escapes from) actual historical problems, while giving "the Literary experience the value that seemed exempt from market price" (372). On the other hand, such claims become somewhat problematic if we shift the analytical perspective a little: if we assume that the effect of Austen's narrative management is not so much to veil historical processes and exclude them from the text as it is to reinforce their presence in the text, albeit by reference that might appear elliptical or reductive. The opening sentence of the novel ("It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife," 5) can hardly be said to downplay the money plot; if anything, it constructs, slightly ironically, a vantage point from which the money plot and the domestic plot are conflated. In contrast to the somewhat exclusionary connotation of Poovey's actual reading of the "gestural aesthetic" in the Austen novel, I find the problematic summoned by this phrase to be indicative of an inexorable constitutive relationship between the literary text and historical reality. That is, even when narrative texts abound in references to the actual world outside them, the nature of the reference is of necessity gestural or elliptical inasmuch as the text is not *the representation* but *a representation* of an irreducibly complex and specific historical reality. The character of this relationship, therefore, has to be gestural inasmuch as the text engages the complexities of historical reality in ways that cannot be fully represented or narratively managed by the text itself. The constitutive effect of gestural involvement of the text with the world is that the text makes no sense without our recognition of its gesturing to the world. The referentiality of literary texts is always necessarily reductive, but it is nevertheless referential; while some form of managed, limited referentiality is to be found in every novel, organizing different strategies of representation and different aesthetic styles, each novel is in its overall intelligibility nevertheless predicated on referentiality as a condition of its meaning-making. Understood in this way, gesturing could be regarded as a general characteristic of novels, since even in their selective referentiality, novels refuse, as it were, to be disembedded from the world. This embeddedness is a quality of literary texts that I characterized earlier as historical concreteness. Of course, this kind of observation does not remove the question of the actual manner in which Austen's novel engages the world it gestures at. Poovey's view is that "Austen's novels rendered their relationship to actual events less important than their ability to conjure up a self-contained, self-referential world" (372).

One way in which Poovey's concern with gestural representation in Austen could be profitably complemented (or revised) is by emphasis on the kind of understanding

<sup>21</sup> As a sociologist of culture, Bourdieu focused primarily on the functioning of the field of cultural production, using in his analysis the terminology of economic relations (capital), but also suggesting that capital appears in many forms (economic, cultural, social), and that different forms of capital can be converted into other forms under certain conditions. His simultaneous attribution of explanatory primacy

of value or capital that we find in the cultural sociology of Pierre Bourdieu,<sup>21</sup> which is an understanding analogous to the one articulated in the novels by Jane Austen. Poovey's insight, which is effectively informed by the disciplinary frame of her historical-ethnographic approach as well as by her insistence on issues of representation, is that representing value in or as literature is not merely an economic affair. But what Poovey sees as the substitution of the money plot by the domestic plot in *Pride and Prejudice*, as an example of the novel's elliptical referentiality, is in fact the chief thematic concern in Austen's novels on the whole. The point of both Austen's narrative sociology and Bourdieu's sociology of culture is that their concept of value is not reductively economic. Neither Austen's nor Bourdieu's perspective reduce capital to economic capital, and both project a view of social totality which is never simply economically defined, while simultaneously acknowledging the very processes of economic life as having central importance. Value, capital, and especially the conversion of one form of capital into another form of capital—these are the central themes of both Austenian and Bourdieuan social analysis. In this regard, it could be said that Piketty's use of Austen's texts, interesting and perceptive as it is, does not fully engage the structure of her social vision: her novels do not only illustrate processes of wealth distribution expressed in monetary terms, but at least equally importantly they dramatize the distribution and flows of different forms of capital (especially social capital), and in this way present a rather complex view of social and historical processes in England in that time period.

Let me briefly illustrate here different ways in which Austen's texts gesture both subtly and broadly. An example of the former is found in the already mentioned Antigua episode in *Mansfield Park*, the ambiguity of which has led to Moretti's polemic with Said. The other example of gesturing, one of broad social mapping, is the theme of convertibility of capital (a central narrative concern in Austen's novels). The Antigua episode, which takes Sir Thomas Bertram away from Mansfield Park, raises the question of whether Sir Thomas's absence is motivated purely by narrative reasons (of moving the plot in a certain direction, as Moretti claimed), or whether it was a way for the novel to relate the wealth of the British gentry to British imperialism (as Said claimed).<sup>22</sup> Speaking of *Pride and Prejudice*, Tony Tanner offered an interesting formulation of the somewhat contradictory functioning of the historical imagination in that novel: "although history is discernible out of the corner of the eye . . . the overall impression given by the book is of a small section of society locked in an almost—

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to economic capital and assumption of the relative autonomy of the social operations of other forms of capital is a matter that requires a much broader discussion than can be attempted here. For Bourdieu's discussion of different types of capital, see "The Forms of Capital."

<sup>22</sup> Here is Piketty's view: "Foreign possessions first became important in the period 1750–1800, as we know, for instance, from Sir Thomas's investments in the West Indies in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*. But the share of foreign assets remained modest: when Austen wrote her novel in 1812, they represented, as far as we can tell from the available sources, barely 10 percent of Britain's national income, or one-thirtieth of the value of agricultural land (which amounted to more than three years of national income). Hence it comes as no surprise to discover that most of Austen's characters lived on the rents from their rural properties" (120).

*almost*—timeless, ahistorical present in which very little will or can, or even should, change” (104). The same dynamic is at work in *Mansfield Park*: since the narrative is mostly associated with Fanny’s (that is, domestic) perspective, (public) history can only be glimpsed peripherally, which in turn reinforces the impression of the stability of the small social order of the provincial gentry depicted in the novel. Yet, even this peripheral glimpse, as Tanner emphasized, precludes the assumption of a thoroughly ahistorical optics, as the social order is presented as almost stable,<sup>23</sup> but really not quite. This form of Austenian gestural representation, which proceeds consistently from the sociological motivation of the novel’s narrative method, urges us to read the novel relative not only to the kinds of questions framed by Moretti’s polemic with Said, but—because of its very broadness—to a whole array of other questions about the circulation of capital and power in the national and global contexts from which Austen’s England cannot be disengaged.

The second example of Austenian gesturing is not limited to a plausible but telling reticence of the first example; in fact, it is the very opposite of that. It is the very matter of the plot, in the form of the marriage market narrative and its evocation of a specific system of class and capital. This gestural strategy is direct and not subtle at all; it involves an unrestrained depiction of circuits and conventions of the exchange of social and economic power. That is the story in *Pride and Prejudice* of Bingley, who affiliates his northern economic capital with the prestige of the southern gentry class; or the story in *Mansfield Park* of Maria Ward, who marries above her social status in spite of the circumstance that her dowry falls short by £3000 (which she makes up by her personal charm, or having “the good luck to captivate Sir Thomas Bertram,” 5). Like Pierre Bourdieu in a different period and context, Austen was interested in mapping out the mechanisms of convertibility of different forms of capital, and she understood that economic capital at the turn of the nineteenth century was only one form of capital in a complex constellation of social distinction. Even though her narratives focus on a tiny social group—the lowest echelons of the aristocracy, the gentry and the provincial classes in their orbit, this focus is not only pointedly ethnographic but also pointedly representative, inasmuch as it identifies the dominant logic of the contemporary British class system. This is a logic of both hierarchy and co-optation, of maintaining a rigid routine of social stratification while allowing for traffic in social and economic capital on the borders separating neighboring strata, and thus allowing a limited measure of class mobility. Bingley does get his genteel connections in marrying Jane Bennet, and Sir Thomas Bertram does get a fair amount of money by marrying Maria Ward. However, what has made Austen’s narratives so interesting over the years is the fact that they are not merely reproductions of the market logic of convertibility of different kinds of capital, but that they always involve what in their own terms must appear as a departure from that logic. Bingley and Jane (major but not central characters) in fact marry for love, regardless of the fact that in some ways there

<sup>23</sup> There is some economic context for this perception of stability: Piketty mentions that the average income in England at the time when Austen wrote her novels “could have been observed in 1720 or 1770” (105).

are also benefits to come from the association of his money and her genteel pedigree. Similarly, there is an element of affection in the making of the marriage between Sir Thomas Bertram and Maria Ward. For the protagonists, the departure from the dominant logic is always slightly more dramatic: Darcy marries Elizabeth Bennet without gaining much in terms of social or economic capital, and the same goes for Edmund's marrying Fanny Price. In both cases the matches are presented as marriages of affection (with much of the narrative working as the gradual realization by the characters of both the affection and their defiance of the norm). In *Mansfield Park*, the woman protagonist gains distinction as the emerging moral arbiter of her social environment, despite her humble origins—this is an even more dramatic departure from the dominant class and gender conventions than Elizabeth's assertion of her moral authority in *Pride and Prejudice*. The work of Austen's narrative thus consists both in mapping and in suggesting; it is a class ethnography as well as a politics of imagining changes to a patriarchal and stratified society.

Austen's ability to map out the circulations of social and economic capital, and to describe a sort of political economy of this circulation (albeit focusing on only a limited segment of the social world) points forward to the sociological imagination of Pierre Bourdieu. On a hopefully humorous note, one thinks of the uncompromisingly tedious style of Bourdieu's sociological analysis as a distant relative of Austen's equally uncompromisingly repetitive narrative situations. The slight variations in Austen's narratives ineluctably lead to painting the same social world, always more clearly depicted with each new version. But this is not a static world bound by an iron logic. Austen constructs a world that sees itself as fixed in its ways (of the political economy of different forms of capital), while at the same time it stands besieged by constant change, which is precisely why the loci of change—the northern industrial areas, the overseas empire, the world at large, and finally London as the conduit of all these forces—remain gesturally present even as their continual pressure on the internal structure of the world of the gentry is left largely unrepresented.

It is also in this sense that the mid-Victorian novel is, in the main, the offspring to Austen's narrative vision. The Dickensian world, for instance, is drawn in different strokes of humor and pathos, his topical and reformist zeal is a novelty, his social focus is on the lower-middle class, but the basic contours of his understanding of economic and social capital are the same as in Austen. In the Gaskell novel, there is a way of acknowledging and re-working Austen's narrative procedure. Tanner claimed the cognitive theme for *Pride and Prejudice*: he read the novel as “a drama of re-cognition” (105), of re-view; in other words, as a story of gaining knowledge, as a method, a story of learning. It is in those terms that we can describe Gaskell's indebtedness to Austen, beyond the superficial similarities of the marriage plot between Austen's novels and *North and South*. The process of re-cognition, or of overcoming prejudice, is in Tanner's reading situated in the individual consciousness of the character, and certainly there is an analogy between Elizabeth and Margaret in that sense. And then there is also the work of the narrative itself, which is organized as production of a complex map of the social world. In this regard, the passage from Austen to Gaskell

is a passage in the assessment of historical change in the social world; Austen's *almost* but not quite timeless ahistorical present becomes Gaskell's dramatic *yet* accommodating historical process. And there is also a shift in the respective vantage points of the imagined communities addressed by the novels: the stability of "truth universally acknowledged" gives way to cultural conflict (of region, class, gender), which can never be fully reconciled.<sup>24</sup> Austen's re-cognition is a method of cultivating and shaping individual consciousness within the conventional parameters of a stable community; with Gaskell, individual cultivation is still an objective, but now it has to accommodate the much larger scope of a world that seems to change in a manner that goes beyond old conventions. The equation of universality and the polite society of provincial England, entertained only half-ironically in Austen, is replaced in Gaskell's novel by the entirely seriously entertained imperative of the understanding of social totality, which turns out to be a knowledge of social tensions. In *North and South*, the Bildungsroman narrative no longer pertains to just one character, and the narrative of re-cognition is no longer a matter of just one individual consciousness. Strictly speaking, the narrative focus is not even on the binary cultural relationship proposed by the title, and embodied by Thornton and Margaret; the story can no longer function as merely a narrative of overcoming (class) pride and prejudice, inasmuch as their relationship is shaped not only by their respective class positions but also by the totality of the social world and their evolving attitudes towards the industrial working class. The centrality of Higgins, the working-class character, and his independent construction of a rapport with Margaret on the one hand and Thornton on the other, represents the novel's dramatization of what it sees as the imperative of social re-cognition, that is, taking cognizance of the new situation of social complexity created by industrialization. Gaskell's novel is thus structured as a narrative of re-cognition, unfolding on the one hand as the narrative of learning about the changing condition of the English cotton industry, and on the other hand, as the narrative of learning about the benefits of social dialogue that encompasses the entirety of the social world.

<sup>24</sup> Gallagher is right to emphasize that Gaskell's novel "strains against its own narrative mode" (183–4); in her reading, the novel both dramatizes a metonymic connection between the private and public spheres (through the exertion of Margaret's influence streaming from the domestic into the economic and political spheres), as well as a skepticism about the effectiveness of such influence. It is my sense that the novel both acknowledges and overrides this kind of skepticism through the very proposition of social accommodation as a method of social reform.

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