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THE WORKING CLASS IN EARLY VICTORIAN NOVELS

by

JUDITH ISAAC

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate
Faculty in English in partial fulfillment
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CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION	1
The Challenge to the Authors	
The Condition of the People	
The Political-Social Theme	
The Characterization of the Working- Class Hero	
Chapter	
I. BENJAMIN DISRAELI'S <u>SYBIL</u> : THE IDEA OF THE WORKING CLASS.	94
Disraeli's Political Philosophy	
Disraeli's Conception of "Class"	
The Aesthetic Problem	
II. ELIZABETH GASKELL'S <u>MARY BARTON</u> : AN ATTEMPT TO ACHIEVE SOCIAL TRAGEDY.	168
Mrs. Gaskell's Moral Vision	
The Political Implications of Patient Suffering	
III. CHARLES KINGSLEY'S <u>ALTON LOCKE</u> : THE IDEALIZED INDUSTRIAL	212
Christian Socialism	
Kingsley's Conception of the Working Class	
IV. GEORGE ELIOT'S <u>FELIX HOLT</u> : THE MISTRUST OF POLITICS	271
George Eliot's Politics	
The Moral Basis of the Political Theme	
AFTERWORD: A NOTE ON GISSING, HARDY, AND LAWRENCE . .	343
A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY.	361

INTRODUCTION

In the 1840's there began to appear a group of novels recognized at the time as constituting a new literary development. These novels have recently come to be the focus of a renewed critical interest. Kathleen Tillotson regards them as "novels with a purpose," Raymond Williams as "industrial novels," Louis Cazamian as "social" or "philanthropic" novels, and Arnold Kettle, in the broadest term, as "social problem" novels. The group consists of novels drawn from among the following: Disraeli's Sybil, Elizabeth Gaskell's Mary Barton and North and South, Kingsley's Alton Locke, Thackeray's Vanity Fair, Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre, Dickens' Dombey and Son and Hard Times, and George Eliot's Felix Holt. Each critic, of course selects and groups the books according to his particular focus of interest: Tillotson is concerned with the authors' serious social purpose, Williams with the social background and the debate over industrialism, Kettle with the authors' response to Chartism, and Cazamian with their attempt to find solutions to social problems. And all of these critics are concerned, in different ways, with the literary

response to the social crisis brought about by industrial capitalism.

None of the preceding categories reflects the fact that these novels (or some of them) present a new development in literary history: the introduction of the working class as a subject for fiction. Miss Tillotson concentrates on the writers' struggle to bring social realities into the novel, but her focus is not primarily upon the working class. Williams describes a general background of ideas in the novels, but he is not concerned with the aesthetic treatment of those ideas. Kettle perceives imaginative flaws in the novels as a direct consequence of extra-literary purposes, but he neglects the authors' social philosophies as determinants of the novels' structure. Cazamian analyzes a common motif of philanthropy in the novels, but he disregards the undercurrent of fear in the 'philanthropic' theme, as well as the effects of that fear on the imaginative coherence of the works. Except for Kathleen Tillotson, none of the critics regards these novels as pioneer efforts to cope with a new subject.

The purpose of this study is to examine the way in which the experience of the industrial working class was brought into the purview of the literary tradition, and the

problems which the subject created for novelists working within the conceptual and aesthetic framework of an old tradition. Consequently, the novels will be regarded as social evidence, as expressions of a social-political philosophy, and as formal texts. All of these novels are marred by the authors' ambivalence towards a subject at once remote from their experience yet terrifying in its implications. Most early Victorian novelists were frightened of the working class (mob, masses, demos, rabble) and the far-reaching social changes signified by its presence, while at the same time sympathizing with the 'lower orders' who bore the brunt of social change. This mixture of sympathy and fear troubled their art: it drove them to undertake a subject beyond the boundaries of established literary convention, but it impeded their ability to treat that subject realistically or sympathetically.

Numerous explanations have been suggested for the novelists' fear of the workers: an essential ignorance of working-class life, a vested interest in maintaining the social order, a susceptibility to popular prejudice, etc. The point of view which seems most useful for a literary analysis involves an 'idealistic' interpretation of history or at least an interpretation of literature as strongly

shaped by a certain climate of ideas. Either as cause or result of their fear, the novelists lacked the philosophical, sociological, and political concepts which would allow them to come to terms with the working-class presence and re-create that presence in an imaginatively coherent piece of literature. They lacked a concept of 'change' as an aspect of order (from the time of the Greek philosophers change had been associated with disorder); a sociological theory that could explain the numerous implications of social change; and a political theory that would legitimate the power-struggle of independent interest-groups as a necessary (or at least tolerable) way of securing social justice. Consequently, except for Dickens, they were unable to accept industrial society as a radically new social system, the special character of the proletarian as a new kind of individual, and the impulses of the working class as responses to changed social and economic conditions. The mixture of tones, modes, historical periods, and narrative points of view in the early novels about the working class reflects, among other things, the authors' inability to appreciate the full range of the social changes of their time and to find some order in the apparent chaos.

This study is focussed on four novels which were published between 1845 (Sybil) and 1866 (Felix Holt), a period in which England's middle class was struggling to come to terms with the working-class presence and to absorb the workers into the existing class structure. The novels are treated as a unit because of their thematic and technical similarities, and because of their marked difference from the later Victorian novels about the working class. They were selected for this study because they explicitly focus on working-class characters, and are therefore significantly different from the other "industrial" or "social-problem" novels. North and South or Hard Times, for example, have a large social perspective, but the working-class characters in those novels are pale or minor figures, largely peripheral to the major action. Only rarely did the middle-class novelist try to penetrate the workers' consciousness and write a novel from their point of view. The few attempts to do so are the objects of this study. These novels are undoubtedly inferior to some of the other "industrial" or "social-problem" novels, but they nevertheless deserve attention as indices of a social and literary revolution which culminated in the achievements of Gissing, Hardy, and Lawrence.

The Challenge to the Authors

The mid-Victorian novelists who wrote about the working class recognized that they were dealing with characters who were in some ways different from the humble poor or rural artisans of the eighteenth-century novel.¹ They also recognized that the working-class provided them with rather intractable material. The remoteness of working-class life, the difficulty of shaping social "ideas" into fictional form, and the genteel boundaries of literary convention all presented obstacles. Charlotte Bronte confessed, "I cannot write books handling the topics of the day; it is of no use trying,"² and she regarded the subject of North and South as "good ground, but still rugged for the step of Fiction; stony--thorny it will prove at times."³ Disraeli apologized for his subject in his Preface to Sybil, Kingsley and Mrs. Gaskell justified their artistic

¹Kathleen Tillotson discusses the originality of the novelists' effort in Novels of the Eighteen-Forties (Oxford, 1961), pp. 73-88.

²Letter to George Smith, October 20, 1852. The Brontes, Their Lives, Friendships, and Correspondence, IV (Shakespeare Head Bronte, Oxford, 1932), p. 14.

³Letter of September 30, 1954. Ibid., p. 153.

purpose in their respective Prefaces, but all the novelists in one way or other expressed discomfort with the working-class subject.

The early novels about the working class are a product of a deliberate intention to write about an alien subject. Disraeli and Dickens travelled to the industrial regions of the North in order to gain first-hand experience of working-class life; Kingsley entered into a lengthy correspondence with a Chartist leader in order to find a model for his main character; Mrs. Gaskell visited the homes of her parishioners to achieve some degree of intimacy with them. They adopted, in part, a journalistic stance, as if they were newsmen covering a foreign war or explorers bringing back a report of unknown territory. Dickens wanted to tell "the stern and plain truth,"⁴ Disraeli "to illustrate the condition of the people,"⁵ and Mrs. Gaskell "to give voice to the agony that convulses this dumb people."⁶ All the writers tacitly admitted that they had to discipline their imaginative powers to the

⁴1841 introduction to Oliver Twist.

⁵Preface to 1845 edition of Sybil.

⁶Preface to first edition of Mary Barton, 1848.

demands of a reality neither familiar nor aesthetically appealing. Nevertheless, they felt compelled, like Henry James (in The Princess Cassamassima) to discover "what 'goes on' irreconcilably, subversively, beneath the vast smug surface of society."⁷

The audience received the novels in the spirit in which they were written, with a sense of wonder at the subterranean social depths. One critic of Sybil called Disraeli "a traveller into new regions of humanity . . . who setting out from the salons of the luxurious, penetrates into the dark and unknown regions of the populace."⁸ The Dean of Westminster praised Dickens' work with a similar metaphor: "By him that veil was rent asunder which parts the various classes of society."⁹ Thackeray remarked that the upper classes remained ignorant of social realities "until some poet like Hood wakes and sings that dreadful 'Song of the Shirt'; some prophet like Carlyle rises up and denounces woe; some clear-sighted, energetic man . . . travels into the poor man's country for us, and comes back with

⁷Preface to The Princess Casamassima.

⁸Douglas Jerrold's Shilling Magazine (June 1845).

⁹Arthur Stanley, Sermons on Special Occasions (1882), p. 134.

his tale of terror and wonder."¹⁰ The more conservative voices in the literary establishment grumbled about the breakdown of civilized norms, but the novelists apparently felt that the working-class presence was too strong a reality to be ignored.

In a sense, all these novels were written with a 'purpose,' although few of them are obvious works of propaganda. Disraeli candidly confessed that he adopted "the form of fiction as the instrument to scatter his suggestions" because it was "a method, which, in the temper of the times, offered the best chance of influencing opinions,"¹¹ but Mrs. Gaskell, Dickens, and George Eliot had no such purpose. Mrs. Gaskell claimed to have found a genuine "romance" in the lives of the poor, Dickens declared that his novel was conceived before his visit to the manufacturing town of Preston, and George Eliot insisted the artist must rise above partisan politics. Nevertheless, all the novels are 'purposeful' in the sense that the artists deliberately engaged themselves with an elusive subject,

¹⁰"Waiting at the Station," Punch, March 9, 1850.

¹¹Preface to Coningsby.

forced themselves to master, by an act of intelligence, what their sensibilities rejected, and struggled to come to terms with what they perceived as a 'problem.' The distinction of all these novels, as Arnold Kettle suggests, is the artist's "limit of involvement;"

To see a living complex of forces and people as a 'problem' necessarily implies a standpoint not merely detached in the artist's sense, but in a different way judicial, therapeutic perhaps, and all too easily self-righteous. . . . Perhaps the word 'preach' is one that should be indicated. The strain of abstraction involved in the word, the incompletely fused elements of didacticism . . . these edge into the most fundamental conceptions and standpoints of the problem-monger.¹²

Hard Times is easily the most 'inspired' of all the "social-problem" novels, but even Dickens detached himself artistically when he dealt directly with a working-class character (the portrait of Slackbridge and the description of the strike is in the tradition of Disraeli's Bishop Hatton and the Hell-Cats). What one senses as an extra-literary 'purpose' in all these novels is a function of the author's distance, his compulsion to discover and make sense out of objectionable and chaotic material. There follows a clash

¹²"The Early Victorian Social-Problem Novel" in The Pelican Guide to English Literature: From Dickens to Hardy, VI, ed. Boris Ford (Baltimore, 1968), p. 170.

or at least tension between his social and political concerns and his artistic impulses.

As Kathleen Tillotson observes, the attempt to bring social and political realities into the novel met numerous difficulties:

The formal ordering of ideas into narrative, the presentation of 'views' through persons, the creating of a world which bore a strangely close relation to the actual contemporary world and was nevertheless newly created--all these were problems which exercised the novelists' art to the utmost; the finer the artistic conscience, the less he could be content to 'think aloud,' the more concerned to 'make something' of this . . . material.¹³

By the mid-nineteenth century, the French novel already had a tradition of 'ideas,' and a writer like Stendhal early in the century could gracefully integrate the subject of society and politics into a strong narrative. However, the English novel had developed along different lines, and its authors had no stylistic precedents for dealing with their new subject. There had been political novels at the turn of the century, but these were primarily ideological tracts in which the character and story were clumsy devices for the expression of 'views.' No distinctive fictional mode developed out of the novels of Godwin and his school. There

¹³Tillotson, p. 119.

were also, of course, 'social' novels with 'society' primarily a setting for the play of private personalities. In the picaresque novel, for example, society yields an open-ended series of kaleidoscopic scenes, shifting and changing for the sake of variety. The novel of manners, on the other hand, had rigidly confined social boundaries, and the conventional romance tended to ignore society or to portray it in terms of its moral codes. The historical romance was clearly useless to the novelist who wanted to describe his contemporary reality, and so were the 'Newgate' novels with their tone of moral condescension and the 'silver fork' novels with their extravagant descriptions of aristocratic elegance.

Naturally, these novels provided no precedent for coping with working-class character. The figures of the sensitive young man, gay adventurer, gentleman squire, or aspiring young doctor bore no relation to the working-class character. Nor could the novelists make much use of the humble peasant of pastoral or historical romance or the dashing rogues of popular fiction. The novelists were compelled to create a new kind of character whom they, in fact, did not yet fully understand, and in whose presence they felt uneasy. Their guilt as members of the upper class,

their fears of revolutionary violence, and their ignorance of 'the nether world'--all worked against them. Perhaps in desperation, they were forced to improvise a new kind of novel in which the consciousness of the main character would no longer serve as the unifying focus since the main character could no longer have a high consciousness.

A contrast between Anna Saint-Ives by Thomas Holcroft (pub. 1792) and Disraeli's Sybil (pub. 1845) illustrates the greater difficulties of the later author. Both authors presented 'views' through their personae and both used the device of a marriage proposal to indicate some irreconcilable social conflict. Holcroft's heroine rejects her suitor with the following statement:

There are many leading principles in which we differ; and concerning which, till we agree, to proceed to marriage would be culpable. . . . You think no doubt that the lover ought to yield, and the husband to command; both of which I deny. Husband, wife or lover should all be under the command of reason; other commands are tyranny . . . you think that the claims of birth to superiority are legitimate; I hold them to be usurpations. I deem society, and yourself to be the first of claimants. . . . You maintain that what you possess is your own; I affirm it is the property of him who wants it most. These are the essential differences. Nor are these all, but perhaps they are more than sufficient to end the alliance we were seeking.¹⁵

¹⁵Vol. IV, letter 79.

The crucial problem for Anna is that the suitor "thinks," "deems," "maintains," and "holds" differently from her; there is no felt conflict, only a conflict of social philosophies. The passage fails because Anna's response is so abstract, the entire situation seeming no more than a flimsy contrivance for the presentation of a 'view.'

Sybil's reply to Egremont's proposal is equally heavy with expository overstatement:

Why, what is this? A union between the child and brother of nobles and a daughter of the People! Estrangement from your family, and with cause, their hopes destroyed, their pride outraged; alienation from your order, and justly, all their prejudices insulted. You will forfeit every source of worldly content and cast off every spring of social success. Society for you will become a great confederation to deprive you of self-complacency. . . . Believe me, the gulf is impassable.¹⁶

Sybil's speech is more than a reply to Egremont's proposal. She presents the full social implications of an inter-class marriage, presumably because they may have escaped the attention of the reader. Nevertheless, the scene is more effective than Holcroft's, largely because the language is more emotionally charged: Sybil speaks of 'alienation' and 'forfeiture' rather than 'deeming' and 'thinking.'

¹⁶(Doubleday edn., New York, 1961), pp. 377-378.

But Disraeli's greater success as an artist is won at the expense of his political theme. Sybil is intended to be a spokesman of the people rather than for them. The difficulties in Sybil's relationship with Egremont are supposedly due not to the society outside them, i.e. family and friends, but to the class differences they embody. Sybil's uneasy relationship with Egremont is intended as a piece of evidence that the classes regard one another with mistrust, and this mistrust is corroborated by the social conditions described in the novel. The two nations of England are "fed by different food, ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws." Disraeli's major thesis is that there exists a radical cultural dichotomy between the People and their masters, yet precisely that assumption would seem to virtually disqualify a daughter of the People from presenting a persuasive argument. If Sybil appears to be a sympathetic human character, and her speech is rhetorically effective, then the social case of the novel is weakened. If she is ineffective, Egremont's love for her makes no sense. Something of this difficulty exists in all the social-problem novels where the author is ambivalent about his working-class subject. In all the novels there is an imaginative

lacuna which John Lucas ascribes to the "writer's unwillingness to follow the implications of his given situation to the end."¹⁷

Apart from their ambivalence about the working-class character, the novelists had to consider the audience's level of tolerance for the new subject. Victorian readers generally made a radical distinction between the upper and lower classes, 'genteel' and 'low' life. Disraeli felt "the absolute necessity of suppressing much that is genuine" about the Condition of the People because "the air of improbability which the whole truth would inevitably throw over these pages, might deter some from their perusal."¹⁸ The kindly reassurance of one reviewer that the readers "need not be alarmed at penetrating the recesses of Manchester"¹⁹ indicates that there were some readers who were repelled by the scenes of working-class life, although others welcomed the greater "truth" of the new type

¹⁷"Mrs. Gaskell and Brotherhood," in Tradition and Tolerance in Nineteenth-Century Fiction, eds. David Howard, John Lucas, John Goode (London, 1966), p. 142.

¹⁸Preface to Sybil.

¹⁹North British Review, XV (1851), p. 426.

of fiction. The taste for the conventional romance persisted throughout the decades of social upheaval, despite the announcement of one reviewer in 1849 that the 'fashionable' novels had become "most un-fashionable . . . aping the tone of a school and a system of society which really died once and for ever . . . on the 10th of April last."²⁰

The Condition of the People

Behind the gropings of these writers one can see the far-reaching social changes brought about by industrialism. The rate of growth of industrial production soared in the second quarter of the nineteenth century and sent shock waves into every area of English life. Industrialism brought the rise of the factory system and an urban concentration of working people, and this in turn 'generalized' the labor force and laid the groundwork for massive political agitation. The breakdown of the family as an income-producing unit and the use of woman and child labor in the factories had vast sociological and moral implications: the problem of slums, an increase in crime, typhoid epidemics, and a population explosion. The large-scale redeployment of human and natural resources created a

²⁰Fraser's (April 1849), p. 419.

national mood of restless uncertainty, and social critics recognized that the existing order was being shaken to its foundations. Writing in 1833, John Wade (author of The Black Book of England; or Corruption Unmasked) described the extent of the social upheaval:

The physical order of communities, in which the production of the necessities of subsistence is the first want and chief occupation, has in our case been rapidly inverted, and in lieu of agricultural supremacy, a vast and overtopping superstructure of wealth and population has been substituted. It is to this extraordinary revolution, I doubt not, may be traced much of the bane and many of the blessings incidental to our condition--the growth of an opulent commercial and a numerous, restless, and intelligent operative class; sudden alternations of prosperity and depression--of internal quiet and violent political excitement; extremes of opulence and destitution; the increase of crime; conflicting claims of capital and industry; the spread of an imperfect knowledge, that agitates and unsettles the old without having definitely settled the new foundations; clashing and independent opinions on most public questions, with other anomalies peculiar to our existing but changeful social existence.²¹

The growth of a "numerous, restless, and intelligent operative class" was no doubt one of the "banes" of the industrial revolution. Certainly there had been 'upper classes' and 'lower classes' in preindustrial society, and the word 'class' had existed from the time the Roman

²¹History of the Middle and Working Classes (1842 edn.), Preface, p. 1.

censors used it to differentiate the various tax groups in Roman society. Nevertheless, John Wade saw the working class in 1833 as a newly-created group, different from the 'labouring population' of the eighteenth century. The discovery of water-power in the eighteenth century, coupled with the enclosure movement in the villages, the increase in home and foreign trade, and the emergence of 'radical' ideas had generated considerable social changes, but the advent of the steam-engine accelerated these changes and created a particularly "restless" class of operatives.²² The 'labouring population' was regarded as only another group within the larger category of the 'lower classes,' and they took their places beside the artisans, craftsmen, small shopkeepers, and village yeomen in the lower strata of the traditional social hierarchy. The industrial working class, on the other hand, was a numerically greater category, and one which tended to absorb the gradations of the lower social strata.

²² see Asa Briggs, 'The Language of 'Class' in Early Nineteenth Century England,' Essays in Labour History, eds. Asa Briggs and John Saville (London, 1960), passim. G. D. H. Cole argues that steam power, rather than water power, created the social changes associated with the Industrial Revolution. Studies in Class Structure (London, 1955), pp. 28-30.

Before the nineteenth century, the social structure and its inner gradations were taken for granted as a kind of Divine ordination, and it was generally assumed that a man's station in life was his 'given' condition. The medieval ditty "The rich man in his castle/The poor man at his gate/ God made them high or lowly/ And ordered their estate" reflects this general acceptance of social distinctions as an immutable act of God. In the nineteenth century it became apparent that social classes were historical phenomena, and that they were made and could be unmade by radical changes in the system. In 1834, fourteen years before the publication of The Communist Manifesto, John Stuart Mill wrote of his contemporary social critics:

They revolve in the eternal cycle of landlords, capitalists and laborers, until they seem to think of the distinction of society into those three classes as if it were one of God's ordinances not man's, and as little under human control as the division of day or night. Scarcely any one of them seems to have proposed to himself as a subject of inquiry, what changes the relations of those classes to one another are likely to undergo in the progress of society.²³

In the course of the century, social critics came to recognize the peculiar effects of industrialism on the character of the traditional 'lower classes.' Peter

²³Monthly Repository, p. 320.

Gaskell, one of the early factory reformers, declared that the conditions of labor in an industrial society had created an angry and organized working-class movement:

Since the steam engine has concentrated men into particular localities--has drawn together the population into dense masses--and since an imperfect education has enlarged, and to some degree distorted their views, union is become easy and from being so closely packed, simultaneous action is readily excited. The organization of these working-class societies is now so complete that they form an 'imperium in imperio' of the most obnoxious description.

Engels agreed that "the history of the working class in England begins . . . with the invention of the steam engine and the machines for manufacturing cotton." In The Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels described the revolutionary working-class as the necessary product of industrialism and capitalism:

But with the development of industry the proletariat not only increases in number; it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows and it feels that strength more. The various interests and conditions of life within the ranks of the proletariat are more and more equalized, in proportion as machinery obliterates all distinctions of labor, and nearly everywhere reduces wages to the same low level. The growing competition among the bourgeois, and the resulting commercial crises make the wages of the worker ever more fluctuating; the unceasing improvement of machinery, ever more rapidly developing, makes their livelihood more and more precarious; the collisions between individual workmen and individual bourgeois

take more and more the character of collisions between two classes. Thereupon the workers begin to form combinations (trade unions) against the bourgeois; they club together in order to keep up the rate of wages; they found permanent associations in order to make provision beforehand for these occasional revolts. Here and there the contest breaks out into riots.²⁵

E. P. Thomson, with a keen sense of the particularities of English history, shows that the working-class movement had its roots in the eighteenth century, in the Methodist church and the Jacobin tradition of Tom Paine.²⁶ The Dissenting Church with its democratic organization, communitarian spirit, and doctrines about the millenium may have provided the raw material for the English working class, but social critics in the nineteenth century believed that the factory system had transformed the character of the workers. As early as 1815 Robert Owen perceived a gradual change:

The general diffusion of manufactures throughout a country generates a new character in its inhabitants. . . . The manufacturing system has already so far extended its influence over the British empire, as to effect an essential change in the general character of the mass of the people. This alteration is still in

²⁵"Bourgeois and Proletarians" (Gateway edn., Chicago, 1954), pp. 30-31.

²⁶E. P. Thomson, The Making of the English Working Class (London, 1963).

rapid progress, and, ere long, the comparatively happy simplicity of the agricultural peasant will be wholly lost among us. It is even now scarcely anywhere to be found, without a mixture of those habits which are the offspring of trade, manufactures, and commerce.²⁷

Owen deplored the new character of the masses as he did the society which created the change, but the essential feature of his argument, that the conditions of production affect the characters of the human producers, was repeatedly affirmed even by those favorable to the industrial system.

The most dramatic effect of industrialism, according to most social critics, was the polarization of society into two hostile camps. The critics believed that industrialism had collapsed the gentle gradations in the social hierarchy; artisans, craftsmen, and peasants were all lumped into one category of 'have-nots' at the mercy of the commercial and manufacturing powers. In 1821 William Cobbett argued that the "chain of connection between rich and poor" was being broken by the capitalist system, and society was gradually becoming divided into "masters" and "slaves." "You are for demolishing all small tradesmen,"

²⁷Observations on the Effects of the Manufacturing System, with hints for the improvement of those parts of it which are most injurious to health and morals, dedicated most respectfully to the British legislature (London, 1815), p. 5.

he accused one industrialist, "You are for reducing the community to two classes: MASTERS and SLAVES. . . . When Master and Man were the terms, every one was in his place, and all were free. Now, in fact, it is an affair of Masters and Slaves."²⁸ In a similar vein, Robert Southey wrote in his Colloquies:

It is the tendency of the commercial, and more especially the manufacturing system, to collect wealth rather than diffuse it . . . great capitalists become like pikes in a fish-pond, who devour the weaker fish; and it is but too certain that the poverty of one part of the people seems to increase in the same ratio as the riches of another.²⁹

The social schism seemed particularly dangerous to such critics because the relations between the classes were characterized solely by what Carlyle called the "cash-nexus." Robert Owen observed in 1815:

All ties between employers and employed are frittered down to the consideration of what immediate gain each can derive from the other. The employer regards the employed as mere instruments of gain, while these acquire a gross ferocity of character, which, if legislative measures shall not be judiciously devised to prevent its increase, and ameliorate the condition of this class, will sooner or later plunge this country into a formidable and perhaps inextricable state of danger.³⁰

²⁸Political Register, April 14, 1821.

²⁹(1829), VII, pp. 193-194.

³⁰Owen, p. 10.

The capitalist ethic was widely regarded as essentially exploitive and potentially dangerous, because it failed to tie social privilege with social responsibility. The critics who idealized the medieval social structure did so (in part) because of their belief that the feudal nobility assumed a paternal, protective, and benevolent stance towards their social inferiors. "Bad as the feudal times were," Southey wrote, "they were less injurious than these commercial ones to the kindly and generous feelings of human nature."³¹ With industrial society, he believed, "in came calculation and out went feeling."³² Consequently, "the bond of attachment is broken; there is no longer the generous bounty which calls forth a grateful and honest and confiding dependence" from the masses.³³ Marx and Engels presented a similar view in The Communist Manifesto:

The bourgeoisie . . . 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," and has left no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous "cash payment." It has drowned the most heavenly

³¹Southey, p. 174.

³²Colloquies IV, p. 79.

³³Ibid., p. 47.

ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange values, and in place of the numberless infeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single unconscionable freedom--Free Trade. In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation.³⁴

Many social critics believed that unless some drastic measures were taken to relieve the social pressure, a working-class revolution was inevitable; and the overwhelming majority found it a terrifying prospect. To a public still haunted by the spectre of the French Revolution, the uprising of the masses was associated with a bloody reign of terror and an eventual tyranny. Cobbett was afraid of "a multitude of horrid barbarity"³⁵ and Owen lamented the working man's "gross ferocity of character which . . . will sooner or later plunge the country into a formidable and perhaps inextricable state of danger."³⁶ Southey warned his countrymen about "the state of the poor, which . . . constantly exposes us to the horrors of a

³⁴pp. 18-19.

³⁵Porcupine's Works, III (1801). Cited by Raymond Williams, Culture and Society (New York, 1958), p. 13.

³⁶Owen, p. 5.

bellum servile, and sooner or later, if not remedied, will end in one,"³⁷ and Charles Kingsley, looking back on his childhood years, wrote that "young lads believed (and not so wrongly) that the masses were their natural enemies and that they might have to fight, any year or any day, for the safety of their property and the honor of their sisters."³⁸ Disraeli articulated a common fear when he wrote in Sybil:

'Tis the most solemn thing since the deluge. What kingdom can stand against it? Why, go to your history . . . and see the fall of the Great Roman Empire; what was that? Every now and then there came two or three hundred thousand strangers out of the forests, and crossed the mountains and rivers. They come to us every year, and in greater numbers. What are your invasions of the barbarous nations, your Goths and Visigoths, your Lombards and your Huns, to our Population Returns?³⁹

The fears of the upper classes were to some extent supported by the increasing militancy of the Chartist movement. The six demands of the Charter (manhood suffrage, equal election districts, annual Parliaments, abolition of property qualifications for members of the House of Commons,

³⁷M. H. Fitzgerold, ed., Letters of Robert Southey (World's Classics edn., 1912), p. 273.

³⁸Quoted by G. M. Young, Victorian England: Portrait of an Age (London, 1961), p. 27.

³⁹pp. 160-161.

vote by ballot, and salaries for members of Parliament) had been proposed by political reformers as early as the eighteenth century, but the program became identified with the working-class effort in the decades of the 1830's and "hungry forties," and it was regarded as a new and frightening phenomenon.⁴⁰ The Chartists recruited their members from the ranks of all the other reform movements; Owenism, the movement for the Ten Hour Bill, opponents of the New Poor Law, opponents of Peel's Currency Bill of 1819, and the movement to repeal the Corn Laws. However, Chartism was more than a political and economic grouping; it was also a class movement with a nucleus composed of the London Working Men's Association. The struggle for reform was not an issue of abstract procedural justice, but a contest for power based upon the belief that "A Parliament which represents only those who thrive by labour's wrongs will never recognize labour's rights, or legislate for labour's emancipation."⁴¹ The ruling classes, with some

⁴⁰See Preston William Slosson, The Decline of the Chartist Movement (London, 1967), chap. 1, and Christopher Thorne, Chartism (New York, 1966), pp. 12-16.

⁴¹The Rise, Progress, and Phases of Human Slavery (London, 1885; first edn., 1850), p. 119.

justification, regarded Chartism as evidence of the class-struggle,⁴² and its political program a transparent scheme for complete social revolution. One of the more militant Chartists speakers, James Bronterre O'Brien, announced that the workers contemplated "a change amounting to a complete subversion of the existing 'order of the world.' . . . They aspire to be at the top instead of at the bottom of society --or rather that there be no top or bottom at all."⁴³

The Chartists were divided on questions of tactics and procedures between a "moral force" faction which argued for petitions, public meetings, and peaceful demonstrations, and a "physical force" faction which proposed direct violent actions against the ruling classes. The leader of the "moral force" faction was expelled from the movement after the debacle of the National Petition in 1839, and the proponents of violent revolution gained control of the movement. The riots in Birmingham, plunder of shops in Newcastle, machine-smashing in Bolton, bloody demonstrations in Newport, etc., reinforced the image of Chartism in the

⁴²See R. G. Gammage, History of the Chartist Movement (London, 1894), p. 9.

⁴³Poor Man's Guardian, October 19, 1833.

popular imagination as a violent revolutionary organization. When the Chartists gathered for their great demonstration in 1848, the effect had been, according to the Duke of Wellington, "to place all the inhabitants under alarm, paralyzing all trade and business of every description, and driving individuals to seek for safety by arming themselves for the protection of the lives of themselves, and of their neighbors, and for the security of their property."⁴⁴

The fears of the ruling classes were disproportionate to the actual incidence of working-class or Chartist violence, and it may be that the employers were more impressed than the workers by the incendiary rhetoric of some Chartist leaders. Such slogans as "The people may kill wicked princes as monsters or wild beasts," "Be ready to nourish the tree of liberty with the blood of tyrants," or "We are to be free, though we wade through streams of blood," prompted the upper classes' fear of a bellum servile, but it failed to produce enough working-class support to make a success of any major Chartist demonstration.⁴⁵

⁴⁴Quoted by F. C. Mather, Public Order in the Age of the Chartists (New York, 1967), p. 2.

⁴⁵See Thorne, p. 17.

Some members of the ruling classes recognized that Chartism was rooted in the economic discontent of the working masses. After the turmoil in 1839 Lord Russell wrote, "Of the working classes who have declared their adherence to what is called the People's Charter, but few care for Universal Suffrage, Vote by Ballot, or Annual Parliaments. The greater part feel the hardship of their social condition; they complain of their hard toil and insufficient wages."⁴⁶ The political program of the Chartists was regarded by Reverend J. R. Stephen as secondary to the economic program:

The question of universal suffrage was, after all, a knife-and-fork question. If any man asked him what he meant by universal suffrage, he would tell him, he meant to say that every working man in the land had the right to have a good coat and hat, a good roof over his head, a good dinner on his table, no more work than would keep him in good health, and as much wages as would keep him in plenty, and the enjoyment of those pleasures of life which a reasonable man could desire.⁴⁷

Perhaps for this reason the ruling classes viewed the Chartists as a socialist rather than democratic organization. The debate about democracy was keenest in the later

⁴⁶Letters to the Electors of Stroud (London, 1839), p. 33.

⁴⁷Annual Register, vol. lxxx (1838), p. 311.

half of the century, after the Chartists had become effectively defunct. During the times of greatest Chartist activity, the ruling-class argument focussed on the necessity of preserving the rights of private property in the face of working-class demands.

Although the Chartists were divided on the exact details of an economic program, there is clearly a sense in which the movement can be identified with Socialism.⁴⁸ Ernest Jones asked, "What do we want political power for, except to grant free access to all the means of labour, land and machinery?"⁴⁹ Jones and O'Brien hoped "to emancipate the working classes from wages-slavery, by enabling them to become their own masters; to destroy monopoly and to counteract the centralization of wealth, by its equable and general diffusion."⁵⁰ Some Chartists favored the nationalization of land, others wanted to establish a class of freehold farmers with private rights to property, and another group advocated a self-help program for the workers

⁴⁸See Slosson, chap. 1.

⁴⁹Notes to the People, p. 301, cited by Slosson, p. 27.

⁵⁰Notes to the People, p. 27, *ibid.*

until such time as the government would enact generous welfare legislation. They were all agreed, however, on the need for some essential redistribution of the national wealth.

In 1842, Blackwood's Magazine said of the Chartist program, "What is meant, under any mystification of words we need not say, is--one universal partition, amongst the nineteen millions in this island, of the existing property, be its nature what it may, and under whatever tenure."⁵¹ This, rather than the issue of universal suffrage, was the sticking-point for many conservatives. Thomas Babington Macaulay, who disclaimed any fundamental opposition to the principle of universal suffrage and denied the intrinsic value of the Crown and the House of Lords, opposed the Chartists on the grounds that these institutions were necessary for the preservation of property rights. "I believe," he wrote, "that universal suffrage would be fatal to all purposes for which government exists, and for which aristocracies and all other things exist, and that it is incompatible with the very existence of civilization. I conceive that civilization rests upon the security of property."⁵²

⁵¹September, 1842.

⁵²Hansard, vol. lxiii, p. 46.

The ruling classes had various definitions of the 'civilization' which the Chartists threatened to destroy. Some conservatives felt that 'the principle of degree' was at stake, and others felt the threat to the 'security of property' most strongly, but both groups agreed that the Charter amounted to a 'complete subversion of the existing order of the world.' At the same time, some people recognized that the Chartists had legitimate grievances, and that the movement could not be repressed by physical force alone. Thomas Carlyle raised the over-riding question of his generation when he asked, "Is the condition of the English working people wrong; so wrong that rational men cannot, will not, and even should not rest quiet under it?" In Carlyle's view the 'condition of England' question was at the root of social discontent, and he found no ground for complacency after the Chartist debacle in 1839:

The living essence of Chartism has not been put down. Chartism means the bitter discontent grown fierce and mad, the wrong condition therefore or the wrong disposition, of the Working Classes in England. It is a new name for a thing which has had many names, which will yet have many. The matter of Chartism is weighty, deep-rooted, far-extending; did not begin yesterday; will by no means end this day or tomorrow.⁵³

⁵³"Chartism," English and Other Critical Essays (Everyman's edn., London, 1940), p. 165.

Despite the apparent removal of the working-class threat, Carlyle believed that "the condition and disposition of the Working Classes is a rather ominous matter at present," and that "The time is verily come for acting in it, for speech and articulate inquiry about it."

Douglas Jerrold, the producer of a play called The Factory Girl, complained in 1833 that no one was thinking about the poor and in 1839 that no one was thinking of anything else. Friedrich Engels noted that the Parliamentary session of 1844 "was a continuous debate upon subjects affecting the working-class, the Poor Relief Bill, the Factory Act, the Masters' and Servants' Act."⁵⁴ Parliament's interest in the welfare of the workers is perhaps best demonstrated by the numerous committees set up to study the needs of the working class: The Health of Towns Committee in 1840, The Factory Committee and Handloom Weavers Committee in 1841, The Committee of Town Housing in 1842, The Smoke Abatement Committee and Rural Allotments Committee in 1843, The Metropolitan Improvements Committee in 1844. With mixed feelings of alarm, compassion, and disgust, Parliament committed itself to explore 'what goes

⁵⁴Condition of the Working Class in 1844 (London, 1892 edn.), p. 17.

on beneath the vast smug surface of society' and to discover the 'condition of England' beneath the polite exterior. It was a subject of ominous concern to the general public, and eventually to the novelist.

The novelists of the 1830's and 1840's could not remain entirely aloof from the battle. Carlyle foresaw this in 1833 when he wrote:

. . . this exceeding great multitude of novel-writers and suchlike, must, in a new generation, gradually do one of two things: either retire into nurseries, and work for children, minors and semifatuous persons of both sexes; or else, what were far better, sweep their Novel-fabric into the dust-cart, and betake them with such faculty as they have to understand and record what is true. . . .⁵⁵

In part, the novelists responded to the public's demand for information concerning the other half of the 'two nations,' or yielded to the publishers' pressure for books dealing with 'the topic of the day,' as Charlotte Bronte called them.

Anthony Trollope satirized the purely commercial aspect of the new social consciousness when he wrote:

The editor says that we must always have a slap at some of the iniquities of the times. He gave me three or four to choose from; there was the adulteration of

⁵⁵"Diderot" in The Foreign Quarterly Review (1833), in Works: Critical and Miscellaneous Essays, III (Scribner edn., New York, 1904), p. 178.

food, and the want of education for the poor, and street music, and the miscellaneous sale of poisons. . . . Then we have the trial of the apothecary's boy; that is an excellent episode, and gives me a grand hit at the absurdity of the criminal code.⁵⁶

Despite some complaints about "the morbid sensibility to the condition of factory operatives which has become so fashionable of late among the gentry,"⁵⁷ there were many reviewers who were disappointed when a novel failed to "dissect any portion of existing society."⁵⁸ On the other hand, the novelists were genuinely engaged with social problems; they were swept up in the public mood of anxiety, indignation, and curiosity about the condition of the English masses. To some extent, they resembled the Parliamentary reporters and Blue-book pamphleteers who set out to discover the sordid facts about their society and report back to an uninformed but eager audience. (The theme of discovery plays an important role in some of the novels. Egremont discovers 'the People' in *Sybil* and Lancelot Smith discovers laborers with the "speech of

⁵⁶Three Clerks (1858), chap. xix.

⁵⁷Manchester Guardian, 1849, cited by Lucas, p. 146.

⁵⁸A writer in Tait's Edinburgh Magazine (February, 1848, pp. 138-140) was troubled by Wuthering Heights for that reason.

savages" in Kingsley's Yeast.) At the same time, they were a product of that society, and their art had undergone a transvaluation as had so much else in their culture. Like Carlyle, they recognized that "Poetry . . . is nothing but higher Knowledge; and the only genuine Romance (for grown persons) is Reality."

The Political-Social Theme

The mid-Victorian generation of novelists perceived the social crisis of their time in terms of the moral flaws inherent in the political and economic system. Class-conflict, in their view, was the result of the exploitation of Labor which in turn was caused by the spirit of Mammonism and self-interest in the employers. Some novelists also charged that Government protected the interests of the middle class by supporting the laissez-faire philosophy (in major respects) and the spirit of competition. To some extent, all the novelists saw the cause of social unrest in the doctrines of philosophical radicalism and its dual offspring: the Utilitarian ethic and the principles of political economy.

Carlyle provided the keynote for all the novels when he railed against the "Gospel of Mammonism":

True, it must be owned, we for the present, with our Mammon-Gospel, have come to strange conclusions. We call it a Society; and go about professing openly the totallest separation, isolation. Our life is not a mutual helpfulness; but rather, cloaked under due laws-of-war, named "fair competition" and so forth, it is a mutual hostility. We have profoundly forgotten everywhere that CASH-PAYMENT is not the sole relation of human beings; we think, nothing doubting, that IT absolves and liquidates all engagements of man. "My starving workers?" answers the rich Millowner; "Did I not hire them fairly in the market? Did I not pay them, to the last sixpence, the sum covenanted for? What have I to do with them more?"--Verily Mammon-worship is a melancholy creed. When Cain, for his own behoof, had killed Abel, and was questioned, "Where is thy brother?" he too made answer, "Am I my brother's keeper?"⁵⁹

Cloaked in the rhetoric of the fire-and-brimstone preacher, Carlyle's critique of industrial society bears points of resemblance to that of most social reformers in the early nineteenth century, including Marx. He criticizes the breakdown of human relationships (which Southey called the "bond of attachment") in industrial society, the exclusively materialist motive of the capitalists, the lack of any philanthropic impulse in the prevailing social philosophy, and the ensuing consequence of large-scale class-conflict. Most of the social-problem novelists explicitly or implicitly stated their debt to Carlyle:⁶⁰ Disraeli and Kingsley

⁵⁹Past and Present, Book III, chap. 2 (Modern Reader's edn., New York, 1927), p. 152.

⁶⁰See Tillotson, pp. 150-156.

adopted his terminology ("Mammonism," "the cash-nexus," etc.) and Dickens dedicated Hard Times to him. He was the characteristic voice of his time, echoed in the writings of radical-conservatives and radical-revolutionaries alike.

Carlyle attacked Utilitarianism for its hedonistic as well as rational principles. As a species of Hedonism, Utilitarianism promotes the view that all men seek their own pleasure (or the 'general' happiness), and that in fact they ought to do so. As a Rationalist philosophy, Utilitarianism claims that each man is the best judge of his own happiness which he determines on the basis of a calculus of pleasure and pain. Such a philosophy denies the value, and even the existence, of altruism as an ethical principle, and it regards 'feeling' as another term for 'desire.' Carlyle attacked the first principles of Utilitarianism in his critique of Mammonism, the cash-nexus, and the spirit of self-interest, and the second in his indictment of the "Mechanical Age" in which "nothing is done directly, or by hand; all is by rule and calculated contrivance." In Carlyle's view (which was shared by Newman, Ruskin, Dickens, Morris, Arnold, and others) there was something essentially inhumane in the culture of industrial society:

Not the external and physical alone is now managed by machinery, but the internal and spiritual also. . . . The same habit regulates not our modes of action alone, but our modes of thought and feeling. Men are grown mechanical in head and in heart, as well as in hand. They have lost faith in individual endeavor, and in natural force, of any kind. Not for internal perfection, but for external combinations and arrangements, for institutions, constitutions--for Mechanism of one sort or other, do they hope and struggle. Their whole efforts, attachments, opinions, turn on mechanism, and are of a mechanical character.⁶¹

These two criticisms of industrialism--moral and cultural--appear with varying degrees of emphasis in all the social-problem novels.

Carlyle regarded the industrial ethic as the informing spirit of the principles of Political Economy. The moral and cultural evils of materialism, individualism, and mechanization were in his view incorporated into the laissez-faire system of government. That system, in the words of J. R. McCulloch, was founded on a belief that

it is in every case sound policy to leave individuals to pursue their own interest in their own way; that, in prosecuting branches of industry advantageous to themselves, they necessarily prosecute such as are, at the same time, advantageous to the public; and that every regulation intended to force industry into particular channels, or to determine the species of commercial intercourse to be carried on between different parts of the same country, or between distant and

⁶¹"Signs of the Times," Works: Critical and Miscellaneous Essays, II, p. 59.

independent countries, is impolitic and pernicious--injurious to the rights of individuals--and adverse to the progress or real opulence and lasting prosperity.⁶²

Like many of his contemporaries, Carlyle regarded the principles of political economy as a body of moral assumptions rather than social-scientific laws. His criticism of laissez-faire government is, like his criticism of society, an indictment of those moral assumptions. In his view, the principle of self-interest which corrupted the individual character and destroyed social harmony also undermined the authority of government to legislate for the common good.

Like the novelists of his day, Carlyle failed to distinguish between political, social, and moral issues; he perceived Government, Society, and the structure of personal morality as mutually reflecting mirrors:

. . . the Government cannot do . . . what the Society is radically indisposed to do. In the long-run every Government is the exact symbol of its People, with their wisdom and unwisdom; we have to say, like People like Government:--The main substance of this immense Problem of Organizing Labour, and first of all of Managing the Working Classes, will, it is very clear, have to be solved by those who stand practically in the middle of it; by those who themselves work and preside over work. Of all that can be enacted by any Parliament in regard to it, the germs must already lie

⁶²"On Adam Smith and Laissez Faire," in Principles of Political Economy (1830).

potentially extant in those two Classes, who are to obey such enactment. A Human Chaos in which there is no light, you vainly attempt to irradiate by light shed on it: order never can arise there.⁶³

Implicit in Carlyle's philosophy is a view of society as the sum of its members, and a distinction between the State and Society as independent organisms. Carlyle (and most of the social-problem novelists) dismissed the role of government because of its contingent value on the morality of the individual social members, while Disraeli and Kingsley (who subordinated Society to the institutions of State or Church) argued that only an extra-social structure could provide some measure of moral and social cohesion to a chaotic mass of warring individuals. However, Disraeli and Kingsley agreed that a preliminary moral regeneration of the People was necessary before the institutions of Church or State could perform their proper functions. Kingsley wanted to curb the workers' greed to make them fit for socialist co-operation, and Disraeli wanted to revive the aristocracy's paternal spirit which made them the 'natural' leaders of the People. They all believed that the political, social and cultural problems of their

⁶³Past and Present, Book IV, chap. 4, p. 280.

time were reducible to the same problem: the pervasive influence, in industrial society, of a dehumanizing and amoral ethical code based upon materialism and self-interest.

The strongest statement of the relation between Utilitarianism and industrial society appears in Dickens' Hard Times. In that novel, Utilitarianism is described as the central characteristic of the entire industrial civilization rather than an isolated 'problem' in society: it determines the actions of individual people, the nature of human relationships, the quality of life, and even the physical appearance of the industrial city. The principle of Utility controls the whole ambience of industrial life, and class-conflict is only one small feature of the total vision. The locale of the novel, Coketown, is not a Blue-book description of an industrial slum, but a symbol of an inhuman civilization:

It was a town of machinery and tall chimneys. . . . It had a black canal in it, and a river that ran purple with ill-smelling dye, and vast piles of buildings full of windows where there was a rattling and trembling all day long, and where the piston of the steam-engine worked monotonously up and down like the head of an elephant in melancholy madness. It contained several large streets all very like one another, and many more streets still more like one another, inhabited by people equally like one another, who all went in and out at the same hours, with the same sound upon the same pavements, to do the same work, and to

whom every day was the same as yesterday and tomorrow and every year the counterpart of the last and the next.⁶⁴

It would probably be beside the point to define Dickens' sense of Utilitarianism too closely. He is clearly concerned more with its rationalistic than its hedonistic postulate (although the latter also appears in the novel), and he defines rationalism in its broadest sense to account for depersonalization, alienation, mechanization, and a general breakdown of humane or vital impulses in industrial society. The misery of children, cruelty of masters, and poverty of workers are only parts of the problem: Dickens regards Utilitarianism as the shaping spirit of the age, and everything else, including Coketown, as its perverted products. In George Bernard Shaw's view, the novel is a radical critique of the industrial-capitalist system and the human energies which guide it:

Coketown is the whole place; and its rich manufacturers are proud of its dirt, and declare that they like to see the sun blacked out with smoke, because it means that the furnaces are busy and money is being made; whilst its poor factory hands have never known any other sort of town, and are as content with it as a rat is with a hole. . . .

This is Karl Marx, Carlyle, Ruskin, Morris,

⁶⁴Book I, chap. v.

Carpenter, rising up against civilization itself as a disease, and declaring that it is not our disorder but our order that is horrible; that it is not our criminals but our magnates that are robbing and murdering us; and that it is not merely Tom's All Alone that must be demolished and abolished, pulled down, rooted up, and made for ever impossible so that nothing shall remain of it but History's record of its infamy, but our entire system.⁶⁵

The political theme in Dickens' novel, as in all the social-problem novels, centers upon an anti-Utilitarian philosophy or code of conduct. Dickens regarded Utilitarianism primarily as a perversion of human sensibilities, and his solution to the social crisis was to "cultivate . . . the utmost graces of the fancies and affections." The mythic counterpart to "severely workful" Coketown is the golden world of Mr. Sleary's circus where children gather to escape the rigors of their dreary education in "pure Fact." Dickens believed that humane affections, generous sympathies, and sound morality would necessarily flourish in a world which respected the innocent joys of childhood and the "wisdom of the Heart" rather than "the Head." The feelings of innocent children in Hard Times (as elsewhere in Dickens' novels) provide the moral touchstone for the novel, and it is appropriately Mr. Sleary who pronounces

⁶⁵Introduction to Hard Times (London, Waverley, 1912).

the final dictum on Utilitarianism in his lisping speech:

. . . there ith a love in the world, not all thelf-interetht after all, but thomething very different
 . . . it hath a way of ith own of calculating or not calculating, whith thomehow or another ith . . . hard to give a name to . . .⁶⁶

The social-problem novelists share the main features of Dickens' philosophy. They all perceive Utilitarianism as a pernicious moral and emotional influence, and they propose a Christian code of conduct or framework of feelings in order to counteract its effects. The keynote of all the novels is 'philanthropy,' or some version of the altruistic ideal: benevolence, sympathy, cooperation, or sublime self-denial. Disraeli holds up a feudal ideal of privilege associated with duty, Kingsley a cooperative ideal based on sympathy and mutual respect, Mrs. Gaskell a domestic ideal based on love and reciprocal responsibility, and George Eliot a stoic ideal based on duty and personal discipline. All the novelists are unanimous in their indictment of the principle of self-interest, and they propose, in various ways, an ethical code based upon traditiona. Christian caritas.

In addition to the broken "bond of attachment"

⁶⁶Book III, chap. viii.

between masters and men, the novelists deplored the broken "chain of connection" between the various classes, and the resulting division of English society into "two nations" mutually opposed. Like many nineteenth-century social critics, they rejected the Liberal ideal of a society in which each member pursues his private happiness, and they held up a vision of the 'organic' society in which the various social parts are inter-related by function and design to produce a harmonious whole. The key word in their philosophy was 'function'; the various classes would be characterized by their different functions in relation to the social whole rather than their relative degrees of power, and class-antagonism would disappear because the distribution of power would operate in the interests of all the classes. However, the novelists were not egalitarians in the socialist sense of the term, despite certain similarities between the 'organic' vision and the socialist ideal. On the contrary, they wanted to preserve authority rather than establish equality, and they were more concerned with social hierarchy and order than individual liberty and happiness. J. A. Hobson's remarks on Ruskin's social philosophy apply to most of the social-problem novelists:

This organic conception everywhere illuminates his theory and his practical constructive policy: it gives order to his conception of the different industrial classes and to the relations of individual members of each class: it releases him from the mechanical atomic notion of equality, and compels him to develop an orderly system of inter-dependence sustained by authority and obedience.⁶⁷

The social-problem novelists believed, perhaps naively, that class-conflict was not the inevitable result of an unequal distribution of power and privilege per se, and that it could be avoided if the privileged classes justified their power in the name of some universally-accepted moral principle. The novelists agreed with De Tocqueville that "Men are not corrupted by the exercise of power or debased by the habit of obedience; but by the exercise of a power which they believe to be illegal, and by obedience to a rule which they consider to be usurped and oppressive."⁶⁸ The Utilitarian ethic and the Liberal ideal had justified the use of power and privilege which the masses clearly felt to be oppressive, and the great effort of the mid-Victorian generation was to find some

⁶⁷John Ruskin, Social Reformer (London, 1889), p. 82.

⁶⁸Democracy in America, II (3d edn.), p. xi.

other ethical principles or ideals on which to base a social order. Many middle-class Radicals and established aristocrats participated in the effort, and the spirit of philanthropy penetrated even into the ideology of the ultra-Liberal Anti-Corn-Law League. One spokesman for the League declared in 1854:

. . . trade has now a chivalry of its own; a chivalry whose stars are radiant with the more benignant lustre of justice, happiness, and religion, and whose titles will outlive the barbarous nomenclature of Charlemagne.⁶⁹

The new altruistic spirit may have concealed a deeper fear of government intervention to alleviate the condition of the masses or even a fear of a working-class uprising,⁷⁰ but the fact remains that the middle class expressed its commitment to new ideals. One biographer of Richard

⁶⁹H. Dunckley, The Charter of the Nations (1854), p. 25.

⁷⁰One writer in Blackwood's in 1830 made it quite clear that the welfare state was the only alternative to a working-class revolution:

Whoever . . . loves the institutions of his country, and sincerely desires that they may survive unhurt the revolutionary contagion that prevails in the political atmosphere of Europe, let him study how the common people may be made comfortable.

Johnstone, "The Present Crisis," Blackwood's XXVIII, p. 692. Cited by Harold Perkin, The Origins of Modern English Society (London, 1969), p. 251.

Cobden regards this commitment as evidence of a genuine change-of-heart:

Moral ideas of the relations of class to class in this country, and of the relations of country to country in the civilized world, lay behind the contention of the hour, and in the course of that contention came into a new light. The promptings of a commercial shrewdness were gradually enlarged into enthusiasm for a far-reaching principle, and the hard-headed man of business gradually felt himself touched with the generous glow of the patriot and the deliverer.⁷¹

The ideological reversal of the middle class is perhaps best exemplified in the history of John Stuart Mill, who began his career as a straightforward Utilitarian and drastically modified his views later in life. His early philosophy was developed at a time when the middle class was struggling to achieve economic mobility and a share of political power. At that time, against the background of an oppressive and authoritarian aristocracy, Utilitarianism seemed to be a humanistic argument for reform, progress, individual liberty, and human diversity.

⁷¹J. Morley, The Life of Richard Cobden, I (1903 edn.), p. 180. Cobden had formerly challenged traditional forms of charity saying, "Mine is the masculine species of charity which would lead me to inculcate in the minds of the labouring classes the love of independence, the privilege of self-respect, the disdain of being patronized or petted, the desire to accumulate and the ambition to rise." Ibid., p. 137.

By 1832, however, when the aristocratic monolith was destroyed and the working class took up the standard of liberty, Mill felt that society was threatened with a new form of oppression. The working class demanded a more powerful government, capable of mediating class conflict and redistributing property. It appeared that the workers demanded less social diversity and more uniformity. If their demands were fulfilled, Mill argued, individual liberties and minority opinion would be repressed by a democratic bureaucracy in the name of the majority will. Since the working class was the majority, the principle of 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number' seemed to justify that prospect. "The majority has not yet learnt to feel the power of government as its power, or its opinions as its opinions," Mill wrote, but "when they do so, individual liberty will probably be as much exposed to invasion from the government as it already is from public opinion."⁷²

The Utilitarian argument is an industrial rather than a commercial age seemed to subvert the libertarian impulse which had given rise to it. The collectivist

⁷²R. B. McCallum, ed., 'On Liberty' and 'Considerations on Representative Government' (Oxford, 1946), p. 8.

forces of industrialism made 'the greatest happiness for the greatest number' a rationale for a potential tyranny unless the concept of Utility was redefined from its original hedonistic and materialistic meaning. "I regard Utility as the ultimate appeal," Mill wrote, "but it must be Utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being."⁷³ Mill defined man's "permanent interests" as his spiritual interests, and he rejected Bentham's philosophy because it failed to take those into account:

A philosophy like Bentham's . . . can teach the means of organizing and regulating the merely business part of the social arrangements. . . . It will do nothing (except sometimes as an instrument in the hands of a higher doctrine) for the spiritual interests of society; nor does it suffice of itself even for the material interests. . . .⁷⁴

Mill repudiated the calculus of pleasure and pain in favor of a "far-reaching principle": an ideal of human character and personality superseding self-interest. He also rejected the 'egoistic' version of Utilitarianism (each man ought to pursue his own happiness) in favor of a

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴"Bentham" in Mill's Essays on Literature and Society, ed. J. B. Schneewind (New York, 1965), p. 267.

'universalistic' one (each man ought to pursue the general happiness). Like many other middle-class reformers, he compromised strict Utilitarian principles in order to maintain the social order which he felt was necessary for the preservation of individual liberties.

The notion that social and political problems can be solved through spiritual decisions is, from the point of view of the modern reader, a major reason for the imaginative failings in the social-problem novels. All the novels begin with a realistic social statement but conclude with a conventional romance; they define the characters through their response to a powerful social environment, create a dramatic situation when the characters come into conflict with that environment, and then resolve or dissolve the situation on the basis of the characters' personal feelings and possible courses of action which are independent of all environmental determinants. The novelists propose a personal solution to political problems, and an abstract moral ideal or private feeling as an antidote to social ills. Sybil's radical sentiment dissolves in her marriage to Egremont, Alton Locke repudiates politics in favor of religion, Mary Barton marries Jem and emigrates to America, Sissy Jupe is re-united with her circus-family, and Felix

Holt retires from politics to take up the responsibilities of married life--all in the service of a solution to problems caused by industrialism and capitalism. The working-class characters are initially patterned after George Lucacs' "typical" heroes; they embody and bring into focus the social forces of their time, and oppose them with a vision of a 'new' society.⁷⁵ However, the opposition between character and society eventually breaks down, and the individual becomes reconciled to the world by affirming his psycho-spiritual autonomy apart from the social system. The working-class characters who are at first representative of their class are in the end isolated voices testifying to their 'freedom' by virtue of something like their God-given souls. To put it another way, they are initially conceived as characters defined by their social status (in a restless and unstable society) and determined to test out their wills and spirits against a society whose injustice and crude values they reject and oppose; but in the end they appear to be creatures of sensibility, impelled by traditional Christian pieties to make conventional moral choices.

⁷⁵See Georg Lucacs, Studies in European Realism (New York, 1964), p. 2.

It may be that a 'personal' solution is a necessity in the political novel or in the novel altogether, and that a 'political' solution (whatever that might be) would amount to the author's tacit admission that he was less interested in his characters than in the 'truths' that they express. The difficulty in the social-problem novel is not that they fail to present an ideology (in fact, they often do, and that too is a problem) or the 'correct' ideology (assuming we know what that is), but that the conclusion of the novel, ideological or not, fails to satisfy the imaginative conditions which were previously set up. All of the novels ask questions, prepare issues, and raise problems which are ignored, evaded, or dismissed at the end. Something 'goes wrong' in Sybil when the Daughter of the People repudiates the members of her class at the first sight of their ignorance and violence (after she had already claimed that the workers were degraded by the social system); in Alton Locke when the hero loses heart and falls into a delirium after April 10, 1848 (after he was released from prison for participating in a working-class riot not of his making, and had already confronted the limited moral and emotional resources of his fellow Chartists); in Mary Barton when John Barton becomes addicted to drugs and

finally commits murder (after he had been defined as a psychologically strong character whose social outrage was impelled by moral concerns). In all these novels, the author set up problems which he could not resolve, or reached an impasse which he could not overcome (or leave alone). He therefore had to redefine the issues, reinterpret the characters, or trot out some ideology which would conclude the novel even if it failed to satisfy its imaginative conditions.

From a Marxist point of view, the conclusions to the novels appear to be evidence of "the novelists' failure to deal really honestly with the social experiences their novels are intended to portray."⁷⁶ John Lucas finds evidence of that failure in the portraits of working-class characters who live exclusively in slums and behave like animals, and in the conventional moral conclusions which signify that "a halt is suddenly called to the attempt at imaginative honesty, and a political attitude quickly wheeled forward in its place." In his view, the novels' realism is undermined by the authors' vested psychological interest in maintaining the existing social order:

⁷⁶ John Lucas, "Mrs. Gaskell and Brotherhood," in Tradition and Tolerance in Nineteenth-Century Fiction, eds. David Howard, John Lucas, and John Goode (London, 1966), p. 141.

The intention of recommending the brotherhood of united interests as a solution to social problems and prime aid to a nation of single-minded purpose frequently looks to be undermined by a guilty recognition that it is solely to the advantage of the class that proposes it. And it does also seem that accompanying the guilt is a fear that those who are made the principal object of this recommendation may reject it in favor of their own. . . . And what is unbearable to him is the implication that the object of his sympathy himself knows what is for his good, because this entirely destroys the calming vision of a single nation which gives his belief in progress its moral justification. Trying to preserve this vision against external probabilities and his own unease is therefore very often the social-problem novelist's most acute difficulty.⁷⁷

It may be, however, that the novelists were less concerned to preserve the existing social system than the idea of social order, and that they were impelled less by their patrician bias or their vested interest in the status quo than their humane concern for the preservation of order and civilization. The novelists may indeed have had a 'partisan' bias, insofar as they believed that society must be maintained even at the expense of social injustice. They may have 'recoiled' (as John Lucas claims) from their working-class characters, because they perceived the working-class movement--despite their considerable sympathy for it--as a prelude to total anarchy. From that point of view, the novels reflect a political dilemma of the nineteenth

⁷⁷Lucas, p. 147.

century: it appeared to most political and social thinkers that society as an institution was being challenged by individuals and groups purportedly bent solely on social reform. Recognizing the need for reform, they argued the greater need to preserve society (the Nation, the spirit of the People, the inherited wisdom of ages and generations, etc.) from its attackers. Many nineteenth-century political thinkers regarded 'society' as a precarious and unstable organism, bound together only by a powerful extra-societal agency which imposed limits upon individual wills. Only Adam Smith and his followers believed that a society in which every individual competes in the name of self-interest could remain secure. Smith believed in the beneficent operations of a natural 'market system,' but the greater number of his contemporaries believed that a central authority, a widely-held reverence for tradition, or some such restraint upon individual wills and interests was necessary in order to maintain a measure of social cohesion. They regarded the working-class movement as an organization of wilful and self-interested individuals or misguided social reformers who failed to see that their demand for individual 'rights' threatened a precarious social order. In their view, the working-class activist

was someone like Conrad's Secret Agent, a character without 'fidelity' who would, out of malice or ignorance, dissolve those few frail bonds which connected the social members and prevented society from turning into a Hobbesian nightmare.

The fear of society 'falling apart' persisted throughout the nineteenth century, reinforced by the public's growing awareness that change had become the rule of life, and that man was a creature driven by uncontrollable forces into new and terrifying situations. Despite Carlyle's reassurance that "In Change . . . there is nothing terrible, nothing supernatural" (Characteristics), it seemed to many people inconceivable that civilization could endure without an idea of order. According to Northrop Frye,⁷⁸ Rimbaud's poem about "the drunken boat" ("Le Bateau Ivre") represents a widespread conception of life in the nineteenth century: it appears in Hegel's historical dialectic (where 'antithesis' overturns 'synthesis'), in Marx's political ideology (in which the proletariat revolts against the bourgeoisie), in Darwin's theory of evolution (in which the Classical

⁷⁸Northrop Frye, "The Drunken Boat," Romanticism Reconsidered, ed. Northrop Frye (New York, 1963).

Humanist conception of man is overthrown by the operation of biological laws), in Schopenhauer's World as Will (attacking the World as Idea), and in Freud's theory of the 'id' (forever at war with the order of the 'ego'). In all these theoretical systems, there is a notion of order being overturned by some subversive force or process; an idea that any stasis is chimerical or temporary, and that instability is the order of life. Some thinkers, like Carlyle, accepted the fact that "Change . . . lies in the very essence of our lot and life," some equated change with progress, and others regarded it as a cosmic force working against all human and civilized designs.

The social-problem novel originates in a sense of disorder, particularly in the view that society is an unstable and shifting medium in which individual characters move and suffer. Whether the novels are primarily political tracts, critiques of industrialism, or 'genuine' romances, they invariably reflect the novelists' response to social disorder. Unlike the picaresque novel or the conventional romance, the social-problem novel does not take 'society' for granted as a fixed entity to be explored or as a background for the play of personalities. An embattled and precarious society is the problem, and the

novelists invariably find themselves torn between their compassion for individual workers and their conviction that society, however imperfect, is superior to a state of total anarchy. What 'takes over' in the course of the novels is the authors' defense of society as an idea or institution, which means that they have to surrender something of their compassion for the working man or their attention to individual characters or problems. The novels invariably reach a critical moment when the hero's (justified) outrage involves him in some (unjustified) piece of working-class violence, after which the hero is miraculously reborn into another kind of character with a new perception of the world and his relation to it. The underlying myth in all the social-problem novels is that individuals acting in their own behalf, however rational they are or however justified their complaints may be, invariably promote the destruction of the social fabric.

The social-problem novelists were undoubtedly influenced by the popular stereotype of the worker as a sub-human creature who lives in slums and thrives on violence, and it probably influenced their political ideologies. However, the unsavory portrait of the demos is not by itself evidence that the novelists recoiled from their subject,

or that their novels were written in the service of political repression. On the contrary, some of them appear to have been inspired to write about a world they perceived as radically different from their own. The Marxist critique of the social-problem novels (v. Lucas) fails to take into account the far-reaching reforms which were initiated by members of the ruling classes who described the workers in the same ugly stereotypes, and proposed social solutions in the same moral terms, as the social-problem novelists. The Young Englanders, for example, many of whom were undoubtedly sincere, argued for social reform in the name of Christian morality. They were preceded by a sizeable group of aristocrat-factory-reformers who regarded the 'immorality' of the workers as a direct consequence of the 'immorality' of the industrial system. Richard Oastler, for example, perceived the workers' degradation as a direct indictment of the manufacturing interests:

. . . some people will strenuously maintain that the cause of our general distress is to be found in the "INTEMPERANCE" and "DRUNKENNESS" of the people. No doubt this is a very great evil--it is not the cause, --it is one of the effects of our present system! . . . Let every friend of temperance look to the causes, and endeavor to remove them. Go with me to Manchester, if you will, and, at "leaving off time," take your stand by a large "gin temple," in the neighborhood of an enormous mill; and see the poor over-worked, forlorn, emaciated "Factory girl" of nine years old--the

renowned "British labourer!" All in rags and tatters; see her "slur" past you, to the door of the "gin temple." . . . This is the way thousands of industrious females are made into "drunkards." These injured females, are the very foundation on which our great manufacturing interest rests! LET ENGLAND BLUSH!⁷⁹

The protest-literature of the 1830's and 1840's persistently appeals for practical social reforms on the grounds that the 'system' is immoral (in the Christian sense) and produces immorality in the workers. For example, the agitation for the ten hours' bill centered on the issue of public morals. One factory inspector in 1841 argued that the workers' hours of labor had to be limited, if only for the sake of improving their characters and the quality of their homes. The question of the workers' physical suffering appears to be almost a secondary matter beside the larger moral issue:

There can be little doubt that working 10 hours a-day would be more favorable to health and the enjoyment of life than 12 hours can be; but without entering into the question of health, no one will hesitate, I think, to admit that, in a moral point of view, so entire an absorption of the working classes, without intermission, from the early age of 13 . . . must be extremely prejudicial, and is an evil greatly to be deplored.--For the sake, therefore, of public morals, of bringing up an orderly population, and of giving the great body of people a reasonable enjoyment of life, it is much to be desired, that in all trades some portion of every

⁷⁹Letter to the Editor of the Agricultural and Industrial Magazine (London, 1835), pp. 144-145.

working-day should be reserved for rest and leisure.⁸⁰

What is perhaps more surprising is the degree to which working-class reformers insisted on the 'moral' issue, and implicitly confirmed the findings of the Blue-books. The demands for education, sanitation, religious instruction, and shorter work-days were accompanied with the argument that the existing system tended to degrade and brutalize the workers. The condition of the working-class family received particular attention, and a major argument for the ten-hours' bill was that it would return the wife to her proper place in the home and strengthen the moral character of the family:

It is needless for us to say, that all attempts to improve the moral and physical condition of female factory workers will be abortive, unless their hours of toil are materially reduced. Indeed, we may go so far as to say, that married females would be much better occupied in performing the domestic duties of the household, than following the never-tiring motion of machinery. We therefore hope the day is not distant, when the husband will be able to provide for his wife and family, without sending the former to

⁸⁰Parliamentary Papers, 1847-48, XXVI, Factory Inspectors, pp. 152-153. Neil Smelser argues that the major reason for working-class agitation in the 1840's was the workers' desire to "restore the fusion between the family's economic functions and its more general moral and educational functions." Social Change in the Industrial Revolution (Chicago, 1959), pp. 144-145.

endure the drudgery of the cotton mill.⁸¹

It appears that the workers were at least as concerned as the upper-class reformers to restore order and authority to their lives.

The stereotyped portrait of the worker as a morally degraded character is not, by itself, evidence of any desire among the novelists to resist social change or deny the validity of working-class demands. The most active social reformers and even the workers themselves presented that stereotype in order to awaken the public conscience. By the same token, moral preachment in the novels and exhortation to Christian caritas, are not necessarily evidence of the authors' retreat from obvious political truths. It was widely believed, even by the most spirited critics of the factory system, that "Every capitalist might contribute much to the happiness of those in his employ, by [an] exercise of enlightened charity."⁸² Many social reformers regarded Utilitarianism and Political Economy as ethical rather than economic systems, and they opposed Malthus' "Selfish system" with a paternal regard for the rights of

⁸¹Ten Hours' Advocate, March 6, 1847.

⁸²J. P. Kay, The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working Classes Employed in the Cotton Manufacture in Manchester (London, 1832), pp. 63-64.

the poor. They regarded benevolence as a duty rather than a supererogatory act, and they believed that their moral doctrines constituted a systematic attack on the basic premises of the capitalists. There was apparently no distinction made between the moral and 'purely' economic premises of the Political Economists, and a Tory factory-reformer like Sadler who preached the doctrines of benevolence was widely recognized as an opponent of the philosophical radicals. One commentator in Blackwood's, reviewing Sadler's first session in Parliament, believed that Sadler was a genuine adversary of the industrialists and capitalists:

The Economists for the first time heard their fallibility called in question, and felt their ascendancy in danger. . . . These sages of the Satanic school in politics encountered an adversary by whom their favorite measures were opposed, and their most familiar axioms disputed . . . he is the man whose warning voice called the attention of the honourable House . . . to the first principles of the Economists; who bid them turn their eyes from the capitalist to the labourer; and who had the spirit and the feeling to ask them . . . whether that could be a good system . . . under the influence of which Capital must increase at the expense of humanity; where what is called wealth only serves to oppress and to paralyze industry; and national prosperity is made to . . . proceed upon its course amidst the sweat, and the blood, and the groans of its victims.⁸³

⁸³"Review of the Last Session of Parliament," Blackwood's, 1829, XXVI, p. 235.

The early advocates of Co-operation or socialism likewise regarded capital as a moral as well as economic system, and they refused to separate the economic from the moral advantages of socialism:

. . . the sweetest of all bonds is that which is formed not merely by a common science, but by a congenial disposition and heart. It is from the heart that every valuable feeling springs, and every source of pleasure and happiness. No kind of pursuit, or knowledge, becomes a source of happiness to a man, till it takes fast hold of the heart and affections. . . .

It is oppressive to contemplate the picture of man . . . approaching to friendless destitution. The heart mourns over it, and seeks relief in imagining the possibility of a state of things, in which we may open our bosom, and receive into our arms, all who wear the fair form and features of man. Such is the state which Co-operation holds out, and Co-operation alone. Co-operation removes the almost insurmountable obstacles to friendship, namely,--self-interest, rivalry, jealousy, and envy. When two persons have an inclination to cultivate a friendship for each other, they seldom proceed far without finding their interests clash. . . . Men must have different pursuits, and be wholly independent of each other, in order to stand any chance of a real and sincere friendship.⁸⁴

The workers, like the social critics in the upper classes, perceived the need for a moral as well as economic reform of industrial society, and their demands for social justice or economic relief were accompanied by a plea for "a more amplified code of duty . . . and a more enlarged perception

⁸⁴The Co-operator, November 1, 1828.

of the wants of the operative."⁸⁵

The rhetoric of reform in mid-century England is a peculiar blend of socialist and Christian thought. The radical-conservatives, early socialists, and humanitarian reformers shared the same tendency to analyze the social crisis in economic terms and solve it in Christian terms. In their view, the workers suffered at the hands of immoral individuals, and the restoration of a just morality in the conduct of social, political, and economic affairs would alleviate suffering, reduce the workers' class-consciousness, and re-establish their sense of individual pride.

The mixture of romance and realism in the social-problem novel signifies an inability of the novelists (with the possible exception of Dickens) to recognize the independent existence of 'society' or the special character of the industrial worker. They could not write a 'realistic' novel in Lukacz' sense of the term, because they could not fully understand the particularity of their social situation or its effects on individual characters. In Lukacs' view

The central category and criterion of realist literature is the type, a peculiar synthesis which organically

⁸⁵Ten Hours' Advocate, February 27, 1847.

binds together the general and the particular both in characters and situations. What makes a type a type is not its average quality, not its mere individual being, however profoundly conceived; what makes it a type is that in it all the humanly and socially essential determinants are present on their highest level of development, in the ultimate unfolding of the possibilities latent in them, in extreme presentation of their extremes, rendering concrete the peaks and limits of men and epochs.⁸⁶

The social-problem novelists could not perceive the special character of industrial society or the special character of the worker. Disraeli's 'two nations,' for example, are the nineteenth-century incarnations of the 'higher' and 'lower' orders which have existed from time immemorial, and his working-class characters are Saxon plowmen superficially transformed by the pressures of industrialism and capitalism. Like most of his contemporaries, Disraeli asserts a Christian view of man as an isolated pilgrim on a spiritual odyssey, and a Christian view of society as one in which each man struggles to perform his duty. He had a stationary view of the human-social condition and failed to see a reciprocal determination between society and its individual members. In fact, he resisted the idea that individual character could be determined because it contradicted his romantic ideal of the human personality. In Sybil, as in

⁸⁶Lukacz, p. 6.

all the social-problem novels, the working-class heroes resist assimilation into either of the 'two nations.' A major theme in all the novels is that the worker is falsely perceived as a member of a class when he is, in fact, nothing more than a suffering individual, one of the traditional 'humble poor' who has lost his identity in industrial society. In Hard Times, for example, Louisa discovers that the abstract category of 'the working class' presents a false picture of living, struggling individuals:

. . . for the first time she was face to face with anything like individuality in connexion with them. . . .
 Something to be worked so much and paid so much, and there ended; something to be infallibly settled by laws of supply and demand; something that blundered against those laws, and floundered into difficulty. . . .
 But she had scarcely thought more of separating them into units, than of separating the sea itself into its component parts.⁸⁷

The habit of viewing the workers as members of a social class was from the point of view of the novelists, a symptom of the social disease of depersonalization. In a sense, they tried to rescue the character of the individual worker from the consuming social forces, and to bring him back to where he 'belonged': in a stable social structure where each man performs his duties according to his station in life, and is bound to his social superiors by ties of mutual sympathy and respect.

⁸⁷Book II, chap. vi.

The Characterization of the Working-Class Hero

The lifeless portrayal of working-class characters and scenes in the social-problem novels signifies the authors' inability to comprehend the social forces of their time. The characters are generally an unmemorable assortment of idealized victims, stoic martyrs, and gentle artisans on the one hand, and on the other, gross caricatures of agitators, rioters, trade unionists, and angry Chartists. The novelists struggled to get a sense of the worker's surroundings and the quality of his life, but they rarely perceived more than blue-book evidence of squalor and general misery. The sordid descriptions of Jacob's Island, the slums of Bermondsey, the sweat shops of London and factories of Manchester all have a journalistic quality, as if written by an outside observer or a diligent reader of Parliamentary reports; and they all point to the same conclusion of widespread suffering among the workers. Nothing in those scenes captures the teeming vitality of the working-class districts as described by D. H. Lawrence or the English writers of the post-World War II generation. There are isolated moments of truth in some novels--Mrs. Gaskell anticipates Lawrence in her pungent description of the workers' homes, and Kingsley brings to life the

Dissenting tradition and its impact upon the workers' world-view--but these moments are rare and not fully integrated into the life of the novel.

The novelists typically evaluated the working-class character and environment in terms of pre-industrial social values. The idealized worker is usually a modernized version of the eighteenth-century rural artisan, a type celebrated by Oliver Goldsmith and the writers of pastoral romance, or he is a representative of the humble-but-virtuous poor, the stock character of traditional Christian myth. His urban environment is likewise evaluated against an earlier ideal. The novelists emphasized those features of the industrial scene which tended to corrode the strong family ties characteristic of a domestic economy; the labor of women and children, the widespread habit of intemperance, the loss of religion, and other abuses which tended to demoralize the working-class family.

The social-problem novelists did not perceive the proletarian as a character radically different from the pre-industrial 'labourer,' or his response to his environment as the special characteristic of his newly-created class. Using the objective criteria of social status, occupation, and ownership of property, they regarded him

as an incarnation of the earlier 'lower orders.' They did not define him, as Marx did, in terms of his relation to the means of production, nor did they perceive in him "a predisposition to react to one's given environment in ways no better to be described than by the term proletarian."⁸⁸ In effect, they did not comprehend the effects of social change; they had no way of knowing that the combined pressures of industrialism and capitalism had called into existence a new type of human being. Like most of their contemporaries, they deplored the 'new character of the masses' and believed it was the artificial, and hopefully temporary, creation of what William Cobbett called "unnatural" social conditions. In the characters of idealized artisans, virtuous seamstresses, and plain humble folk, they tried to revive the 'proper' image of the sempiternal 'lower orders' and restore a sense of society as something governed by "nature, providence, and law."⁸⁹

⁸⁸Some recent historians and social theorists have tried to define a "characteristic mental set" in the working class. See Goetz A. Briefs, The Proletariat (New York, 1937), pp. 50-51. Also Richard Hoggart, The Uses of Literacy (Boston, 1966).

⁸⁹A typical point of view is expressed by one contributor to Blackwood's who deplored the change in "the style and structure of society" from what they were "in former days":
Everywhere, in every walk of life, it is too evident that

None of the novelists legitimized the workers' political activities; they perceived them as the chaotic expression of rage, frustration, and unwarranted anti-social impulses. (There may have been some realistic basis for that view: Engels expressed a similar judgment, but he may have been influenced by his reading of the Blue-books, as some historians claim.) The scenes of working-class riot invariably occur during a Chartist meeting or some political event, usually with the implication that the workers are incapable of coherent action and that their movement is a vehicle for their violent and anarchic tendencies. The bloody rampage of Bishop Hatton following the National Petition (Sybil), the outbreak of arson after a Chartist meeting (Alton Locke), and the carnival atmosphere of a mob riot on election day (Felix Holt) all testify to a belief that the workers could not distinguish political activism from self-abandon, and that they were more interested in assailing the existing order than finding a place in it. The workers were seen not as an organized class with a

the upper orders of Society have been tending, more and more, to a separation of themselves from those whom nature, providence, and law have placed beneath them. "The Warder, No. VII," Blackwood's, 1820, VII, p. 90.

cohesive political purpose, but a random assortment of selfish, ignorant, and miserable malcontents.

The state was seen as an organism designed to maintain social order rather than provide an acceptable arena for social conflict. Whigs and Tories alike rejected Marx's notion that "Your very ideas are but the outgrowth of the conditions of your bourgeois production and bourgeois property, just as your jurisprudence is but the will of your class . . . a will, whose essential character and direction are determined by the economic conditions of existence of your class."⁹⁰ On the contrary, they believed that ideologies were validated by fixed moral and 'social' principles, and not by their relation to group interests or changing historical conditions.

The workers threatened to undermine the process of government as well as its purpose. In the high-minded view of most political theorists, the Members of Parliament were to vote in the name of the corporate social welfare (or, according to Disraeli, the principles or dictates of their parties) rather than their private interests or even the

⁹⁰Communist Manifesto, p. 47.

interests of their constituencies.⁹¹ According to Burke, Parliament was not "a congress of ambassadors from different and hostile interests" but "a deliberative assembly of one nation with one interest, that of the whole--where not local prejudices ought to guide but the general good resulting from the general reason of the whole."⁹² In his opinion, the Members of Parliament could, and should, represent the different local and functional "interests" of the nation in Parliamentary debate, but they were to vote in the interests of the corporate social whole. Burke made this clear when he told his constituents, "If government were a matter of will upon any side, yours without question ought to be superior. But government and legislation are matters of reason and judgment and not of inclination."⁹³ Even the Liberals--a party which stressed the importance of the individual social member and the independence of the Parliamentary representative--rejected the notion of government by 'will.' The Liberals believed that government should

⁹¹See Samuel H. Beer, British Politics in the Collectivist Age (New York, 1965), pp. 3-43.

⁹²Election speech of November 3, 1774, The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke, II (Boston, 1901), pp. 92-93.

⁹³Ibid.

represent individuals rather than fixed corporate interests, but they had in mind a particular type of individual, the independent rational man, whose interests deserved representation. They also demanded the right of each Parliamentary member to vote on the basis of his personal opinion, but they assumed that it would be a conscientious opinion applied to each measure separately, and guided by reason rather than personal 'will,' party loyalties, or the dictates of a constituency.

The critics of democracy variously associated it with anarchy, tyranny, socialism, or cultural ruin. Some of them argued that democracy would result in social anarchy because it violated the corporate or hierarchical principle, and others (particularly Liberals) argued that it would bring a tyranny because it overrode the freedoms of the minority in the name of a new corporate ideal. They all agreed that the workers would establish a socialist system because their 'will' was impelled by greed, envy and narrow self-interest, and that they would, in their existing state of ignorance, destroy the fabric of English civilization by establishing a rule of 'ignorant numbers.' (The feverish enactment of educational reforms in the nineteenth century reflects the Liberals' desire to educate the

workers to their responsibilities as citizens, and the Conservatives' desire to instill in the workers a proper deference to their social superiors.) Burke anticipated all these criticisms early in the century when he declared, with ominous foreboding, that England was in danger of imitating France's example of "an irrational, unprincipled, proscribing, confiscating, plundering, ferocious, bloody, and tyrannical democracy."⁹⁴

Swept up in the general mood of uncertainty about the future of English social life, the social-problem novelists held some of the prevailing beliefs about the nature, purposes, and potential consequences of the working-class movement. The working-class hero in all the novels is distinguished from the other members of his class by his opposition to the movement and his rejection of any form of violence or hostility. In some novels, the main character appears to be conceived exclusively as a model of non-participation: Felix Holt is primarily characterized by his stoic refusal to engage in politics, and Stephen Blackpool by his innocent trust in the ultimate wisdom of his superiors. Both characters are politically quiescent

⁹⁴The Parliamentary History of England, XXVIII, p. 355.

and their virtue is measured by their distance from the 'bad' workers who are political activists and prone to violence. The heroes in all the novels are repelled by the spectre of working-class violence. In those novels where the hero is initially involved in the Chartist movement, he eventually becomes embroiled in some senseless mob action, and then repudiates the Chartist program. At the end of Sybil, Alton Locke, and Mary Barton, the former Chartists renounce their combative posture and become humble penitents, recognizing that the workers are victimized by their own moral insufficiencies as well as those of their social superiors. These novels conclude with a tearful reconciliation between former class-enemies.

The politically passive workers appear at first glance to exist in the service of the authors' conscious political purpose. Their lack of vitality can easily be taken as a function of their status as ideological diagrams. They seem to have been created without the sympathy of the author, 'from a distance' as it were, according to some rule or idea. In reality, however, novelists like Gaskell or Kingsley often struggled with an excessive sympathy for the workers. In all the novels there appear to be moments when the author 'makes contact' with his

character, and then withdraws, as if he could not bear the implications of that contact. The mechanism of withdrawal seems to be something other than the author's patrician bias; it may have been his inability to fathom the depths of his imagined character, or to sustain himself in a consciousness so foreign to his own.

The process of 'withdrawal' is perhaps best illustrated by Mrs. Gaskell, who was inspired to write a "romance" about the lives of the poor and to "give voice to the agony that convulses this dumb people." She found a 'voice' for the workers' agony in the figure of John Barton, a strong and morally upright workman who suffers a series of personal misfortunes. Mrs. Gaskell's identification with her main character is suggested by the fact that she began to write her novel after the death of her young son, and it appears that the workers' agony (the death of Barton's young son marks the beginning of his misfortunes) was in some sense a measure of her own. More important, the author's sympathy skims through the warm and intimate touches in the portrait. Barton is described through small acts and gestures--walking with his family on a Sunday afternoon, smoking his pipe at the family fire, playing host to his neighbors at tea-time, and so on--which

make him deeply human and convey the nuances of a strong and loyal character. However, the characterization deteriorates rather spectacularly in the middle of the novel, apparently because Mrs. Gaskell could not sustain her sympathy for him after he turned rebellious against his masters. Barton gradually neglects his friends and family, becomes addicted to drugs, and finally assassinates his employer's son. Mrs. Gaskell was apparently unable to balance her feeling that Barton's rage was justified against her conviction that it must be controlled. Not her fear of a working-class revolution but her inability to cope with her own outrage at the inequalities of fortune and the injustices of fate led her to abandon John Barton as a main character and take up the story of his young and pretty daughter, a conventional, poor-but-virtuous seamstress confronted with a choice of lovers.

Mrs. Gaskell's treatment of John Barton reflects the degree to which working-class politics unsettled the moral and cultural assumptions of the social-problem novelist even when he had no vested interest in maintaining the social order. Mrs. Gaskell claimed to have been ignorant of the laws of Political Economy, and she presumably believed that these matters were irrelevant to a novel

about the "agony" of the working class. Nevertheless, she condemned Barton's politics and made it the instrument of his downfall, apparently because she perceived his politics as an expression of his moral vision. Barton's assassination of young Carson is the climactic 'political' event of the novel, but his action was highly untypical of the actual Chartists and trade unionists in Mrs. Gaskell's time, and it seems unlikely that she considered it a standard tactic of the working-class movement. The bloody act of personal revenge probably reflects her judgment of the political vocation, and of the motives and impulses of individuals who try to rise up against a 'system' which is as immutable as it is incomprehensible. In a way, Barton's action prefigures the bumbling, desperate attempts of Conrad's secret agent or James' Hyacinth Robinson to destroy what they cannot understand. All of these characters engage in politics because they lack a proper moral or personal philosophy. In rising up against his masters and doing battle with the laws of political economy, Barton commits a sin, and at the end of the novel he repents of the murder and, at the same time, the religious skepticism, which impelled it.

Mrs. Gaskell appears to have made some considerable

efforts to maintain the consciousness of her intended hero as the central focus of the novel, and to make him an independent spokesman for his goals and aspirations. However, the very same feature of Barton's character which attracted the author's sympathy made it virtually impossible for her to sustain him as the dominant point of view in the narrative. Mrs. Gaskell wanted to "give voice to the agony" of a "dumb people" who were incapable of articulating the causes and consequences of their misery. Precisely that lack of articulation characterizes John Barton and turns his every major statement into a mute emotional appeal. When Barton discusses his political views with his friend Wilson, his argument for social justice deteriorates into a plea for personal sympathy:

"Eh, John, donna talk so; surely there's many and many a master as good or better nor us."

"If you think so, tell me this. How comes it they're rich and we're poor? I'd like to know that. Han they done as they'd be done for by us? . . . You'll say that (at least many a one does) they'n gotten capital an' we'n gotten none. I say, our labour's our capital, and we ought to draw interest on that. They get interest on their capital somehow a' this time, while ourn is lying idle, else how could they all live as they do? . . . They'n screwed us down to the lowest peg, in order to make their great big fortunes, and build their great big houses, and we, why we're just clemming, many and many of us. Can you say there's nought wrong in this?"

"Well, Barton, I'll not gainsay ye. But . . . th' masters suffer too."

"Han they ever seen a child o' theirn die for want of food?"⁹⁵

Barton has the rudiments of a "consciousness" in Marx's sense of the word: an idea of himself in relation to society, a sense of fellowship with others who stand in the same relation to the upper classes, and a notion that some social reform is necessary. However, Barton's "consciousness" is not a motive for action; it fails to transform him from a social victim to an independent agent of his own destiny. His disquisition on capital and labor dissolves into a cry of pain and exasperation, and that final cry characterizes his political attitude. He clearly has the sympathy of his author, but that sympathy springs from her conviction that he is incapable of making a forceful statement of his aspirations or assuming control of his social destiny.

The working-class hero in the social-problem novels (with the exception of Felix Holt) is of necessity an absolute Victim: the writers perceived him as the most vulnerable and powerless member of society, and they were unable to conceive for him any reasonable course of independent action. This characterization is not exclusively a

⁹⁵ (Norton edn., New York, 1958), p. 60.

projection of the authors' political wishes; it reflects their conviction that politics, and especially working-class politics, is a limited tool for human improvement. For all their terror of a working-class revolution, they believed that the worker was helpless, and that his political fury was the mindless expression of an inarticulate despair.

It is for such reasons that a novelist like Dickens portrayed the worker as victim, an unenlightened creature of inchoate desires who makes his appeal by silent suffering and eventual martyrdom. Dickens recognized that the shabby quality of life in the industrial city was related to the inner workings of the industrial-capitalist system, and that the working-class condition would continue to deteriorate in the absence of radical social change, but he failed to perceive in the workers a "consciousness" which could become the force for social reform. Politics, in his view, was the ridiculous business of men like Lord Coodle or Sir Thomas Doodle or it was a dangerous business in the hands of angry and violent men like Slackbridge. Dickens regarded working-class politics as a symptom of the demoralized civilization in which the classes stood to one another solely in relations of power. The "honest workman" like Stephen Blackpool, the unconscious and inarticulate victim of the "hard" society,

necessarily suffered a dual oppression: he was rejected by masters and men alike, neither of whom would regard him as an individual or sympathize with his private sufferings.

Stephen's confused plea for compassion in some way typifies the stance of all the working-class heroes who recognize that they are suffering but are unable to discover a legitimate outlet for their rage or their moral energies. To Stephen (and to his author) society is "a muddle." Like Mrs. Gradgrind, Stephen knows that "there's a pain somewhere in the room," but he "couldn't positively say that I have got it." Stephen recognizes the logic and validity of the employers' point of view, but the sight of general suffering in Coketown tells him that some injustice is being committed and he knows that the workers are not responsible for it. By the same token, he hopes for some kind of social reform, but he has no idea what that could be, and he knows that the workers are in no position to effect reform while the employers have no interest in it. Like John Barton, Stephen struggles to make sense out of his suffering:

'Deed we are in a muddle, Sir. Look round town--so rich as 'tis--and see the nimburs o' people as has been broughten into beein heer, fur to weave, an' to card, an' to piece out a livin', aw the same one way, somehows, 'twixt their cradles and their graves. Look how we live, an' wheer we live, an' in what numbers, an' by what chances, and wi' what sameness; and look

how the mills is awlus a goin, and how they never works us no higher to onny dis'ant object--ceptin awlus, death. Look how you considers of us, and writes of us, and talks of us, and goes up wi' yor deputations to Secretaries o' State 'bout us, and how yo are awlus right, and how we are awlus wrong, and never had no reason in us sin ever we were born. Look how this ha' growen and growen, Sir, bigger an' bigger, broader an' broader, harder an' harder, fro year to year, fro generation unto generation. Who can look on't, Sir, and fairly tell a man 'tis not a muddle?⁹⁶

Stephen never clears up the "muddle." He dies, appropriately, by stumbling into an abandoned mine shaft, a victim of industrialism in death as well as in life.

The characterization of Stephen Blackpool points to a typical problem of the novelist who perceived the worker as a social victim and denied him an outlet for social protest. The honest worker is either below society or above it, a figure of undeserved suffering or of stoic self-containment. Stephen Blackpool and Felix Holt mark the two opposite poles on the spectrum of working-class heroes. Stephen is the archetypal victim, an inarticulate and thoroughly defenseless creature ground down by the system, while Felix is a figure of tenacious strength, an excessively articulate character who refuses to engage himself with a society he deems corrupt. Both characters are incapable of generating the action of their novels; they

⁹⁶Book II, chap. v.

merely provide the moral standard by which other characters are judged. In all the social-problem novels, the working-class heroes are the least successful figures. They represent the ideals of selfless virtue, silent suffering, or stoic pride, depending on the author's major focus: as emblems of 'the condition of the people' they are passive victims of the 'system,' and as political models they are stoic non-participants in the social struggle. In either case they are notably undynamic characters.

The greater success of working-class portraits later in the century reflects, among other things, Gissing or Hardy's familiarity with working-class culture and their ability to perceive a "consciousness" in their working-class characters. Hardy's *Jude*, though hardly a sociological model of the English working class, is not the 'idealized industrial' of Kingsley's romantic imagination or George Eliot's social conscience. Neither pitied nor patronized, Jude evades the conventional stereotypes of nineteenth-century fiction. He is not the debased and degraded worker living in sweat-shops and rat-infested cellars, nor is he the noble savage living in a quaint pastoral world of well-scrubbed wives and rosy-cheeked children. Jude moves in a world at least as harsh as Alton

Locke's, and his natural goodness is threatened no less than Felix Holt's, but the concrete details of Jude's world are rich and variegated. There is a reciprocal relation between character and society in the novels of Gissing, Hardy, and Lawrence, and the working-class hero creates his destiny as much as he is created by it. Working-class culture, especially in the novels of Lawrence, is a composite of people and places with widely-differing styles and habits. It provides a medium in which individual characters move and develop, but not a determinant of their personalities. The characters in these novels have independent force and motion, and their histories signify something about universal human nature and its relation to the industrial society.

Gissing, Hardy, and Lawrence rose from relatively humble social origins, and this fact alone may explain their familiarity with working-class life or their ability to portray a conscious and self-motivated worker. They may also have been influenced by the climate of ideas at the end of the century, and the historical developments which created a secure place for the working class in organized society and generated a new kind of political and social theory. The spectacular rise of the labor movement in the

1870's and 1880's produced a new system of 'pressure politics' and a conception of the working class as an organized power-bloc within a pluralistic society. This development, along with the triumph of democracy, destroyed the image of the worker as a passive victim and raised a new set of questions about his destiny in a society which was presumably 'open' and malleable to his will. The working-class heroes in the novels of Gissing and Hardy are distinctly 'modern' types: they are isolated figures who struggle to exert their wills on a recalcitrant social world and who suffer the anxieties and frustrations of their dubious freedom.

The later novelists' identification with the working class was probably encouraged by the changed conception of 'culture' and 'society' towards the end of the century. Largely because of the social criticism of aesthetes like Ruskin and Morris, the dichotomy between 'art' (or 'the artist') and 'the people' gradually faded, and the heretofore opposed world of 'culture' and 'politics' were reconciled. The common hatred of industrialism constituted a bond between the artists and the workers, both of whom saw themselves opposed to the inhumane values of the middle classes and the alienating character of labor in industrial

society. Kingsley and Gissing were never quite comfortable with that alliance, but Hardy and Lawrence were inspired by it and made it the basis for some of their major works.

Implicit in the later novels is a view of 'society' altogether different from the Burkean ideal. Burke regarded organized society as the alter-ego of civilization, the repository of the collective wisdom of ages and generations, and the mystical body which united an otherwise random collection of individuals and interests. The later novelists, on the other hand, regarded society as a soulless and mechanical system created by individual greed and perpetuated by individual degradation, operating against all principles of 'civility' or human dignity. They perceived society as a huge Coketown, but it was Coketown raised to the level of a metaphysical principle. According to Harold J. Laski, this view of society (which was central to the naturalist novel) resulted from the triumph of capitalism:

When [capitalism] broke down the principle of birth as the foundation of privilege and replaced it with the principle of wealth, it secreted a fatal poison in the very roots of its soil. That poison was the establishment of the idea that the acquisition of property as the main source of power was the true end of man. Not holiness, not culture, not fellowship were vital articles of faith. Social life was . . . a 'beneficent private war' in which, because the fittest

survived, the fate of the individual was a matter of indifference to the cosmos.⁹⁷

With this view of society in mind, novelists like Gissing and Hardy perceived the worker as a figure of unaccommodated mankind in general, and they applauded his battle with society as a legitimate struggle for humanism in the face of mechanical social forces. The fundamental issue at the end of the century was not the fate of the social order, but the quality of life for individuals within that order, and in that context the working man was perceived as the standard-bearer of man's struggle with the machine. The great debate over industrialism turned from social to cultural issues, and that climate of ideas laid the groundwork for Hardy's naturalism, Lawrence's vitalism, and the figure of the working man as a full human being.

⁹⁷Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time (New York, 1943), p. 356.

CHAPTER I

BENJAMIN DISRAELI'S SYBIL;

THE IDEA OF THE WORKING CLASS

Sybil was the first 'political' novel to be published on the 'condition-of-England question.' It differs from earlier 'humanitarian' novels like Helen Fleetwood or Michael Armstrong, Factory Boy because it does more than evoke compassion for the suffering poor; it relates the condition of the working class to the crisis in society as a whole, and proposes a political solution to the social problem. The novel is both a thoughtful analysis of class-conflict in an industrial society (Sybil is subtitled The Two Nations) and a manifesto of the Young England movement which Disraeli hoped would save the nation from civil war.

Like the earlier novelists, Disraeli consciously set out to probe the depths of English society and to alert his audience to the scenes of misery which were enacted daily beyond the sight of the average citizen. The descriptions of over-worked mothers and children in mines,

degraded men in factories and tommy-shops, and demoralized families in squalid urban slums are largely designed to evoke a sympathetic response from an audience accustomed to ignore the lower depths or to regard them as merely dangerous. Disraeli draws attention to the Condition of the People (after making apologies for his subject) and pleads for compassion and moral outrage. He does not, however, ignore the danger which is implied in the working-class presence; on the contrary, he highlights it, and shows how the miserable conditions of the workers' lives provide the fuel for the Chartist movement and a possible social insurrection.

Disraeli appeals to fears as well as sympathies; the working class, he warns, is a threat to the social order insofar as it is a victim of it. The novel confirms Carlyle's grim observation in 1833-34 that "two Sects" or "two contradictory, uncommunicating masses" whose "mutual relation [is] pregnant with the elements of discord and hostility" tend to "divide the more unsettled portions of the British People; and agitate that ever-vexed country." Carlyle predicted that "the two Sects will one day part England between them," and the "two bottomless boiling Whirlpools that had broken-out on opposite quarters of the

firm land" will create "the true Hell of Waters, and Noah's Deluge is outdeluged!"¹ Disraeli likewise perceived the dangerous consequences of the social schism. In the words of Stephen Morley, the Chartist, he described England as a country divided into

two nations; between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy; who are ignorant of each other's thoughts, habits, and feelings as if they were dwellers in different zones, or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by a different breeding, fed by a different food, are ordered by different manners and are not governed by the same laws.²

Despite his sympathy for the workers, Disraeli regarded the working-class presence as a sign of social discord and the Chartist movement as a threat to the fabric of English civilization.

Sybil was published mid-point in the decade which came to be known as the 'hungry forties,' and its message reached a public terrified by the rise of Chartist protest. Prices were rising and wages falling; the working class flocked to the movement in increasing numbers, inspired by the rhetoric of Chartist leaders recently released from

¹Thomas Carlyle, Sartor Resartus (Everyman's edn., 1964), pp. 214-215 (Bk. III, Ch. x).

²Benjamin Disraeli, Sybil (Doubleday edn., 1961), p. 84 (Bk. II, Ch. v).

prison after the events of 1839. Angered by their physical privations and humiliated by the middle class' desertion of their cause after 1832, large numbers of workers turned against the ruling establishment and expressed their hostility in strikes and riots. The ruling classes experienced a general sense of panic, fearing for the stability of their government. The revolutions in Europe made a profound impression upon them, and numerous political figures expressed the fear that these events would be repeated upon English soil.³

The aristocracy was particularly concerned about the course of political and social events. Throughout the century, as the value of land fell and the value of machinery rose, the landed aristocracy was being gradually dislodged from its economic supremacy by the ascendant capitalists. After the Reform Bill of 1832 the aristocracy had lost a good deal of its political power and consequently felt itself threatened almost as much by the usurpation of the middle class as by the violence of the working class.

³The views expressed here are derived principally from R. G. Gammage, The History of the Chartist Movement (London, 1894), Elie Halevy, A History of the English People: Victorian Years (New York, 1964), and Preston William Slosson, The Decline of the Chartist Movement (London, 1967).

The middle class, for its part, saw the aristocracy as a political and economic obstacle to its progress. The great debate over the Corn Laws was keenest during this period, and it reflected a passionate mutual antipathy. The landed aristocracy wanted to maintain these protectionist tariffs in order to insure its revenue from the land, but the manufacturers needed a policy of free trade in order to compete with the other European countries. Even when they shared a common purpose such as legislating social welfare measures, they were unable to agree on the precise shape of the welfare program. The landed aristocracy was willing to pass factory legislation which would reduce the power of the manufacturers, and the latter were willing to repeal the Corn Laws which, they claimed, kept up the price of bread (in addition to obstructing their own freedom of trade). The Parliamentary debates of the 1830's are a steady commentary upon the struggle between the landed and manufacturing interests, each of which felt politically and economically threatened by the other.

The three estates of the realm formed, figuratively speaking, a vicious triangle in which each class was opposed to the other two, rather than a ladder of descent from the highest to the lowest. The Tory-aristocratic position was

set forth in 1793 by Lord Braxfield who presided over a trial of a radical agitator:

A government in every country should be just like a corporation; and in this country, it is made up of the landed interest, which alone has a right to be represented. As for the rabble, who have nothing but personal property, what hold has the nation on them? What security for the payment of their taxes? They may pack up all their property on their backs, and leave the country in a twinkling of an eye. But landed property cannot be removed.⁴

The middle class, on the other hand, felt that government had to cater to 'public opinion' which was, of course, synonymous with their own. Sir James Graham remarked in 1826:

I know no bound but public opinion. The seat of public opinion is in the middle ranks of life--in that numerous class, removed from the wants of labour and the cravings of ambition, enjoying the advantages of leisure, and possessing intelligence sufficient for the formation of a sound judgment, neither warped by interest nor obscured by passion.⁵

To many workers both groups were oppressors of the poor and their respective political parties equally detestable. One Radical journalist reported after the 'reform' of 1832 that the Whigs and Tories were nothing more than

⁴Meikle, Scotland and the Revolution, p. 134. Cited by A. P. Thornton, The Habit of Authority (Toronto, 1966), p. 91.

⁵Corn and Currency (1826), p. 9.

two factions of wealthy and influential men who have conspired to plunder the great body of the people time about--the Whigs taking the helm when the Tories become too detestable to be endured, and going below whenever Toryism had got a refreshed character by a few years' pretended opposition to misrule.⁶

The radical politics of the working class necessarily involved some socialist assumptions:

The industrious orders may be compared to the soil, out of which every thing is evolved and produced; the other classes to the trees, tares, weeds, and vegetables, drawing their nutriment, supported and maintained on its surface. . . . When mankind attains a greater perfectability . . . [the useful classes] ought to exist in a perfect state. The other classes have mostly originated in our vices and ignorance . . . having no employment, their name and office will cease in a social state.⁷

There were actually 'three nations' in English society, all mutually opposed, and the coalition of two classes became a necessary tactic for the intimidation of a common enemy. The rationale for the Reform Bill of 1832 was the Whigs' desire to ally the middle classes with the constitution in order to prevent a revolution:

Any [plan of reform] must be objectionable which, by keeping the Franchise high and very exclusive, fails to give satisfaction to the middle and respectable

⁶Cited by W. Kilbourn, The Firebrand (Toronto, 1956), p. 103.

⁷John Wade, The Extraordinary Black Book (1831 edn.), pp. 217-218.

ranks of society, and drives them to a union, founded on dissatisfaction, with the lower orders. It is of the utmost importance to associate the middle with the higher orders of society in the love and support of the institutions and government of the country.⁸

After the passage of the Reform Bill, however, both elements of the ruling classes found it advantageous to form temporary alliances with the workers in order to gain support for their own programs. The middle class could use the workers in their struggle to repeal the Corn Laws, and landed aristocrats could use the workers in their attempt to diminish the power of the manufacturers, and the workers could try to use the middle class to achieve the Charter or the aristocracy to effect reforms in the factory system.

The Tories came to power in 1841 on the strength of their stand against the Poor Law, a much-hated piece of Whig legislation which provoked the workers' discontent with the established order of government. The Tories promised to amend these laws and restore order in the country; the poorhouses would be "No Bastilles" for the English Revolution. The Whigs and Tories agreed that

⁸H. Cockburn, Letters on Affairs of Scotland, cited by Asa Briggs, "The Language of 'Class' in Early Nineteenth-Century England," Essays in Labour History, eds. Asa Briggs and John Saville (London, 1960), p. 56.

something had to be done about the 'condition of England' but they were divided among themselves and with each other upon the specific measures. The Whigs were less averse to the passing of the Charter than to the institution of large-scale social reforms, while the Tories preferred to remove the Chartist threat at the expense of the capitalists. Both parties, however, could agree that it was to their mutual advantage that the Charter be put down and the possibility of revolution removed from English life. With this in mind, Sir Robert Peel proposed a defensive alliance of the Whigs and Tories to protect the institutions of Church and Crown from the threat of working-class radicalism. He was willing to adopt a program of gradual reform of the more glaring social abuses, but his major concern was to protect the political and social establishment from further innovation.

Disraeli saw in Peel's alliance with the Whigs not only a betrayal of age-old Tory principles but a dangerous denial of the workers' legitimate grievances and potential power. He was unable, however, to affect the shape of government policy directly, since he was excluded from Peel's cabinet despite his desperate plea to the new prime

minister that he be spared a "public humiliation."⁹ Disraeli spent the early years of the decade in relative isolation from the center of government, watching the gathering storm of Chartist discontent, and occasionally rising to the floor of the House of Commons to deliver a fiery speech about the gross misjudgment of his party and its leaders. It was during these years that Sybil was written. The novel is at once an exposé of the condition of the people, a warning of the impending class-struggle, a bitter indictment of Peel and his policies, and an exposition of Disraeli's own political philosophy.

Disraeli's program had two major ends: to rescue the aristocracy from moral bankruptcy and political extinction (he believed that the Tories were assimilating with the Whigs), and to save the working class from further oppression at the hands of their bourgeois masters. Disraeli proposed an alliance between the aristocracy and the people based on the feudal principle "that the tenure of all property shall be the performance of its duties." He believed that the aristocracy and the people formed a 'natural' relationship in which the one group provided beneficent protection and the other group responded with a grateful

⁹See Robert Blake, Disraeli (London, 1966).

dependence. In his view, such a relationship would restore to industrial England the stability and moral purpose which he thought had existed in feudal times: the State (headed by a powerful monarch) would be protected by the people from the machinations of a commercial 'oligarchy' and Society would be protected by the state from the greed of the commercial interests.

Disraeli's political philosophy was incorporated in the Young England movement which he organized in 1842 and led for several years. The movement, as Disraeli planned it, was to be "another section of Conservative members, full of youth and energy and constant in their seats" who would "exercise an irresistible control over the tone of the Minister."¹⁰ Disraeli gathered around himself a small number of Tory rebels who were disgusted with Peel and his policies of gradual conciliation. The Young Englanders liked to regard themselves as (and some undoubtedly were) high-minded idealists passionately concerned with the sufferings of the poor, conscious of their responsibilities as men of wealth and privilege, and contemptuous of the nerveless political bureaucrats and grim Parliamentary

¹⁰Ibid., p. 173.

businessmen. As a movement they hardly amounted to more than four young men sitting together behind the Treasury bench in Parliament and enjoying a consciousness of their moral superiority, but their persistence and ardor helped make an impression disproportionate to their numbers. They were cultural revolutionaries, opposed to privilege and exclusion, and critical of a party which relied on the "influence of property, reputable private conduct, and good connections."¹¹

Like many other social critics of their generation (Coleridge, Carlyle, Newman, Ruskin, etc.), the Young Englanders saw the feudal period as providing the terms by which their contemporary society could be criticized. They looked back nostalgically to a time when society was 'organic' and the relations between the classes were based upon a complex network of duties and responsibilities. The laissez-faire philosophy of the Utilitarians was in their view a species of reckless individualism which offered the common man an abstract notion of liberty in place of the practical benefits he would receive in a corporate social structure. Young Englanders like John Manners exhorted the

¹¹These are the remarks of Coningsby with whom Disraeli is presumably identified. Coningsby, Bk. II, Ch. v.

Tory party to "assimilate our cause with that of the people" in the hope of restoring that corporate social ideal:

Let us show the people, i.e. the lower orders, by adding to their comforts and pleasures in the only legitimate way a legislature can do,--viz., by voting money to build public baths, to keep up--or rather to restore--public games, to form public walks, that we are their real friends. Let us give back the Church Holy-Days, open the Churches and Cathedrals to them, and let our men of power in their individual capacities assume a more personal and consequently a more kind intercourse with those below them. In a word, let society take a more feudal appearance than it presents now. That's my vision; it may be a wrong one; but if, as I believe, the Whig one of giving the people political power and prating to them of the rights of man and the glories of science, and the merits of political economy, is wrong, I can see no other way save the old worn-out one of Laissez-faire, Laissez-aller.¹²

The Young Englanders wanted to restore a moral tone to the conduct of social life, and to revive the principle of 'degree' whereby each man's station in life governed his liberties, restraints, and responsibilities. "What we want," says the Tory hero in Disraeli's Coningsby

is not to fashion new dukes and furbish up old baronies but to establish great principles which may maintain the realm and secure the happiness of the people. Let me see authority once more honored; a solemn reverence again the habit of our lives; let me see property acknowledging, as in the old days of

¹²Cited by R. J. White, The Conservative Tradition (London, 1950), p. 215.

faith that labour is her twin brother, and that the essence of all tenure is the performance of duty.¹³

In a similar vein, John Manners declared that the abandonment of moral principle was the immediate cause of England's social crisis:

Now what is the fundamental principle of the feudal system . . . ? It is that the tenure of all property shall be the performance of its duties. . . . And when I see masses of property raised in this country which do not recognize that principle; when I find men making fortunes by a method which permits them . . . to purchase the lands of the old territorial aristocracy of the country, I cannot help remembering that those millions are accumulated by a mode which does not recognize it as a duty 'to endow the Church, to feed the poor, to guard the land, and to execute justice. . . .' When I know that evidence exists in our Parliament of a state of demoralization in the once happy population of this land, which is not equalled in the most barbarous countries . . . I cannot help suspecting that this has arisen because property has been permitted to be created and held without the performance of its duties.¹⁴

Believing that the key to England's political and social future lay in the moral habits of her citizens, the Young Englanders insisted on the need for a National Church "to insure liberty by securing order."¹⁵ The role of the

¹³Bk. VIII, Ch. iii.

¹⁴Cited by White, pp. 213-214.

¹⁵Disraeli's address delivered in the Sheldonian Theatre, Oxford, on November 25, 1864. Cited by White, p. 108.

Church, in their view, was to foster the habit of authority and the spirit of deference by preaching that a man's virtue is measured by the extent to which he fulfills the duties of his station. In effect, the Young Englanders accepted Coleridge's idea of the relation between Church and State:

The proper object and end of the national Church is civilisation with freedom; and the duties of its ministers . . . would be fulfilled in the communication of that degree and kind of knowledge to all, the possession of which is necessary for all in order to their civility. By civility I mean all the qualities essential to a citizen, and devoid of which no people or class of the people can be calculated on by the rulers and leaders of the State for the conservation or promotion of its essential interests. . . . The State has a right to demand of the national Church that its instructions should be fitted to diffuse throughout the people legality. . . .¹⁶

In this scheme of things, Church and State would function in complete harmony, society be safe from the threat of revolution, and every individual secure in the knowledge of his liberties and privileges.

In retrospect, the Young England movement seems to have relied more heavily on a mystique of government than on a practical political program, if only because it remains doubtful whether Disraeli's visionary idealism

¹⁶ On the Constitution of the Church and State, according to the Idea of Each (London, 1852 edn.), p. 64.

committed him to any specific course of action. Despite his pious declamations, Disraeli's voting record on measures concerning the social welfare shows no remarkable concern for the condition of the people. He voted against the Education Order of 1839, the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, the Public Health Act of 1848, the Mines Act of 1850, and an Act to set up a General Board of Health in 1854.¹⁷ Either Disraeli was a thorough hypocrite, as some of his contemporaries claimed, or Viscount Cranborne was justified when he wrote, "Those of his opinions which could claim the permanent quality of principles had their origin in his imagination and not in his reason. He saw visions; he did not draw conclusions. . . . He had none of the aversion which men of more logical temper feel for incoherence even in minor matters."¹⁸

To Peel, the Young England movement was "pernicious nonsense," but others took it seriously. One reviewer of Disraeli's novels was particularly caustic in his criticism of the man and the movement:

¹⁷See Thornton, p. 207, and F. C. Smith, Disraelian Conservatism and Social Reform (London, 1967), pp. 12-13.

¹⁸Lady G. Cecil, Life of Robert Marquis of Salisbury I (London: 1921), p. 216.

It is superfluous to blame Mr. Disraeli for not working out into the practical reality of these days a political philosophy which is in fact nothing less than an abandonment of all principles of individuality, responsibility and self-government; and a return to the narrowest principles of loyal dependence and local patriotism. . . . Such principles, or something like them, have been the basis of all the fanaticism and charlatanism that in their manifold expressions have arrested the advance of the human mind.¹⁹

Disraeli answered his critics in his General Preface to the 1870 edition of his novels:

[The novels] recognized imagination in government of nations as a quality not less important than reason. They trusted much to a popular sentiment, which rested on an heroic tradition and was sustained by the high spirit of a free aristocracy. Their economic principles were not unsound but they looked upon the health and knowledge of the multitude as not the least precious part of the wealth of nations. . . . Resting on popular sympathies and popular privileges, they hold that no society could be durable unless it was built upon the principles of loyalty and reverence.

Disraeli was not offended, apparently, by the critics' charges against him. He felt that the Liberals ignored "those moral and political considerations which make nations great, and by the influence of which alone men are distinguished from animals." "Man is only truly great

¹⁹Milnes, Edinburgh Review, July, 1847. Cited by Blake, p. 208.

when he acts from the passions; never irresistible but when he appeals to the imagination," he wrote in Coningsby. That view is embodied in both Disraeli's political philosophy and the style of his novels. They present not arguments but images. Ultimately, those images should serve a political function: they should inspire "loyalty and reverence" of the kind which existed in medieval times.

The reviewer's charge that Disraeli abandoned "all principles of individuality, responsibility, and self-government" was a standard Liberal argument against the Conservative philosophy. Disraeli's dictum that "man was made to adore and to obey" went against the grain of nineteenth-century Liberals like John Stuart Mill who believed that "free scope should be given to varieties of character." Disraeli insisted, like Burke, that "we are afraid to put men to live and trade each upon his own stock of reason because we suspect that the stock in each is small," and he agreed that government should place "sufficient restraint" upon the individual social members.²⁰ Burke's conception of government lies at the core of the Conservative philosophy.

²⁰Reflections on the Revolution in France (World's Classics edn., 1955), p. 65.

The Utilitarians and other philosophic liberals held to the notion that man is the master of his fate and that his station in life is a just and proper reward for his abilities and ambition. At some level they believed in a 'natural order of things' which is established by rational and self-interested individuals in free competition with one another. Philanthropy, they felt, went against the 'laws' of human nature and perhaps worse, disturbed the evolutionary progress of society. They agreed with Malthus that

dependent poverty ought to be held disgraceful. Such a stimulus seems to be absolutely necessary to promote the happiness of the great mass of mankind; and every general attempt to weaken this stimulus, however benevolent its apparent intention, will always defeat its own purpose.²¹

In that spirit Harriet Martineau, by all accounts a large-hearted woman, opposed a Factory Bill which would limit the working hours of children under the age of 14. "The case of those wretched factory children seems desperate," she wrote, but "the only hope seems to be that the race will die out in two or three generations, by which time machinery may be found to do their work better than their

²¹Principles of Population (Modern Library edn., 1960), ed. Gertrude Himmelfarb, p. 33.

miserable selves."²² In a similar vein, Herbert Spencer viewed the sufferings of the poor as part of the natural laws of progress.²³

The Conservative ideal of a hierarchic and organic society was antithetical to that philosophy. The vision of a social order held together by a network of duties and privileges motivated some Tories of Disraeli's time to pioneer social legislation and factory reform, and to establish Toryism as a 'popular' policy. Opposing the rational optimism of the political economists, Richard Oastler led the factory movement in the north and Lord Ashley fought in Parliament on behalf of children and women in the mines and factories. To Spencer's principle of enlightened selfishness Lord Ashley replied, "There is nothing so economical as justice and mercy towards all interests--social and spiritual--of all the human race."²⁴ He countered Spencer's argument about the natural 'constitution

²²Cited by Lord Lindsay of Birker, "The Social Conscience and the Ideas of Ruskin," Ideas and Beliefs of the Victorians, British Broadcasting Corporation (London, 1950), p. 279.

²³Cited by Christopher Dawson, "The Humanitarians," *Ibid.*, p. 253.

²⁴*Ibid.*, loc. cit.

of things' with a traditional religious view: "If St. Paul, calling our bodies the temples of the Holy Ghost, said that they must not be contaminated by sin, we also say that our bodies, the temples of the Holy Ghost, ought not to be contaminated by preventable disease, degraded by avoidable filth, and disabled for His service by unnecessary suffering."²⁵ These Christian and humanitarian impulses were incorporated into a political philosophy which later came to be known as Tory democracy. Richard Oastler explained:

A Tory is one who, believing that the institutions of this country are calculated, as they were intended, to secure the prosperity and happiness of every class of society, wishes to maintain them in their original beauty, simplicity, and integrity. He is tenacious of the rights of all, but most of the poor and needy, because they require the shelter of the constitution and the laws more than the other classes. A Tory is the staunch friend of Order for the sake of Liberty; and knowing that all our institutions are founded upon Christianity, he is of course a Christian, believing with St. Paul that each order of society is mutually dependent on the others for peace and prosperity, and that, although there "are many members, yet there is one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you. Nay much more, those members of the body which seem to be more feeble are necessary." Sir, I am just such a Tory; or if you prefer it in my own words, as I once defined it to the Duke of Wellington when he asked, "What do you mean by Toryism?" you shall have it: I replied, "My Lord Duke,

²⁵Ibid., loc. cit.

I mean a place for everything and everything in its place.²⁶

Disraeli held a similar view. "By the Conservative cause," he wrote, "I mean the splendour of the Crown, the lustre of the Peerage, the privileges of the Commons, the rights of the poor. I mean that harmonious union, that magnificent concord of all interests, of all classes, on which our national greatness depends."²⁷

This Tory concern for the poor had diverse foundations. There was first of all the practical need to "save the nation from anarchy and blood--thus secure the rights of the nobles by giving peace and contentment to the cottage."²⁸ There was also a growing humanitarian and

²⁶Cited by White, p. 26.

²⁷Ibid., loc. cit.

²⁸Richard Oastler's appeal to the Tories indicates that the fear of a working-class revolution was a major impulse for his humanitarian efforts:

"Now Tories, what say you? Will you go back? You cannot. 'Stand still'/ Impossible. Will you join the Whigs against the people? If so you are a set of unprincipled knaves, and deserve to meet with the first reward of roguery. Will you go forward, then, hand in hand with 'the people' and thus save the nation from anarchy and blood--thus secure the rights of the nobles by giving comfort, peace and contentment to the cottage? If you follow this plan, every patriot will join you, I care not whether he be Tory, Whig, or Radical, every man who loves his country will be on your side. . . . The people have now learnt their

philanthropic spirit, particularly after the publication of the Blue-books, when the privileged classes tried to ease themselves of the burden of social guilt.²⁹ This was coupled with the traditional Christian sense of responsibility for others. However, perhaps the greatest part of the Tories' concern for the workers was generated by their hatred of the common enemy; the manufacturers and industrialists who had created all the turmoil and then justified their actions with an inhumane philosophy. Lord Ashley's recent biographer claims that he took up the factory question primarily out of contempt for the millowners.³⁰ His article on "Infant Labour" in 1840 clearly amalgamates a humanitarian concern for the workers' welfare with a bitter indictment of capitalism as "the enemy of mankind":

Our system begets the vast and inflammable mass that lies waiting day by day, for the spark to explode it into mischief. We cover the land with spectacles of misery; wealth is felt only by its oppressions. . . . No wonder that thousands of hearts should be against

strength, the avalanche is descending and will crush their opponents. It is not too late to guide it--it is too late to oppose it.

Cited by White, p. 215.

²⁹See J. L. and Barbara Hammond, The Town Labourer (New York, 1968), pp. 192-213. Also Geoffrey Finlayson, Decade of Reform (New York, 1970), pp. 37-64.

³⁰G. F. A. Best, Shaftesbury (London, 1964), pp. 81-87.

a system which establishes the relations, without calling forth the sympathies, of master and servant, landlord and tenant, employer and employed. . . . When called upon to suggest our remedy of the evil, we reply by an exhibition of the cause of it. . . . Reverse the conduct of the enemy of mankind. . . .³¹

The Tories opposed the industrialists at least in part for 'cultural' reasons. Matthew Arnold's attack on the "philistinism" of the captains of industry had its counterpart earlier in the century when writers like Carlyle attacked Mammonism, the cash-nexus, and the 'mechanism' of the Utilitarian philosophers and their middle-class acolytes. The contempt for middle-class 'culture' is implicit in Coleridge's Constitution of Church and State where he argued for a "civilisation . . . grounded in cultivation, in the harmonious development of those qualities and faculties that characterize our humanity."³² Bentham's oft-quoted remark that "Push-pin is as good as poetry" was viewed as a paradigm of middle-class callousness and a direct offense to the English gentleman who, as G. K. Chesterton once remarked, was less interested in the equality of men than in the inequality of horses. The idea of 'breeding for excellence' was ingrained in the Tory

³¹Cited by White, p. 223.

³²On the Constitution of Church and State, p. 51.

tradition and Bentham's egalitarianism seemed to remove all grandeur from private and public life. To some extent, the Tory reformers' notion of noblesse oblige was an attempt to counteract what Carlyle called the "Mammon-Gospel" of the industrial age. They agreed with Carlyle that the entire civilization needed spiritual invigoration:

The saddest news is, that we should find our National Existence . . . depend on selling manufactured cotton at a farthing an ell cheaper than any other People. A most narrow stand for a great nation to base itself on! . . . All this Mammon-Gospel of Supply-and-Demand, Competition, Laissez-Faire, and Devil take the hindmost, begins to be one of the shabbiest Gospels ever preached; or altogether the shabbiest. . . . Farthing cheaper per yard! No great nation can stand on the apex of such a pyramid; screwing itself higher and higher; balancing itself on its great-toe! . . . The inventive genius of great England will not for ever sit patient with mere wheels and pinions, bobbin-straps, and billy-tollers whirring in the head of it. The inventive genius of England is not a Beaver's, or a Spinner's, or a Spider's genius; it is a man's genius, I hope, with a God over him!³³

This kind of spiritual indignation lay at the heart of the Tories' involvement with "the lot of those . . . dumb millions of toilers." Like Carlyle, the Young Englanders and other Tory reformers were opposed to democracy and socialism, and they were just as frightened as the middle-class of a working-class insurrection. However,

³³Past and Present (Modern Readers' Series edn., 1927), Bk. III, Ch. ix, pp. 190-192.

their fear of the workers was balanced (or outweighed) by their contempt for the capitalists and their revulsion from the soulless civilization of industrial England. Their strongest passion was "a faith in the imperishable dignity of man; in the high vocation to which, throughout his earthly history, he has been appointed," and their commitment to the cause of the worker was, in great measure, an expression of that faith. Their compassion for the working man was largely an instance of a projective identification with the victims of a demoralizing civilization.

The working-class characters in Sybil reflect Disraeli's often contradictory attitudes towards his subject. They are an assortment of savages, saints, and victims, and their portraits correspond to different aspects of the author's political vision. Like other members of his class, Disraeli regarded the worker as a threat to order, and he accordingly portrayed him in the stereotype of a near-savage bent on destruction. His 'savage' characters like Bishop Hatton and the Hell-Cats are designed to alert the readers to the consequences of social neglect. On the other hand, Disraeli recognized that the workers had legitimate grievances and believed a policy of repression

would be neither practicable nor just. His portrait of the worker as 'victim' arouses the compassion of the audience and directs the efforts of right-minded Englishmen to the reform of working-class conditions rather than repression of the working-class movement. Disraeli proposes an alliance of the working class and the aristocracy, and to that end he describes the workers as the heroic incarnation of the long-suffering English People. The saintly or heroic figures of Sybil and Walter Gerard appeal to the readers' nostalgia for some legendary age of English glory at the same time that they arouse a sense of guilt for historic injustice. They are the larger-than-life descendants of the Saxons and serfs who have suffered centuries of oppression. Their sense of honor makes them a fitting ally for the aristocracy, and their noble suffering is an implicit demand for the reader's commitment to their welfare.

Despite their differences, all these working-class characters have an essential feature in common: they are described 'from the outside,' by an author who fails to achieve full imaginative empathy with his subject. Disraeli's stance with regard to the workers may have resembled that of his character Egremont who studiously

attempts to discover the facts about working-class life. Egremont recognizes that the "innate inability of mutual comprehension" between rich and poor portends "the ruin of our common country" and he insinuates himself into the confidence of the workers in order "to obtain that knowledge which could alone qualify me for beneficial action." Disraeli likewise perceives the worker from the point of view of one whose "station . . . entailed on me some portion of its responsibility" and his sympathy is an expression of his personal sense of duty.³⁴ He responds to the people but does not 'engage' himself with them; his involvement is limited by his deeper concern for the national interest or his private political vocation.

The titular heroine of Sybil is not a realistic working-class character but a mythic representation of the People. Sybil is a Daughter of the People, a descendant of the Saxons and serfs--the 'lower orders'--who have existed from time immemorial. In Disraeli's view, the nineteenth-century industrial worker is only a temporary incarnation of those people who have always existed at the lower stratum of the social hierarchy. Sybil and her

³⁴Sybil, Bk. III, Ch. viii.

father speak in an archaic idiom, and they refer to themselves as "Saxon thralls" weighted down by the "Norman yoke" of the aristocracy. They evoke memories of England's medieval past and a social system which was hierarchical and 'organic,' and therefore stable and orderly (despite the cruelty of some Norman overlords). Sybil passes through a countryside dotted with religious ruins, and she is accompanied in her walks by "a young bloodhound of the ancient breed such as are now found but in a few old halls and granges in the north of England." In her humble virtues and pious simplicity, she recalls the "blood and beauty" of England's People before their demoralization by commerce and industry. She stands out against the sordid background of the industrial working-class as a 'genuine' character of the People, thereby apparently demonstrating the viability of Disraeli's political program. Her reverence and obedience show that the workers are the fitting allies of a beneficent upper class, and her constant suffering that the rulers of England have neglected their responsibilities.

Sybil is a novice in a convent, and therefore not a worker at all, but she represents Disraeli's idea of the worker because of her historical pedigree and her oppressed

status. According to her father, "Sybil knows nothing of the real world except its sufferings." Her family has been driven from the land, her Catholic faith has been made an object of national scorn, and, as a woman of the 'lower orders,' she looks forward to a life which is a "lease of woe." As a Saxon, a Roman Catholic, and a woman, Sybil exemplifies what Disraeli regards as the essential characteristic of the workers' condition: oppression and exploitation at the hands of ruthless masters.

Disraeli's idealized People, at once spiritually unassailable and physically defenseless, are designed to evoke feelings of reverence and compassion. They are simultaneously above and below the range of common humanity: their virtue inspires the reader with visions of feudal grandeur, and their vulnerability calls forth the tenderest feelings. These characteristics are embodied in the figure of the romantic heroine, a type celebrated in the novels of Sir Walter Scott, whose eroticized innocence and desperate need excite feelings of awe, desire, and pity in the proper proportions. Sybil clearly conforms to the type of romantic heroine which inspired Wilkie Collins' touching tribute in an article in Households Words:

I love her blushing cheek, her gracefully rounded form,

her chiselled nose, her slender waist, her luxuriant tresses which always escape from the fillet that binds them. Any man or woman who attempts . . . to cheat me out of one of her moonlight walks, one of her floods of tears, one of her kneeling entreaties to obdurate relatives, one of her rapturous sinkings on her lover's bosom, is a novelist whom I distrust and dislike.³⁵

Disraeli accordingly portrays his heroine as a "Beautiful Religious" who is simultaneously a "poor girl" in "infinite distress," endlessly wringing her hands and looking tearfully upwards to heaven. Sybil is a "seraph," "ministering angel," "pure heart," and "character of almost divine majesty," and she suffers "unutterable woe." As an embodiment of England's past, she is a vague and dreamlike figure drifting among the ruins of a forgotten splendor, and as a symbol of the People, an equally insubstantial figure of pure Suffering. Walking along the moors at twilight or stumbling in the back-streets of a London slum, Sybil is always an ethereal creature somehow placed out of her time. Her introduction to the reader signifies that she is to be regarded with special reverence:

At this moment, a sudden flush of rosy light, suffusing the gray ruins, indicated that the sun had just fallen: and, through a vacant arch that overlooked them, alone in the resplendent sky, glittered a twilight star. The hour, the scene, the solemn stillness and the softening

³⁵Cited by Margaret Dalziel, Popular Fiction 100 Years Ago (London, 1957), p. 84.

beauty repressed controversy, induced even silence. . . .
 The divine melody ceased . . . when, in the vacant and
 starlit arch on which his [Egremont's] glance was
 fixed, he beheld a female form.³⁶

This was Sybil, "the fair phantom of some saint haunting the
 ruins of her desecrated fane."

Opposed to the People are the violent and brutish
 workers who threaten the nation with revolutionary chaos.
 These are characters like Bishop Hatton and his gang of
 Hell-Cats, the ignorant and demoralized masses who testify
 to the workers' inability to assume political responsibility.
 Disraeli regards them as subhuman creatures: they
 are "animals; unconscious; their minds a blank; and their
 worst actions only the impulse of a gross and savage instinct."
 Even Walter Gerard who champions the Chartist cause agrees that
 "There are great bodies of the working classes of this country
 nearer the condition of brutes than they have been at any time
 since the Conquest." In his view, there is "nothing to distinguish
 them from brutes, except that their morals are inferior. Incest and
 infanticide are as common among them as among the lower
 animals."³⁷ These demoralized masses are responsible

³⁶Bk. II, Ch. v.

³⁷Bk. III, Ch. v.

for the riot at the end of Sybil.

These 'animal' workers may reflect Disraeli's class prejudice or his unfounded fear of revolutionary chaos, but they also reflect the findings of Blue-book pamphleteers and Parliamentary reporters who invariably remarked upon the moral degradation of the working classes. The agitators for factory reform typically argued against "those causes which universally operate to the deterioration of the moral character of the labouring man."³⁸ Peter Gaskell believed that the working man's "household . . . in which all the decencies and moral observances of domestic life are constantly violated, reduces its inmates to a condition little elevated above that of the savage." He observes "recklessness, improvidence, and unnecessary poverty, starvation, drunkenness, parental cruelty and carelessness, filial disobedience, neglect of conjugal rights, absence of maternal love, destruction of brotherly and sisterly affection" as the "constituents" of the workers' homes, and claimed that "the results of such a combination are moral degradation,

³⁸Peter Gaskell, Artisans and Machinery: The Moral and Physical Condition of the Manufacturing Population (London, 1836), pp. 13-14. See Neil Smelser, Social Change in the Industrial Revolution (Chicago, 1959), pp. 183 ff.

ruin of domestic enjoyments, and social misery."³⁹ In a similar vein, Sadler declared that the mills were "little better than brothels,"⁴⁰ and Lord Ashley predicted that "Domestic life and domestic discipline must soon be at an end."⁴¹ Some reformers emphasized the deterioration of "woman's moral organization" and others believed that drunkenness, ignorance or infant labor were primarily responsible for the workers' moral degradation, but they were all generally agreed⁴² that the masses of workers were "ignorant and largely depraved."⁴³

³⁹Gaskell, p. 89.

⁴⁰See Smelser, p. 283.

⁴¹See Harold Perkin, The Origins of Modern English Society (London, 1969), p. 150.

⁴²Neil Smelser claims that a major argument for factory reform in the 1830's was that the factory system fostered the workers' moral deterioration, p. 279 ff.

⁴³Perkin points out that even optimistic supporters of industrialism like Joseph Fletcher were alarmed at the character of the workers in the large towns. Fletcher writes: Here, brought into close neighbourhood, and estranged from the influence of superior example, they are subject to temptations, hazards and incitements . . . ignorant and largely depraved, they are likewise capable of combination . . . to say nothing of all the evils which improvidence and heathenism pour out upon themselves.

"Moral and Educational Statistics of England and Wales," Journal of the London Statistical Society, 1847, X, p. 193f. See Perkin, p. 161.

Disraeli undoubtedly read some of the Blue-books and Parliamentary reports, and fictionalized their material in some of his scenes and characters. There are whole chapters in the novel which seem to be reconstructed from 'evidence,' and they appear to be written solely for the purpose of disclosing that evidence to the public:

"Don't mother me," said a jolly widow, with a kindling eye; "go to your own mother, who is dying in a back cellar without a winder, while you've got lodgings in a two-pair."

"Dying! she's only drunk," said the youth.

"And if she's only drunk," rejoined Mrs. Carey, in a passion, "what makes her drunk but toil? working from five o'clock in the morning to seven o'clock at night, and for the like of such as you."

"That's a good one," said the youth. "I should like to know what my mother ever did for me but to give me treacle and laudanum when I was a baby to fill my stomach, by the token of which, as my gal says, she stunted the growth of the prettiest figure in all Mowbray."⁴⁴

The working-class dialect is hardly convincing, and the speakers are charmless Hogarthian caricatures of the 'lower orders.' Disraeli apparently constructed the scene from popular stereotype and Blue-book reports.

Disraeli regarded the leaders of the working-class movements (Chartism, Trade Unionism, Socialism, etc.) as the unfortunate products of deplorable working-class

⁴⁴Bk. II, Ch. ix.

conditions. With the exception of Walter Gerard (who comes to regret his affiliation with the Chartists), the leaders are, like Devilsdust, demoralized victims of inhumane circumstances. Devilsdust's commitment to the movement is a misguided attempt to vindicate a personal history which reflects the demoralization of the workers as much as it does social injustice:

This was the familiar appellation of a young gentleman who really had no other, baptismal or patrimonial. About a fortnight after his mother had introduced him into the world, she returned to her factory, and put her infant out to nurse; that is to say, paid three-pence a week to an old woman, who takes charge of these new-born babies for the day, and gives them back at night to their mothers as they hurriedly return from the scene of their labour to the dungeon or the den, which is still by courtesy called "home." The expense is not great: laudanum and treacle, administered in the shape of some popular elixir, affords these innocents a brief taste of the sweets of existence, and, keeping them quiet, prepares them for the silence of their impending grave. Infanticide is practiced as extensively and as legally in England as it is on the banks of the Ganges; a circumstance which apparently has not yet engaged the attention of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. . . . At two years of age, his mother being lost sight of, and the weekly payment having ceased, he was sent out in the street to "play" in order to be run over. Even this expedient failed. . . . He foraged for himself, and shared with the dogs the garbage of the streets. . . . And slumbering at night on a bed of mouldering straw, his only protection against the splashy surface of his den, with a dung-heap at his head and a cess-pool at his feet, he still clung to the only roof which shielded him from the tempest. . . . At seventeen he combined the experience of manhood with the divine energies of youth . . . never murmured, but

read and pondered the rights of labour, and sighed to vindicate his order.⁴⁵

Devilsdust's anarcho-socialist principles are not a function of the indigenous cultural traditions of the working class: the radical secularism derived from Tom Paine and expressed in the "Corresponding Societies" of the 1790's, the working-class newspaper, public meetings and public debates, or the dissenting-Methodist tradition of the rural laborers and miners of Durham and Lincolnshire.⁴⁶ Disraeli did not know of, or could not appreciate, these traditions. Devilsdust is a child of the streets, and his misguided principles are more or less the spontaneous generation of his perverse upbringing.

The working-class movements in Sybil are little more than sordid assemblies of angry and largely illiterate men who gather for midnight meetings at Druid's Altar or in the back-cellars of London slums. The trade union is a secret society of robed and masked figures who initiate new members in a mystic ceremony and swear them to undertake "the chastisement of Nobs, the assassination of oppressive and

⁴⁵Bk. II, Ch. x.

⁴⁶See E. J. Hobsbawm, "Trends in the British Labour Movement Since 1850," Labouring Men (London, 1964), pp. 372-373.

tyrannical masters, or the demolition of all mills, works, and shops that shall be deemed by us incorrigible."⁴⁷ Even the Chartist organization, presumably the most democratic, enlightened, and non-violent of the workers' groups, is, as Sybil discovers, "a plebeian senate of wild ambitions and sinister and selfish ends." The workers' strike, presumably designed to effect factory reforms or a raise in wages, is conceived by ignorant and surly workers like Dandy Mick over a glass of gin at the Temple saloon:

"The people won't bear their grievances much longer," said Devilsdust.

"I think one of the greatest grievances the people have," said Caroline, "is the beaks serving notice on Chaffing Jack to shut up the Temple on Sunday nights."

"It is infamous," said Mick; "ayn't we to have no recreation? One might as well live in Suffolk, where the immigrants come from, and where they are obliged to burn ricks to pass the time."

"As for the rights of labor," said Harriet, "the people goes for nothing with this machinery."

"And you have opened your mouth to say a very sensible thing, Miss Harriet," said Mick; "but if I were Lord Paramount for eight and forty hours, I'd soon settle that question. Wouldn't I fire a broadside into their 'double deckers'? The battle of Navarino at Mowbray fair, with fourteen squibs from the admiral's ship going off at the same time, should be nothing to it."

"Labor may be weak, but capital is weaker," said Devilsdust. "Their capital is all paper."

"I tell you what," said Mick, with a knowing look,

⁴⁷Bk. III, Ch. iv.

and in a lowered tone, "the only thing, my hearties, that can save this here nation is a--good strike."⁴⁸

These workers are not revolutionaries inspired by an ideology or reformers committed to a coherent program. They are merely angry and ignorant individuals who regard the closing of the Temple saloon, the introduction of machinery, and the unequal distribution of wealth as equal evidence of social injustice.

The strike at the end of the novel predictably turns into an orgiastic riot, and the justifiable grievances of the workers recede into the background as Disraeli dwells on the mindless fury of the mob:

There rose one of those universal shrieks of wild passion which announce that men have discarded all the trammels of civilization, and found in their licentious rage new and unforeseen sources of power and vengeance. Where it came from, how it was obtained, who prompted the thought, who first accomplished it, were alike impossible to trace; but, as it were in a moment, a number of trusses of straw were piled up before the house and set on fire, the gates of the timber yard were forced, and a quantity of scattlings and battens soon fed the flame. Everything indeed that could stimulate the fire was employed; and every one was occupied in the service. They ran to the waterside and plundered the barges, and threw huge blocks of coal upon the enormous bonfire. Men, women, and children were alike at work with the eagerness and energy of fiends. The roof of the house caught fire: the dwelling burned rapidly; you could see the flames like the tongues of

⁴⁸Bk. II, Ch. x.

wild beasts, licking the bare and vanishing walls; a single being was observed amid the fiery havoc, shrieking and desperate; he clung convulsively to a huge account-book. . . . The glare of the clear flame fell for a moment upon his countenance of agony; the mob gave an infernal cheer; then, some part of the building falling in, there rose a vast cloud of smoke and rubbish, and he was seen no more.⁴⁹

The joyful piece of poetic justice brought against the keeper of the account-book fails to balance the savage horror of the workers' insurrection. This is no bread-and-food riot, machine-breaking disturbance, or organized protest against the factory system; it does not fall into any of the categories which historians like E. P. Thomson use to describe the working-class uprising. It is rather a projection of Disraeli's own terror, and that of the ruling classes, at the prospect of chaos brought about by mob action.

There are, of course, sympathetic working-class characters whose condition awakens genuine compassion. There are men like Warner, the gentle hand-loom weaver, "honest, loyal, and industrious," who was "born to labor and . . . ready to labor" were it not for the advent of the machine. His desperate situation is meant to arouse the sympathies of the reader:

⁴⁹Bk. V, Ch. vii.

I can not sell my loom . . . at the price of old firewood, and it cost me gold. It is not vice that has brought me to this, nor indolence, nor imprudence. . . .

I loved my loom and my loom loved me. It gave me a cottage in my native village, surrounded by a garden, of whose claims on my solicitude it was not jealous. There was time for both. It gave me for a wife the maiden that I had ever loved; and it gathered my children round my hearth with plenteousness and peace. I was content: I sought no other lot. It is not adversity that makes me look back upon the past with tenderness.

Then why am I here? Why am I, and six hundred thousand subjects of the queen . . . why are we, after manfully struggling for years, and each year sinking lower in the scale, why are we driven from our innocent and happy homes, our country cottages that we loved, first to bide in close towns without comforts, and gradually to crouch into cellars. . . . The capitalist flourishes, he amasses immense wealth; we sink, lower and lower; lower than the beasts of burden; for they are fed better than we, cared for more. And it is just, for according to the present system they are more precious.⁵⁰

Warner's complaints are not dismissed like Dandy Mick's. His grievances represent some of the strongest grounds for working-class discontent in the early half of the nineteenth century: the breakdown of the domestic economy and the workers' loss of independence and dignity. In The Condition of the English Working Class in 1844 Engels noted, with mixed feelings, the reversal of sexual roles in an industrial economy and the consequent breakdown of family life. Peter Gaskell lamented "the ruin of domestic

⁵⁰Bk. II, Ch. ix.

enjoyments" in his pamphlet on The Moral and Physical Condition of the Manufacturing Population and his sentiments were echoed in the speeches and writings of Sadler, Oastler, and Lord Ashley, among others. Warner's complaints were supported by all the early critics of industrialism who, like William Cobbett, deplored the passing of the "little farmers and their happy families."

Warner suffers only indirectly from the callousness of his capitalist masters; his major argument is with the industrial process itself, particularly as it affects the workers' families. Numerous working-class movements were organized with a view towards redeeming the workers' families from the centrifugal forces of industrialism,⁵¹ and social critics from every class applauded the effort. Blue-book pamphleteers like Peter Gaskell, no less than socialists and trade unionists, sentimentalized the home of the preindustrial laborer:

[the worker] presented [an] orderly and respectable appearance. It is through that the amount of labour gone through . . . [and] the quantity of cloth or yarn produced [were] small. . . . They were, however, sufficient to clothe and feed himself and family decently, and according to their station; to lay by a penny for an evil day, and to enjoy those amusements and bodily

⁵¹G. D. H. Cole and F. A. Wilson, eds., British Working Class Movements: Select Documents (London, 1951), pp. 423-424.

recreations then in being. He was a respectable member of society; a good father, a good husband, and a good son.⁵²

Disraeli apparently accepted this rosy view of the preindustrial family. His working-class hero, Walter Gerard, presumably speaks for the author when he mournfully declares, "The domestic feeling is fast vanishing among the working classes of this country . . . the Home no longer exists."

Like all the other working-class characters in Sybil, Warner is a mouthpiece or a model for a point of view. There were clearly many workers who wanted to reinstate some features of the preindustrial family economy. (One recent sociologist claims that a major part of the working-class disturbances in the early nineteenth century represented the workers' attempt to restore the fusion between the family economy and other family functions, and to safeguard traditional moral patterns, particularly with regard to sexual behavior and parental authority.) However, the working-class home was at least as much a subject for upper-class concern as it was for the workers themselves, perhaps more so. The proponents of order believed that the workers' secure home life was essential for the

⁵²Gaskell, pp. 13-14.

preservation of social peace. Disraeli apparently felt that it was necessary to improve the workers' living conditions in order to curb their propensity towards violence and brutality. He was particularly concerned with sanitary conditions, and he defended his policy (which one Liberal called "the policy of sewage") by saying that it would improve the workers' characters:

It involves the state of the dwellings of the people, the moral consequences of which are not less considerable than the physical. It involves their enjoyment of some of the chief elements of nature--air, light, and water. It involves the regulation of their industry, the inspection of their toil. It involves the purity of their provisions, and it touches upon all the means by which you may wean them from habits of excess and brutality.⁵³

Disraeli's commitment to the working-class home was apparently based upon patrician political considerations: the need to insulate the worker from corrosive social pressures and to impede his collectivization into an organized working-class. (The Chartist-socialist Stephen Morley claims that "The domestic principle has fulfilled its purpose. The irresistible law of progress demands that another should be developed. . . . Home is a barbarous

⁵³Quoted in W. F. Monypenny and G. E. Buckle, The Life of Benjamin Disraeli, Earl of Beaconsfield, rev. ed. in 2 vols. (London, 1929), Vol. II, pp. 711-712.

idea; the method of a rude age; home is isolation; therefore anti-social. What we want is Community.⁵⁴) Disraeli had none of the warm sympathies which Gaskell, Eliot, Hardy, or Lawrence demonstrated toward the worker's home. He failed to appreciate its salty features: the mild hedonism involved in 'keeping a good table,' 'keeping cheerful,' or 'keeping a good fire.' He had no taste for what Richard Hoggart regards as the core of the working-class attitude: a sense of the personal, the concrete, and the local.⁵⁵ Warner laments the loss of his old home as if it were primarily state of innocence, and the creature comforts it provided were only a secondary matter. The sentimental reminiscences of a blissful family gathered round the hearth in a cottage contribute to a picture of prelapsarian beatitude--and, of course, political quiescence. There is nothing in that picture to suggest the congestion and clutter and richness of life among the 'common folk' (which even earlier writers like Goldsmith appreciated), the strong feelings of independence and self-reliance fostered by family and craft traditions, or the communitarian and

⁵⁴Bk. III, Ch. ix.

⁵⁵The Uses of Literacy (Boston, 1966), p. 32.

democratic spirit nourished by the local (probably Methodist) village church.

Disraeli's failure to create a viable and realistic working-class character may reflect, in part, his ignorance of the subject (due to the "innate inability of mutual comprehension" of the Two Nations), or his fear of the workers because of the revolutionary threat, or even a patrician bias which impeded any spontaneous flow of sympathies. All these may have existed and reinforced one another (the ignorance supports the fear, the bias supports the ignorance, etc.), and led Disraeli to create working-class characters who were either mouthpieces for ideas, caricatures based upon popular stereotypes, or standard romantic heroes and heroines. In any case none of the characters seem to be fully realized, vital, and imaginatively absorbing.

This is not to say that the characters necessarily suffer because of the author's extra-literary purpose in writing the novel (although they probably do), but that the specific political philosophy which Disraeli held might have rendered him incapable of perceiving or describing a vital and realistic working-class character. On the most superficial level, his politics did not allow him to

portray a revolutionist with any degree of sympathy. More important, however, his politics may have made it impossible for him to recognize the unique character of the nineteenth-century industrial worker or to comprehend that worker's specific social circumstances. Disraeli could neither appreciate nor legitimize the effects of social change, and he failed to perceive its effects on the lives and characters of the social members. He believed that organized society had always been a stratified hierarchy of power, shaped something like a triangle, in which power was distributed from a central authority at the apex to the broad masses at the bottom. In his view, society had always been stratified on the basis of wealth and poverty, strength and weakness, and in that scheme of things he saw no significant difference between the industrial workers of the nineteenth century and the Saxon peasants in the days before the Norman conquest. Disraeli identified his working-class characters as Saxons or serfs because he regarded them as roughly equivalent social classes: the 'have-nots' of society who have always depended, in one way or other, on the beneficence of their social superiors.

Disraeli's simplistic division of the workers into saints and villains reflects another aspect of his political

philosophy: its heavily judgmental tone. Disraeli agreed with Burke that "In a state of rude nature there is no such thing as a people," and that "A number of men in themselves have no collective capacity." The "collective capacity" of the people was regarded by Disraeli and Burke as a spiritual force, a mystic sense of community, which bound the warring wills of individuals and rival factions in a 'rude' society into a cohesive State or Nation (they use the terms interchangeably). Both men regarded the State as the pivotal institution of civilization; in their scheme, it was the agent for resolving conflicts and regulating the relations among the classes--in effect it created a Nation out of a chaotic mass of warring individuals. The Nation was furthermore "an idea of continuity," "a deliberate election of the ages and of generations" which was "to be looked on with other reverence; because it is not a partnership in things subservient only to the gross animal existence of a temporary and perishable clay."⁵⁶ The power of the State, in this view, extended over time as well as space; it was not only a bond between all individuals throughout the

⁵⁶Reflections on the Revolution in France (World's Classics edn., 1950), pp. 105-106.

ages, but a bond between the ages; it preserved the 'spirit of the nation' or culture (as it later came to be called) as well as order:

A nation is not a mere mass of bipeds with no strength but their animal vigour, and no collective grandeur but that of their numbers. There is required to constitute that great creation, a people, some higher endowments and some rarer--honour and faith and justice; a national spirit fostered by national exploits; a solemn creed expounded by a pure and learned priesthood; a jurisprudence which is the aggregate wisdom of ages; the spirit of chivalry, the inspiration of religion, the supremacy of law; that free order and that natural gradation of ranks which are but a type and image of the economy of the universe; a love of home and country, fostered by traditional manners and consecrated by customs that embalm ancestral deeds. . . .⁵⁷

With this definition of a nation in mind, we can see why Disraeli would romanticize his *Daughter of the People*; *Sybil* incorporates the whole of English history and culture. By the same token, Disraeli would portray those who threaten the stability of the state or society as brute savages. Gerard was undoubtedly a mouthpiece for the author when he spoke of the working-class condition as "the most solemn thing since the deluge," and asked,

⁵⁷"The Letters of Runnymede," Letter III to Mr. Thomas Atwood, Whigs and Whiggism: Political Writings by Benjamin Disraeli, ed. William Hutcheon (New York, 1971), p. 251.

"What are your invasions of the barbarous nations, your Goths and Visigoths, your Lombards and Huns, to our Population Returns?"

Disraeli's political theory was compelled by his conviction that "no society could be durable unless it was built upon the principles of loyalty and reverence," and because of that conviction he claimed that "imagination in government of nations" was "a quality not less important than reason." There was a rational basis and a practical motive for his apparently whimsical imagination: a desire to hold the country together during a period of social crisis in the only way he believed possible--by inspiring a kind of religious commitment to a mythic English Nation. At a time when England was divided into "Two Nations" and threatened with civil war, Disraeli wanted to emphasize the historical and cultural traditions which bound the people into 'one nation' united in a common cause. His use of mixed tones and modes in Sybil, his caricatures of saints and villains, and reckless transitions from Gothic romance to documentary expose to high melodrama all represent an 'integrated' and honest attempt to describe and resolve one problem: the social crisis brought about by industrialism. That the various elements of the novel

seem so discordant is largely evidence of the fact that society and politics are no longer commonly discussed in Disraeli's terms.

A twentieth-century sociologist could easily dismiss Disraeli's political philosophy by showing that its premises were wrong: a society is not merely the sum of its individual members nor are the state and the society separate and independent organisms. He might claim that the state is only one of many political institutions operating within a society and that political institutions are only one of a cluster of social institutions.⁵⁸ From a twentieth-century perspective, it appears that Disraeli's question about the supremacy of State or Society had no foundation, and that he raised his questions about the consequences of social conflict in the wrong way. Nevertheless, Disraeli's philosophy may deserve the attention of the literary critic as well as the historian of ideas because it brings into focus the Victorians' growing awareness that there existed a problematic and unknown, yet vitally important, entity called Society. Disraeli was

⁵⁸See Seymour Martin Lipset, Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics (New York, 1963), pp. 2-4.

clearly not the first to recognize its existence; ever since the beginnings of the bourgeois revolution it had become painfully clear that there was a distinction to be drawn between Society and State or Man and Citizen. From the seventeenth century onwards, political thinkers struggled to formulate some principle of social cohesion or legitimate state authority in the face of continuing conflict among rival social groups and members. That struggle became more intense in the nineteenth century when England felt itself threatened with civil war, and the effects of industrialism made it clear that society had outworn the form and function of government. During those years of social crisis, the idea of society imposed itself upon the popular consciousness, and it finally became a subject for the novel. Disraeli's political philosophy represents the Victorians' groping attempt to understand society as a 'system' rather than a body of persons, and his novel reflects their struggle to bring the new subject within the purview of fictional literature.

The novelists of the 1840's who tried to make society a subject for their fiction confronted many obstacles, as Kathleen Tillotson has noted. Not least of these was

the level of popular taste in its various aspects: the public's expectation to be entertained rather than instructed, its strict standards of moral propriety, its appreciation of sentimental pathos and contempt for basic experience, and so on. The novelists had to bear the readers' expectations in mind, if only to gauge the extent to which those expectations could be defeated or changed.

Probably the more important obstacle to the novelist was the state of the novel itself and its lack of any tradition for coping with the scenes and characters which the new subject required. The social frontiers of the novel had been expanded by some of the 'Newgate novels' with their lurid descriptions of 'low life,' but these novels emphasized crime and violence rather than the drama of life among the poor; they were written with a strong moral bias (to prove that crime does not pay or that evil consequences follow when lovely woman stoops to folly), and they were not considered respectable literature. On the other hand, the 'silver fork' novels with their strict adherence to upper-class standards of gentility were entirely too confining. The novelist who tried to bridge the gap between the classes did so with considerable embarrassment, and often with apologies. Thackeray entitled

his sixtieth chapter of Vanity Fair "Returns to the Genteel World," and he apparently had to further ease the transition between the 'two worlds' with the statement, "We are glad to get [Amelia] out of that low sphere in which she has been creeping hitherto, and introduce her into a polite circle." Likewise Charlotte Brontë was uneasy with some of her scenes in Shirley, and she cautioned her audience about the eighteenth chapter "Which the genteel reader is recommended to skip, low persons being here introduced."

The novelists who wanted to write specifically about the lives of the working poor had the added problem of extending the novel's geographical range and amplifying the setting with precise descriptive detail. The historical romance was typically set "not . . . anywhere in particular . . . up in a mountain, near a castle,"⁵⁹ but the novelist who hoped to "illustrate the Condition of the People" had to show graphic physical details as well as tell a story. Dickens brought Whitechapel into the novel in Oliver Twist, and Mrs. Gaskell tried to recreate the

⁵⁹Anthony Trollope's burlesque novelette "Sir Antony Allan-a-dale" in Three Clerks, ch. xix.

scenes and spirit of Manchester in Mary Barton, in an attempt to tell "the stern and plain truth" to the fiction-reading public. Dickens and Mrs. Gaskell were somewhat familiar with the lives of the working poor, but novelists like Disraeli or Kingsley had to make an unprecedented commitment to research the materials for their novels in order to gain an intimate knowledge. Sometimes they fell back on Blue-book evidence or popular stereotype, but they persevered in the struggle to imagine what went on in "the dark and unknown regions of the populace."

For novelists 'with a purpose' like Disraeli, the subject of the working class posed particularly formidable demands on the artist's talent. He had to 'make something' of the material--tell a story, resolve a situation, or illustrate a moral which would point up his philosophy. He had the usual problem of the novelist with an extra-literary purpose--the tendency to rely too heavily on 'ideas' and 'views'--and the added difficulty of creating a working-class character who would be a mouthpiece for, or a representative of, the upper-class author's opinions. The problem was compounded by the absence of any literary precedents for such a character. The 'industrious classes' in the English novel were simply those people who worked

in shops and factories and kitchens, and could not speak standard English.⁶⁰ Scott had created some memorable characters who portrayed the dignity of humble life, but these romanticized 'humble poor' or 'lower orders' could not easily be transposed into the slums or factories of Manchester. The typical hero of early Victorian fiction was the gentleman who spent his time managing his estates and enjoying the rational pleasures of social life. There were some middle-class heroes, usually types like Lydgate in Middlemarch, the young doctor or lawyer struggling to succeed, and some soldier-adventurers who displayed admirable qualities of courage and chivalry, but very rarely worker-heroes. The working-class hero of popular fiction was likely to be a character like Thornton in Mrs. Gaskell's North and South, an intelligent and morally upright young man of humble origins who managed, by virtue of hard work and sound principles, to rise out of his class. His speech, habits, and manners were generally indistinguishable from the upper class.⁶¹ The novelists of the 1840's had to create an entirely new kind of worker who would represent the

⁶⁰ Dalziel, p. 138.

⁶¹ "The Hero," Ibid., pp. 99-107.

dignity of labor in the industrial city; he would have to be somehow endearing without the charming qualities of rustic simplicity and quaintness, articulate without being excessively educated, and representative of the customs and manners of his class without being somehow 'low.'

In an attempt to deal with this new kind of character, the novelists had to depart from literary models in other ways. The tones and contours of the prevailing types of fiction were not entirely appropriate to the new subject: the historical romance with its vague setting in somewhere long ago, the novel of manners with its narrow social range, the picaresque novel with its delightful adventures, and others--the ladies' romance, Gothic thriller, Newgate novel, etc.--could not easily be accommodated to a subject which demanded some degree of documentary realism and thoughtful analysis as well as imaginative life and moral design. The heroes of those novels (chivalrous gentlemen, gay adventurers, sensitive young men, and amiable rogues) were unsuitable for the new character, and, perhaps more notable, the tonal qualities of those novels were inappropriate to a subject which the author perceived as problematic. The high inspiration of the historical romance, the formal observances in the novel of manners, the playful

humor in the picaresque novel, the maudlin intimacies of the sentimental romance, and so on, all demanded a relatively unambiguous, confident, and steady but narrow perspective on the characters and events in the novel. However, the early novelists about the working class lacked that confident attitude and sure focus. They struggled with conflicting feelings of sympathy and fear, shifting degrees of narrative distance, and an uncertain point of view. They had to somehow expand the scope of the novel to include 'ideas' as well as feelings, a specific locale instead of a vague or timeless one, a contemporary reality instead of a distant past, a variety of social scenes and types, and a sense of society as a living force rather than a background for the play of personality or character. There was no precedent like The Red and the Black in English fiction, and the novelists had to struggle to graft their new material on to old fictional forms, or to create new ones to accommodate their subject.

Disraeli's Sybil may be regarded as a groundbreaking effort⁶² to bring the working-class into the novel,

⁶²It seems difficult to define exactly the nature of Disraeli's originality. Edmund Spenser regards Disraeli as the first 'political' novelist and Louis Cazamian regards him as the first 'social' novelist. Both these

and it bears the marks of the author's exertions. It seems everywhere apparent that Disraeli was trying to 'fit' his subject into the conventional forms of fiction, and that no single mold could contain it. The novel is a farrago of tones and modes with effects ranging from broad satire to inspired prophecy, and the scenes are often a pastiche of literary types as various as the historical romance and the rogue adventure story. Like most novels of its time, Sybil is a shapeless and sprawling creation; it has none of the formal concentration, dramatic intensity, or epistemological complexity of the modern novel, nor is it expected to. However, Sybil is remarkable even as an example of its kind, and its patchwork effect may express something more than the author's idiosyncratic style. Disraeli may have searched for some coherent artistic shape for his portrait of the 'Two Nations,' and,

categories are obviously imprecise, and Disraeli does not appear to be wholly original in either one (wasn't William Godwin a 'political' novelist? doesn't every novelist write about society?). Nevertheless, it seems true that Disraeli did something unprecedented in Sybil. He incorporated politics into the novel's conventional form and expressed his ideology in a historical romance. He also brought society into the foreground of his novel and made it an identifiable subject rather than a background for the play of private personalities.

lacking any precedents, he resorted to the use of different literary models.

The unifying element of the novel is the narrative voice, a brooding, far-seeing, eloquent, and often angry commentator. That voice is perhaps the most brilliant 'character' in the novel; it has the oratorical gift of the young Disraeli on the floor of the House of Commons, and the philosophical wisdom of the elder statesman he was to become. The narrator fills some imaginative gaps in what might otherwise be a lifeless documentary or conventional romance. He adds a historical dimension to the novel when, for example, he presents the genealogies of families, and a philosophical-moral dimension when he speculates on the implications of the novel's action. There are times when he is clearly a political propagandist: he discusses the effects of the Reform Bill, compares the politics of Burke and Bolingbroke, laments the condition of the two parties in Parliament, and presents his views on the relation between church and state. A trivial point in the novel--a character passing by some ruins, for example--is ground enough for the narrator to launch into some lengthy disquisition on the role of the church in history. The narrative voice is often 'intrusive'

but usually persuasive, and some of the most memorable passages in Sybil occur when the narrator uses the novel as a forum for his own ideas:

But if it have not furnished us with abler administrators or a more illustrious senate, the Reform Act may have exercised on the country at large a beneficial influence. Has it? Has it elevated the tone of the public mind? Has it cultured the popular sensibilities to noble and ennobling ends? Has it proposed to the people of England a higher test of national respect and confidence than the debasing qualification universally prevalent in this country since the fatal introduction of the system of Dutch finance? Who will pretend it? If a spirit of rapacious covetousness, desecrating all the humanities of life, has been the besetting sin of England for the last century and a half, since the passing of the Reform Act the altar of Mammon has blazed with triple worship. To acquire, to accumulate, to plunder each other by virtue of philosophic phrases, to propose a Utopia to consist only of WEALTH and TOIL, this has been the breathless business of enfranchised England for the last twelve years, until we are startled from our voracious strife by the wail of intolerable serfage.⁶³

That exalted voice of authority eases some of the transitions in the novel: it broods on the actual political events in the 1830's (the 'bedchamber crisis,' Birmingham massacre, National Convention, etc.), rises to philosophical speculation, and sweeps the reader up into a mystic communion with England's mythic past.

The major substance of the novel is a realistic

⁶³Bk. I, Ch. v.

description of English society in the 1830's and 1840's, with special emphasis on the condition of the working class. There are scenes describing the poverty in a workman's home, the agony of women and children in the mines, the cruel injustices of the tommy-shop, the insidious intrigues of Chartists, and so on. Disraeli apparently wanted to embrace as much of society as possible in Sybil, and he included the whole spectrum of political and social types among his cast of characters. There are the trade unionist (Dandy Mick), anarchist (Devilsdust), Chartist (Morley), indolent aristocrat (Mountchesney), cynical aristocrat (Lord Marney), enlightened aristocrat (Egremont), an assortment of establishment politicians (Thorough Base, Floatwell, Bombastes Rip), and a variety of industrialists, capitalists, factory owners, villagers, and merchants. Some of these portraits, as their names suggest, are intended only for satiric purposes, but they all play a role in the social conflict.

The central focus of the novel is not the individual characters and their histories but the broad outlines of contrast and conflict between the 'Two Nations,' the rich and the poor of England. Cultural contrast is Sybil's theme, as also the most prominent principle of

its formal organization; the entire novel rests upon a neatly-constructed, somewhat mechanical, system of contrasts between scenes, characters, and ideas. For example, there is a 'silver fork' description of indolent lords and ladies in a "vast and golden saloon" on the eve of the Derby of 1837:

The gleaming lustres poured a flood of soft yet brilliant light over a plateau glittering with gold plate, and fragrant with exotics imbedded in vases of rare porcelain. The seats on each side of the table were occupied by persons consuming, with a heedless air, delicacies for which they had no appetite; while the conversation in general consisted of flying phrases. . . .

"Come from Lady St. Julians', Fitz?" said a youth of tender years, and whose fair visage was as downy and blooming as the peach from which, with a languid air, he withdrew his lips to make this inquiry of the gentleman with the cane.

"Yes; why were you not there?"

"I never go anywhere," replied the melancholy Cupid, "everything bores me so."

"Well, will you go to Epsom with us to-morrow, Alfred?" said Lord Fitz-Heron. "I take Berners and Charles Egremont, and with you our party will be perfect."

"I feel so cursed blase!" exclaimed the boy in a tone of elegant anguish.

"It will give you a fillip, Alfred," said Mr. Berners; "do you all the good in the world."

"Nothing can do me good," said Alfred, throwing away his almost untasted peach; "I should be happy if anything could do me harm. Waiter, bring me a tumbler of Badminton."⁶⁴

⁶⁴Bk. I, Ch. i.

The dialogue of the 'other' Nation has all the accents of the 'Newgate novels':

"I say, Jim," said a young genius of fourteen, stretching himself on the turf, "I pity them ere jarvies a-sitting on their boxes all the night and waiting for the nobs what is dancing. They 'as no repose."

"But they 'as porter," replied his friend, a sedater spirit, with the advantage of an additional year or two of experience; they takes their pot of half and half by turns, and if their name is called, the link what they subscribe for to pay sings out, 'Here'; and that's the way their guvners is done."⁶⁵

These scenes often follow one another and their juxtaposition lends the novel a heavy irony. The elegant home of Lord Marney is contrasted with the wretched hovels in the town of Marney, the salons of Mowbray with the squalor in the adjoining factories, and the polite chatter of Parliamentary members in their drawing rooms with the gathering storm of protest in the streets below. The effect of these contrasts is sometimes startling: in one chapter the smug gentlemen sip claret and listen to music in the drawing room, and in the following chapter a starving and desperate populace is busy setting fire to the neighborhood.

Against the background of a divided and contentious society, Disraeli holds up an ideal vision of social harmony and national glory represented in the marriage of

⁶⁵Bk. IV, Ch. vii.

Sybil and Egremont. The love story is set in a medieval atmosphere of church and chivalry, and it unfolds with the extravagant turns of high melodrama. Sybil is a daughter of the Saxon people, virtuous, chaste, and beautiful, and Egremont (the name signifies Norman extraction) is the handsome young knight who meets her one evening in the ruins of an ancient monastery and falls in love with her. There are no moments of glib satire in Disraeli's account of their thwarted relationship; the tones are hushed and reverential, and the atmosphere is charged with a mystic grandeur.

Sybil initially rejects Egremont's proposal because she assumes that "the gulf" between them "is impassable." She has the attitudes of the nineteenth-century working class: "to be one of the people was to be miserable and innocent; one of the privileged, a luxurious tyrant." In her view, the world is "divided only between the oppressors and the oppressed," and she resists Egremont's love because of his status as a class-enemy. Egremont, on the other hand, has a vision of the One Nation and a spontaneous love for the People. He tries to win Sybil's feminine trust by establishing the trustworthiness of the aristocracy and the infirmity of the People:

The People are not strong; the People never can be strong. Their attempts at self-vindication can end only in their suffering and confusion. . . . There is a dayspring in the history of this nation, which perhaps only those who are on the mountain-tops can as yet recognize. . . . The new generation of the aristocracy are not tyrants, not oppressors, Sybil, as you persist in believing. Their intelligence, better than that, their hearts, are open to the responsibilities of their position. But the work that is before them is no holiday-work. It is not the fever of superficial impulse that can remove the deep-fixed barriers of centuries of ignorance and crime. Enough that their sympathies are awakened; time and thought will bring the rest. They are the natural leaders of the People, Sybil; believe me they are the only ones.⁶⁶

Sybil dismisses that fervent appeal, and at the same time rejects his love and his political leadership: "The leaders of the People are those whom the People trust."

It is only after the violence of the National Convention and her father's betrayal by the People that Sybil discovers that morality is not the exclusive possession of any one class:

She had seen enough to suspect that the world was a more complicated system than she had preconceived. There was not that rude and strong simplicity in its organization which she had supposed. The characters were more various, the motives more mixed, the classes more blended, the elements of each more subtle and diversified, than she had imagined. The People, she found, was not that pure embodiment of unity of feeling, of interest, and of purpose which she had imagined in her abstractions. The people had enemies among the people; their own passions.⁶⁷

⁶⁶Bk. IV, Ch. xv.

⁶⁷Bk. V, Ch. i.

Sybil breaks away from her class, and then recognizes that 'the impassable gulf' which separated her from Egremont consists of nothing more than ignorance and inherited attitudes:

She would ascribe . . . the want of sympathy that unquestionably exists between Wealth and Work in England to mutual ignorance between the classes which possess these two great elements of national prosperity; and though the source of that ignorance was to be sought in antecedent circumstances of violence and oppression, the consequences had outlived the causes, as customs survive opinions.⁶⁸

From that moment of insight, and the change-of-heart that follows in its wake, a series of miracles occur which bring the lovers together. Egremont appears at a critical moment to save Sybil's and her father's lives, a document is suddenly discovered which makes Sybil an heiress, and the lovers finally marry.

The novel's conclusion carries it far away from its beginnings. What began as a realistic portrait of a divided society on the brink of civil war concludes as a wish-fulfilled romantic fantasy, complete with all the predictable and happy resolutions: true love is vindicated, virtue rewarded, and the lovers' legitimate inheritance restored. All the discords are suddenly, and

⁶⁸Ibid., loc. cit.

quite magically, harmonized. The realistic issues which divide the nation are dissolved by the power of love and a Divine intercession in human affairs, and the problems of nineteenth-century England are restored by a document which returns the country to its history. The heart triumphs over the head and the past over the present, and the novel concludes on a note of pious prayer for "the coming hour" and "the claims of the future."

The ending of the novel signifies what has been apparent all along, that Disraeli could not reconcile his realistic portrait of class-conflict in the nineteenth century with his purpose as a political propagandist. He not only had difficulty in reconciling his 'ideas' with his 'pictures'; he also had difficulty integrating his particular political argument into a novel designed primarily to illustrate the 'condition of England.' The politics of the Young England movement rested on the notion that the past (more importantly, the distant past) could point the way to the future, that man could be regenerated by his imagination and faith, and that the 'spirit of the nation' was ultimately a more powerful force operating in society than the spirit of naked self-interest. Disraeli of necessity had to abandon his

realistic or journalistic approach and take the novel's action onto a more sublime plane of human experience.

To further complicate his problem, Disraeli's politics involved a confused and contradictory view of the past, and that confusion detracts from the reality of his working-class portraits as well as the integrity of the whole novel. On the one hand, Disraeli regarded the past as something very much like the present, and the working class as an incarnation of the sempiternal 'lower orders.' On the other hand, Disraeli idealized the medieval past and regarded its social structure as a model for future generations. In the light of the feudal ideal, Disraeli portrayed the workers as a degraded and oppressed group, the victims of centuries of misrule under a 'commercial oligarchy.' The 'good' workers, in that scheme, were those anachronistic remnants of a more illustrious age, and the 'bad' ones were those whose characters had been molded by the brutish conditions of their own time.

Disraeli went further than most critics of industrialism in his idealization of the middle ages. After all, a socialist like Owen and a Whig like Burke could express a nostalgic longing for the days of pre-industrial social harmony. What is peculiar to Disraeli and the

Young Englanders is the attempt to use the middle ages as a kind of starting-point of English history, something like the moment of Revelation for the devout Christian: it is an event or a moment which organizes all of history, and makes everything which came before appear like a prologue, and everything which followed, an epilogue to the great event. Disraeli regarded the middle ages in much the same way that Newman did the doctrine of apostolic succession: as a principle of legitimacy, a touchstone for 'purifying' an institution (Church or State) of its illegitimate historical accretions, and controlling the extent and kinds of modifications of that institution. Disraeli differed from Owen who mourned the passing of the old feudal order and decided that the time had come for a radical change in the means of social organization. He also differed from a conservative thinker like Burke who argued against radical social reform in the name of a sacrosanct 'history' or 'spirit of the nation.' Burke's 'history' endowed the status quo, no matter how nefarious or dubious its origins, with a certain kind of legitimacy, and implicitly sanctioned the authority of the middle class on the grounds that it was built up through time. However, Disraeli wanted to withdraw political power from

the middle class and restore it to the aristocracy, and he needed another principle of legitimacy in order to reform the system in their favor. In effect, he idealized the middle ages in order to separate the "gentlemen of England" from the middle class parvenus who had displaced the People as well as the landed aristocracy.

Disraeli was apparently torn between his two purposes in writing the novel. His sympathy for the workers (and his understanding of 'class') impelled him to portray them as the eternal Poor who "are deprived of the requisites to support the health of their bodies and minds," but his hatred of the middle class impelled him to reconstruct an ideal past for the worker, and to show that the "proud and prosperous" ('aristocratic') People were degraded only because their rightful legacy was usurped by a greedy "commercial oligarchy." In this light, Sybil's recovery of her patrimony is more than a standard convention of the happy ending to a romance; it signifies the working class' eventual displacement of the usurping middle class, and the workers' reinstatement in a favored position with the aristocracy.

By making Sybil an aristocrat and an heiress to the Mowbray estate, Disraeli proposed his version of a

legitimate social revolution. He implicitly refuted the argument of David Hume who wrote in his History of England (pub. 1754) that the Norman conquest was an entirely illegitimate seizure of power, and that it would be "difficult to find in all history a revolution more destructive, or attended with a more complete subjection of the ancient inhabitants." Hume's writings convinced other historians, notably Augustin Thierry, that the aristocracy was a privileged and repressive group, and they proved to Thomas Paine that England was without a constitution because the government originated in conquest and no 'social contract' had ever been made. Disraeli, however, showed that the workers were displaced by the middle class rather than the Norman conquerors. Sybil retrieves her estate from the descendants of John Warren, the "obscure adventurer" of dubious origins, who had made his fortune as an Indian nabob. Furthermore, Egremont is instrumental in the recovery of the missing document, and he proves thereby that "the new generation of the aristocracy are not tyrants, not oppressors." Perhaps most importantly, the recovery of the document points the way to a legitimate and constructive revolution: it shows that the workers would benefit most by returning to the past rather than departing

from it, and that the real enemies of the People and the State are the newly-arrived middle classes.

The ending of the novel reflects Disraeli's political program: a happy and triumphant People displaces the usurping middle class, and the People join with the aristocracy in a loving union. Yet the political element in the novel conflicts with the social element because the Daughter of the People turns out to be, after all, an aristocrat. That Disraeli ignored this contradiction is evidence (among other things) that he abandoned the social aspect of the novel, or that he asked his questions about society in one set of terms and was forced to answer in another. It may be that politics 'took over' the novel about society, or that Disraeli's hatred of the middle class superseded his sympathy for the workers. From another point of view, it appears that Disraeli was forced to abandon his novel about 'society,' and that his view of society as a static entity, or politics as a vindication of England's feudal past, did not allow him to sustain 'society' as a living force in the novel or to work out his characters' problems in an actual social context. His view of society as an unchanging condition in the lives of men (everyone is born with a 'station in life') was

undramatic, as was his perception of the worker as the quintessential Victim. His difficulty with the subject of the working class may have resembled the playwrights' difficulty in dramatizing the life of Christ: no tension is possible, nor can there be any significant movement towards a resolution, because all the meaning and consequences are evident in the character and his situation. Disraeli's illustration of the condition of the people and his portrait of society are a two-dimensional series of contrasts and comparisons between different social groups. Given his view of politics and society, he could not portray a clash between the classes (as Zola would later do in Germinal) as signifying anything more than a pointless, chaotic, and potentially destructive confrontation. In order to generate some action in the novel, and move it towards some resolution (the vindication of English history), he had to move his realistic and documentary novel into an entirely different sphere, and work out the social problem on the level of political myth and romantic fantasy.

CHAPTER II

ELIZABETH GASKELL'S MARY BARTON:

AN ATTEMPT TO ACHIEVE SOCIAL TRAGEDY

Mary Barton is generally regarded as the least purposeful of the 'novels with a purpose';¹ it bears the fewest marks of the political or social reformer, and seems, more than the others, to reflect the author's spontaneous sympathies. Of all her contemporaries, Mrs. Gaskell was the one most 'engaged' with the subject of the working class, and least inclined to use her novel as an instrument of propaganda.² In her Preface to Mary Barton, Mrs.

¹See Kathleen Tillotson, Novels of the Eighteen-Forties (Oxford, 1956), p. 202. Also Arnold Kettle, "The Early Victorian Social-Problem Novel," The Pelican Guide to English Literature: From Dickens to Hardy, ed. Boris Ford (Baltimore, 1958), p. 178.

²In one of her letters, Mrs. Gaskell wrote:
I quite understand an EDITOR'S desire to please his readers, but that I CAN not (it is not WILL not) write at all if I ever think of my readers, & what impression I am making on them. 'If they don't like me, they must LUMP me' to use a Lancashire proverb. It is from no despising my readers. I am sure I don't do that, but if I ever let the thought or consciousness of them come between me & my subject I COULD not write at all.
Letter #394 to Charles Eliot Norton, The Letters of Mrs.

Gaskell declared, perhaps proudly, that she knew "nothing of political economy or the theories of trade," and that she "tried to write truthfully" about her subject ('truth' presumably being synonymous with 'feeling'). She abandoned the more conventional subjects of fiction because she perceived a "deep . . . romance in the lives of some of those who elbowed me daily in the busy streets of the town in which I resided," and she felt a "deep sympathy with the careworn men."³ It appears that she perceived the working man as a genuine subject for literature, and she was perhaps the first to do so.

Mrs. Gaskell began to write her novel as a way to distract herself from the death of her young son, and she chose to write about the working man presumably because she sympathized with his "groping search after the causes of suffering, and the reason why suffering is sent."⁴ The 'condition of England' question or the abstract issues of capital and labor were not her major concern; she was

Gaskell, eds. J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Cambridge, 1967), p. 503.

³Preface to the original edition of Mary Barton, dated October, 1848.

⁴Letter #42 to Mrs. Greg, Letters, p. 74.

inspired by the human problems created by industrial society. "The prevailing thought in my mind when the tale was silently forming itself," she wrote, "was the seeming injustice of the inequality of fortune."⁵ The disparity between capital and labor was, in her view, just another manifestation of the divine will which metes out rewards and punishments in an incomprehensible manner, and the working man's struggle to come to terms with his fate was, in that light, a universal and human one. "Tossed to and fro by circumstances, apparently in even a greater degree than other men," the working man appeared to be a victim of cosmic injustice, and his attempt to rectify the social order represented mankind's futile argument with God or with His system of things.

As a long-time resident of Manchester, Mrs. Gaskell was in a more favorable position than Disraeli or Kingsley to perceive the "deep romance" in the lives of the poor. In the role of minister's wife, she frequently visited the homes of her working-class parishioners and saw them in their moments of deepest trial. Like Sandy Mackaye, she saw "God and Satan at death-grips" in the gin-shops and costermongers' cellars. "Sooty Manchester" appeared to her,

⁵Preface to Mary Barton.

as it did to Carlyle, to be "built on the infinite Abysses . . . and there is birth in it, and death in it."⁶ To Mrs. Gaskell, the industrial city was not the strange scene of unmitigated horror that it was to Disraeli, nor the seed-bed of riot and revolution that it was to Kingsley. She regarded Manchester as the mixed blessing of the industrial revolution, and shared De Tocqueville's view of the city as the testing-ground of a new civilization.⁷

Mrs. Gaskell's familiarity and empathy with working-class life is reflected in the intimate portraits of her characters and their surroundings. One of her critics compared her with Disraeli, saying that she knew her subject "as an ardent naturalist knows the flora of his own neighborhood" and Disraeli "as a traveller knows the

⁶Thomas Carlyle, Past and Present (New York, 1927 edn.), p. 237.

⁷De Tocqueville held a middle view between the Blue-book reporters who saw in Manchester all the abuses of industrialism, and the acolytes of Victorian progress who saw only its achievements. In Journeys to England and Ireland he wrote:

From this foul drain the greatest stream of human industry flows out to fertilize the whole world. From this filthy sewer pure gold flows. Here humanity attains its most complete development and its most brutish, here civilization works its miracles and civilized man is turned almost into a savage.
Ed. J. P. Mayer (London, 1958), pp. 107-108.

botany of a strange country."⁸ Her working-class characters are full human beings, described without sensational or documentary effects. The Davenport cellar with its broken window-panes, the Barton household with its cherished crockery, geraniums, and checkered curtains, the damp and darkened home of Alice Wilson, and the warm fireside of Job Legh's house are portrayed with a care that reflects the author's intimate contact with the workers and her genuine interest in their style of life. A happy home is described in vivid details: "the delicious glow of the fire, the bright light that revelled in every corner of the room, the savory smells, the comfortable sounds of a boiling kettle, and the hissing, frizzling ham." "Good times" for the workers are concretized in graphic scenes, like the tea party at which the head of the household sends out his daughter to buy eggs, ham, milk, and rum--the little 'extras' that indicate prosperity in the workers' home. Conversely, the bad times are expressed by darkened homes, the gradual sale of cherished family possessions, and the eventual neglect of old friends and neighbors. There is nothing in the novel so abstract

⁸William Minto, Fortnightly Review, September 1, 1878, quoted by Tillotson, p. 208.

as Disraeli's Warner reminiscing about the time when "I loved my loom and my loom loved me," and nothing so judgmental as Disraeli's shocked exclamation that some of the millworkers "are to be the mothers of England!" Mrs. Gaskell's eye, if not always approving, is always compassionate.

There is, then, a significant achievement in Mary Barton and, in some sense, an advance over the other social-problem novels where the working class is not fully assimilated into the fictional material. But Mrs. Gaskell, like her contemporaries, was unable to maintain her interest in her main character, or, in any event, to sustain him as the central character or consciousness of the novel. John Barton was originally intended to be the hero of the novel and conceived as a dignified tragic character who questions the justice of providence because he obeys its laws. At the end of the novel, he becomes a kind of Ahab, sensible only of "that terrible malignity which has been from the beginning," rebellious against all authority, immune to the call of homely affections, and monomaniacally bent on vengeance against the powers-that-be. Barton is transformed into a "powerful monster" whose inarticulate rage is expressed in a pointless act of violence, and he

redeems himself in the final chapters only by his abject penance and denial of those conditions which provoked his action. Mrs. Gaskell finally dropped him as a main character and took up the fortunes of his pretty daughter.

Mrs. Gaskell "had no axe to grind"⁹ as did Disraeli or Kingsley, and her withdrawal of sympathy from the main character, "a thorough specimen of a Manchester man," cannot be explained in terms of extra-literary pressures. John Barton had the sympathy of the author, but it was a kind of sympathy which destroyed his independence or vitality as a literary character. Mrs. Gaskell identified herself with Barton because he was the inarticulate victim of an incomprehensible system, but precisely that absence of power and articulation made it impossible for him to express his rage or undertake a constructive course of action. Furthermore, Barton's rage, insofar as it was directed against 'the system,' expressed a defiance of God and (what the laissez-faire economists called) "the social and moral economy of the world."¹⁰ His politics raised

⁹Ibid., p. 202.

¹⁰The Manchester School of economics held that the system of free competition was, in the long run, to the advantage of the workers as well as masters. See Asa Briggs, Victorian Cities (New York, 1963), p. 123 for a discussion

philosophic and religious questions with which Mrs. Gaskell was unable to contend.

Mrs. Gaskell's portrait of John Barton shows that an excess of sympathy as well as its absence impeded the social-problem novelist in dealing with the subject of the working class. Mrs. Gaskell resembles Dickens rather than Disraeli or Kingsley in her attitude towards the workers: she was impressed by their helplessness rather than their revolutionary potential, and she responded to the 'condition of England' question with pity rather than fear. Her inability to sustain John Barton as a tragic figure indicates that she was unable to release her sympathies for aesthetic ends. From another point of view, they indicate that the worker was not yet a suitable subject for

of the Manchester School. The justification of social inequalities appears repeatedly in popular fiction, even where the author is basically sympathetic to the workers' suffering. In a discussion of a miners' strike in The True Briton (1852), the author writes:

It is evidently a part of the social and moral economy of the world, that extremes should meet. It is the lot of one portion of our fellow-creatures to pass their lives in labouring for living or for wealth--not in sight of the warm sun of heaven . . . but in glimmering darkness, in subterranean caverns, in strange and murky mines . . . where danger and death stalk in fearful proximity. And yet, how could the world be carried on, but for the product of these labours?

Quoted by Margaret Dalziel, Popular Fiction 100 Years Ago (London, 1957), p. 143.

literature, or that an upper-class novelist was unable to perceive him as a viable literary subject. Neither pity nor fear allowed the social-problem novelists to perceive the worker as a character who could maintain himself as the focus of thought and action in the novel.

Mrs. Gaskell originally intended John Barton to be the "central figure" of the novel; he was, in her words, "my hero, the person with whom all my sympathies went, with whom I tried to identify myself."¹¹ He was conceived as a tragic figure in the Hebraic mold, a character "resolute either for good or evil," who is forced into what Jaspers called "the boundary situation" where he defines his relation to a disordered world. Mrs. Gaskell portrayed him as "a thorough specimen of a Manchester man," a strong and virile character with the "acuteness and intelligence of countenance, which has often been noted in a manufacturing population." In the words of Arnold Kettle, Barton is,

¹¹In Letter #39 to Miss Lamont, Mrs. Gaskell wrote, "John Barton was the original name [of the novel], as being the central figure to my mind." In Letter #42 to Mrs. Greg she wrote, "Round the character of John Barton all the others formed themselves; he was my hero, the person with whom all my sympathies went, with whom I tried to identify myself at the time." Letters, pp. 70-74.

"apart from Heathcliff, . . . the nearest approach to a tragic hero which the early Victorian novel permitted itself."¹² For the first time, it seems, an upper class novelist regarded the working man as a character whose experience had implications for mankind in general.

At the beginning of the novel, John is a dignified figure who, like Job, questions the justice of God's providence at the same time that he obeys His laws. He knows that he is morally innocent and that he suffers without apparent cause, and his philosophic and religious doubts raise serious questions about the justice of a divine will. The narrator describes John's dilemma with sympathetic appreciation, and explains the relation between John's politics and religion. The disparity between capital and labor is, in John's view, an example of God's incomprehensible system of rewards and punishments:

John Barton's overpowering thought, which was to work out his fate on earth, was rich and poor; why are they so separate, so distinct, when God has made them all? It is not His will that their interests are so far apart. Whose doing is it?

And so on into the problems and mysteries of life, until, bewildered and lost, unhappy and suffering, the only feeling that remained clear and undisturbed in the

¹²"The Early Victorian Social-Problem Novel," p. 181.

tumult of his heart, was hatred to the one class, and keen sympathy to the other.¹³

At the outset, John's political concerns are linked with his religious faith and his subsequent involvement with the Chartist movement is an index of his estrangement from God and His moral law. With each of John's misfortunes, his character disintegrates. Eventually he loses all the "ties which bound him down to the gentle humanities of the earth."¹⁴ The loss of his wife and son, the destruction of the Carson mill and its aftermath of widespread unemployment, the rejection of the Chartist petition of 1839, and the unhappy events during the strike in Manchester mark the course of his victimization as it leads to both moral decline and increasing political activism. It appears to him that the "gods" are scornful as well as malicious--a policeman in London laughs at him after having struck him, and Harry Carson draws a caricature-portrait of him when he makes a desperate appeal for justice--and the insult is more painful than the injury. In a half-demonic rage, Barton commits himself to "avenge us on yon chap, who had so little

¹³Elizabeth Gaskell, Mary Barton (Norton edn., New York, 1958), p. 162.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 18.

feeling in him as to make game on earnest suffering men."¹⁵ His assassination of young Carson is an act of religious as well as political defiance, and it is redeemed at the end of the novel when Barton reconciles himself to both God and the authority of his employers.

Mrs. Gaskell was apparently unable to maintain her sympathy for Barton because of the religious implications of his political actions. Her conception of Barton's dilemma forced her to make a choice somewhere in the novel: either condone Barton's violence and his religious skepticism or justify God's ways to man. Mrs. Gaskell chose the latter course. In his final moments, John is a repentant sinner, weary of life and afraid of judgment after death, and full of regret for his wayward impulses. His death-bed plea for forgiveness is a melodramatic sequel to his otherwise tragic life:

But now he knew that he had killed a man, and a brother,--now he knew that no good thing could come out of this evil, even to the sufferers whose cause he had so blindly espoused. . . .

He felt execrated by all; and as if he could never lay bare the perverted reasonings which had made the performance of undoubted sin appear a duty. The longing to plead some faint excuse grew stronger and stronger. He feebly raised his head, and looking at Job Legh, he whispered out, "I did not know what I

¹⁵Ibid., p. 181.

was doing Job Legh; God knows I didn't! Oh, sir!" said he, wildly, almost throwing himself at Mr. Carson's feet, "say you forgive me the anguish I now see I have caused you. I care not for pain, or death, you know I don't; but oh, man, forgive me the trespass I have done!"¹⁶

Like Alton Locke, John Barton repents of his crimes and thereby cancels the tragic aspects of his existence. His conscience is not the conscience of Hester Prynne who accepts guilt on her own terms and maintains herself as a tragic figure, nor is it precisely an Aeschylean deus ex machina whose miraculous appearance at the end points the way to cosmic reconciliation. John's guilt is the nemesis for a dubious crime, and its harshness is excessive and inexplicable.¹⁷ There is no 'hidden god,' functioning in unknown ways; John's guilt seems to be a projection of Mrs. Gaskell's own fear that she had somehow 'gone too far' in justifying rebelliousness.

In Margaret Ganz's view, Mrs. Gaskell's "basic diffidence about challenging the conventions of the status quo, her genuine desire not to be 'WICKED' in arousing contentious

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 354-355.

¹⁷The narrator refers to Barton's nemesis as the work of "The Destroyer" or "The Avenger." "After the excitement had passed away, the Avenger, the sure Avenger, had found him out." Ibid., p. 354.

feelings, but rather to function as a 'peacemaker' . . . her pious commitment to the gospel of resignation--all conspire against the fulfillment of her conception of Barton's dilemma."¹⁸ On the other hand, Raymond Williams claims that the shift of focus within the novel is "characteristic of the structure of feeling within which she was working," and that John Barton "must always have been cast as the murderer, with the intention perhaps of showing an essentially good man driven to an appalling crime by loss, suffering and despair."¹⁹ In either view, it seems clear that Mrs. Gaskell was unable to maintain John Barton as the imaginative hero of the novel because she could not accept his revolt against divine providence and the social order.

The shift of emphasis from John to Mary Barton signifies a shift from potential tragedy to standard Vic-

¹⁸Margaret Ganz, Elizabeth Gaskell: The Artist in Conflict (New York, 1969), p. 63. Miss Ganz's view is supported by Mrs. Gaskell's statement in a letter to a friend that her "intention was simply to represent the view many of the work-people take." Mrs. Gaskell added, "No one can feel more deeply than I how WICKED it is to do anything to excite class against class; and the sin was most unconscious if I have done so." Letter #36 to Mary Ewart, Letters, p. 67.

¹⁹Culture and Society (New York, 1958), p. 90.

torian melodrama. Because John considers his suffering to be a flaw in 'the system,' he explores the possibility of chaos in the heavens and on earth, and then enters into a course of action based upon his convictions. By comparison, Mary is a thoughtless and sentimental creature whose difficulties stem from private and wayward impulses. She is capable of feeling pain but not injustice, and she is prone to folly rather than violence. The superior advantages of the rich are not, in her view, a symptom of some disorder in the scheme of things; they only serve to arouse her "silly fancies" of "doing all the elegant nothings appertaining to ladyhood." Mary's problem of choosing between Jem Wilson ("a steady workman at a good trade, a good son to his parents, and a fine, manly, spirited chap") and "her gay lover, Harry Carson" is the typical dilemma of the Victorian heroine in popular fiction. The difficulty of her choice testifies to the "contrariness of the human heart from Eve downwards, that we all, in our old Adam state, fancy things forbidden sweet,"²⁰ and her ultimate victory over temptation illustrates the moral that covetousness is a sin and contentment a virtue. Mary's story

²⁰Ibid., p. 75.

answers the problem of suffering in traditional Christian terms: the disparity of fortune is only a "seeming injustice," worldly desires are a displacement of spiritual concerns, and large efforts at social reform are less consequential than small deeds of personal charity.

There is a contrary development of the two characters in the novel as John's fortunes decline and Mary's rise. John's social and public perspective on suffering leads him to further complications and inexorable tragedy while Mary gradually overcomes all obstacles in her private quest for love and happiness. The fortunes of the two characters intersect in the figure of Harry Carson who was the object of Mary's vanity and John's revenge. His murder leads to Mary's trial-by-fire and final achievement, and John's further isolation from "the gentle humanities of earth" and his ultimate spiritual destruction. The outcome of the action reflects the triumph of innocence over experience, action over contemplation, love over justice, and domestic happiness over social melioration.

The secondary characters in the novel are largely designed as counterpoints to John and Mary. The most important minor figure is Job Legh, the ardent naturalist who pursues his eccentric interests in scorpions and butterflies

away from the turmoil of the social scene. Unlike John, Job is content to work for even small wages, and he resists involvement in abstract issues of capital and labor:

You see my folly is this. . . . I would take what I could get; I think half a loaf is better than no bread. I would work for low wages rather than sit idle and starve. But comes the Trades Union, and says, "Well, if you take the half-loaf, we'll worry you out of your life. Will you be clemmed, or will you be worried?" Now clemming is a quiet death, and worrying isn't, so I choose clemming, and come into th' Union. But I'd wish they'd leave me free, if I am a fool.²¹

Job's dignity lies in his independence, yet he has a natural impulse to co-operate with his fellows, a spontaneous love of nature, and warm human sympathies which reflect themselves in personal deeds of Christian charity. He is therefore the appropriate person to teach Mr. Carson the duties of an employer in a competitive society. He resembles Sandy Mackaye in Alton Locke and Sam Tollady in Workers in the Dawn, the kindly old gentlemen who amalgamate the virtues of self-reliance and caritas, thereby serving as tutors and benefactors to the young and wayward generation. Mrs. Tillotson calls Job "the point of rest in the narrative and in the theme, the embodiment . . . of the practical

²¹Ibid., p. 90.

possibilities of the Christian ethic."²²

Job's granddaughter Margaret is an object-lesson in the virtue of patient suffering and Mary's Aunt Esther exemplifies the folly of vain impulse. These are relatively colorless characters, especially Margaret who knows that "being patient is the hardest work we, any on us, have to do through life." Margaret is a wooden figure of innocent faith who believes that "waiting is far more difficult than acting."²³ By comparison, Esther is a more interesting figure, but her function as a moral type is equally obvious. She hovers in the background of the novel as an exemplum of one who "did . . . love once one above me far" and paid the wages of sin.

Jem Wilson, Mary's faithful lover, and Harry Carson, the would-be seducer, are stock characters in the eternal triangle. Mary's temporary infatuation with Harry and her ultimate choice of Jem illustrates the conventional moral lesson that appearances are deceptive and that genuine virtue triumphs in the end. In their confrontation over Mary, Jem is initially "troubled by the outward appearance

²²Novels of the Eighteen-Forties, p. 219.

²³Mary Barton, p. 136.

of his rival" but he recalls "a man's a man for a' that." Carson, on the other hand, dismisses Jem instantly because "No woman with eyes could choose the one when the other wooed. It was Hyperion to a Satyr." Jem's success illustrates the folly of the rich who view the workers as their inferiors, and the wisdom of the poor (like Jem and Job Legh) who refuse to be intimidated.

The figure of old Alice Wilson brings into the foreground a minor theme in "the tale of Manchester life": the difference between the country-born worker and the "thorough specimen of a Manchester man." The novel suggests that the physical surroundings in Manchester are partly responsible for the breakdown of human character, and that a rural atmosphere nurtured a more wholesome, if less sensible, spirit. Barton's wife "had the fresh beauty of the agricultural districts" while he had a "wan, colourless face."²⁴ At the same time, John had the "acuteness and intelligence of countenance, which has often been noted in a manufacturing population" and his wife had "somewhat of the deficiency of sense in her countenance, which is . . . characteristic of the rural inhabitants in comparison with the manufacturing

²⁴Ibid., p. 3.

town." Likewise the country-born Mr. Wilson who was "more handsome . . . hearty and hopeful" than John was also "less sensible-looking than his friend."²⁵ Nevertheless, the simple and innocent rural character is idealized, and John Barton, the purported hero of the novel, is subordinated and finally destroyed. Old Alice is forever reminiscing about the green fields of home, and she dies "happy as a child . . . whom the Lord is hushabying to my long sleep." Her peaceful death is an obvious contrast to John's death-bed ravings. Like Margaret and Davenport, she possesses a touching innocence and faith in God's goodness, even in the face of "seeming injustice." "Half our life's spent in waiting," she tells Mary, "and it ill becomes one like me, wi' so many mercies, to grumble."

The shift of focus from John to Mary signifies, among other things, the author's gradual disengagement from her characters and a new direction to her sympathy for the working man. Mrs. Gaskell identified herself with John Barton and saw his life as the material for a "tragic poem."²⁶

²⁵Ibid., p. 4.

²⁶In Letter #39 to Miss Lamont, Mrs. Gaskell wrote, "I had so long felt that the bewildered life of an ignorant thoughtful man of strong power of sympathy, dwelling in a town so full of contrasts as this is, was a tragic poem." Letters, p. 70.

Mary, on the other hand, is never much more than a moral exemplum, and Mrs. Gaskell's sympathies for her are mixed with condescension and excessive sentimentality. At the end of the novel, it seems clear that Mrs. Gaskell has remained the upper-class novelist, observing her working-class characters from a distance, and trying pragmatically to resolve their problems rather than express them imaginatively.

Mrs. Gaskell apparently struggled to reconcile her spontaneous sympathies for the suffering worker with her moral and theological position (and her 'political' position, although she may not have used the word--in effect, Mrs. Gaskell adopted the views of the political economists who claimed that the disparity between capital and labor was the inevitable working out of some natural law).²⁷ Her

²⁷Mrs. Gaskell's political and economic views are reflected in the dialogue between Job Legh and Mr. Carson in the penultimate chapter of the novel. Job claims that "John Barton was no fool. No need to tell him that were all men equal tonight, some would get the start by rising earlier tomorrow." Nevertheless, Job tries to justify, or at least explain, the roots of Barton's antagonism to the masters. Mr. Carson rejoins, "Now how in the world can we help it? We cannot regulate the demand for labour. No man or set of men can do it. It depends on events which God alone can control." The two men finally agree that "God has given men feelings and passions which cannot be worked into the problem." Mary Barton, pp. 371-373.

attempt to define the worker's sense of injustice was frustrated by her belief that adversity is largely a moral test, and that the sufferer must sustain himself with Christian pieties such as faith, humility, and charity. Her attempt to probe the 'condition of England' question was similarly defeated by her belief that differences of rank and degree are God's ordinance, and that the individual must strive to fulfill the duties of his station. Thereby her sympathy for the worker was drained of all intellectual content and moral force, and reduced to the benevolence typical of the social-problem novelist.²⁸ Like Dickens, Mrs. Gaskell perceived industrial society as a "muddle" of conflicting

²⁸At the beginning of the novel, the workers' demands are based upon universal religious and moral principles. Barton tells Wilson, "Don't think to come over me with th' old tale, that the rich know nothing of the trials of the poor; I say, if they don't know, they ought to know." Ibid., p. 7. At the end of the novel, the workers ask only for pity and pure sentiment. Job Legh pleads with Carson, "What we all feel sharpest is the want of inclination to try and help the evils which come like blights at times over the manufacturing places. . . . If we saw the masters try for our sakes to find a remedy,--even if they were long about it,--even if they could find no help, and at the end of all could only say, 'Poor fellows, our hearts are sore for ye; we've done all we could, and can't find a cure,'--we'd bear up like men through bad times." Ibid., p. 374. There is no contradiction between Barton's and Job Legh's views, but the tone of their respective appeals is radically different, and so is the purpose. Barton argues for social justice in the hope of meliorating the working-class condition, while Job Legh argues in the name of love in order to maintain social peace.

truths and moral imperatives: she saw the evils of industrialism and capitalism but could find no villain, recognized the causes of working-class violence but could not condone it, and advocated social reform while doubting the efficacy of social and governmental institutions. Amidst the conflicting claims of political economists, Chartists, and utopian social reformers, she held fast to the obvious fact that the worker was the victim of the social system. Despite her attempt to make John something of a tragic hero, she produced a sentimental portrait of the worker who is finally, like Stephen Blackpool, a miserable victim of social circumstances.

From one point of view, Mrs. Gaskell's failure to achieve her tragic purpose in Mary Barton reflects a typically Victorian problem of defining evil, injustice, or even suffering.²⁹ As Richard Sewall observes, tragedy arises when the moral or cosmic order breaks down and man is forced into a 'boundary situation' from which he must define his relation to a disordered world.³⁰ But no such

²⁹See Margaret Dalziel for a discussion of the Victorian novelists' attitude towards social inequality. *Op. cit.*, pp. 144-147.

³⁰Richard Sewall, The Vision of Tragedy (New Haven, 1959), pp. 1-8.

breakdown is conceivable to the orthodox Christian who believes that the woes of the earthly world will be redeemed in heaven, and that suffering is purgative and redemptive.³¹ Mrs. Gaskell defeats her tragic purpose by showing that John suffers from the "seeming injustice of the inequalities of fortune" rather than an actual one, and that his suffering is ultimately a blessing to himself and others. When John questions the justice of divine providence, Mrs. Gaskell criticizes his "widely erring judgment," and when he is "full of sympathy for suffering which appealed to him through the senses," Mrs. Gaskell questions the value of his sensory evidence. His sensory evidence fails to discover the rationale of the employers who decide policy on the basis of inescapable economic pressures, nor does it reveal the presence of a moral conscience ("the Avenger, the sure Avenger") which comes into play after a sin has been committed. John is finally a victim of the "perverted reasonings" which "made the performance of undoubted sin appear a duty," and his plea for forgiveness rests on his confession, "I did not know what I was doing, Job Legh;

³¹According to Sewall, 'Christian' tragedy is centered on one central dilemma: "to believe or not to believe, a choice charged with terror." Ibid., p. 51.

God knows I didn't!" His character founders on what is essentially Mrs. Gaskell's religious dilemma in the form of an epistemological question: how does one know what is real? or, what is the difference between the appearance and the reality of evil?

Mrs. Gaskell's attitude towards suffering follows from her conviction that the true arena of human conflict is not the social scene but the individual spirit. All the major characters (John, Mary, Margaret, and Mr. Carson) undergo a period of suffering which purges their spirit of its imperfections, re-directs their sympathies, and ultimately proves to be a blessing in disguise. Mrs. Gaskell interprets 'suffering' in such a way that it is not a problem--a symptom of cosmic injustice--but a solution to the problem of coming to terms with the inequality of fortune:

There are stages in the contemplation and endurance of great sorrow, which endow men with the same earnestness and clearness of thought that in some of old took the form of Prophecy. To those who have large capability of loving and suffering, united with great power of firm endurance, there comes a time in their woe, when they are lifted out of the contemplation of their individual case into a searching inquiry into the nature of their calamity, and the remedy (if remedy there be) which may prevent its recurrence to others as well as to themselves.

Hence, the beautiful, noble efforts which are from time to time brought to light, as being continuously

made by those who have once hung on the cross of agony, in order that others may not suffer as they have done; one of the grandest ends which sorrow can accomplish; the sufferer wrestling with God's messenger until a blessing is left behind, not for one alone but for generations.³²

At the end of the novel, Mrs. Gaskell vindicates God's ways to man by showing that there are, in fact, no "inequalities of fortune," and that John's envy of the rich was based on his mistaken notion that wealth is synonymous with happiness. John eventually discovers that joys and sorrows are evenly distributed among the various classes, and that all men are united "in the deep suffering of the heart":

The eyes of John Barton grew dim with tears. Rich and poor, masters and men, were then brothers in the deep suffering of the heart; for was not this the very anguish he had felt for young Tom, in years so long gone by, that they seemed like another life!

The mourner before him was no longer the employer; a being of another race, eternally placed in antagonistic attitude; going through the world glittering like gold, with a stony heart within, which knew no sorrow but through the accidents of Trade; no longer the enemy, the oppressor, but a very poor and desolate old man.³³

John realizes that external circumstances are less consequential to human happiness than internal ones, and that

³²p. 375.

³³Ibid., pp. 353-354.

the classes could be reconciled by an increase of personal communication rather than practical social reforms. Mrs. Gaskell resolves his problem by radically re-defining it: John suffers from his ignorance and moral failures rather than the fluctuations of the economy or the disparity between the classes.

From a literary point of view, Mrs. Gaskell's failure to maintain John Barton as the hero of the novel and her inability to fulfill her conception of his dilemma signifies the peculiar difficulties of the social-problem novelists. Like her contemporaries (Disraeli, Kingsley, and Dickens), she was unable to sustain a working-class character as the central consciousness of the novel, an independent spokesman for his point of view, or an active agent of his own destiny. For whatever reason--her fear of violence or her moral reservations about revolt against God's ordinance--she could not propel her intended hero into a meaningful course of action, and in that sense Mary Barton resembles all the social-problem novels where the worker is either a wooden symbol of virtue, a brute savage, or a passive victim of circumstances. Mrs. Gaskell identified herself with her hero's "bewildered life," but not with his attempts to cope with it; like her contemporaries,

she accepted the conventional stereotype of the worker as a creature incapable of conscious and purposeful action, and she simply could not portray him as a tragic actor in a large social drama.

Mrs. Gaskell's inability to cope with her working-class character is reflected in the ambiguous and confused portrait of John during the period of his dark isolation from "the gentle humanities of earth." Somewhat paradoxically, John becomes addicted to opium at the same time that he considers joining the Chartist movement, and the conjunction of the two events suggests that Mrs. Gaskell regarded John's politics as a symptom of his "incipient madness." The narrator seems to struggle, slip, and fail to plumb the depths of John's consciousness or to make sense of his "diseased thoughts": he appears alternately as a demonic Romantic hero cut loose from the moral universe, a visionary saint, and a "powerful monster" without a soul:

And so on into the problems and mysteries of life, until, bewildered and lost, unhappy and suffering, the only feeling that remained clear and undisturbed in the tumult of his heart, was hatred to the one class, and keen sympathy to the other.

But what availed his sympathy? No education had given him wisdom; and without wisdom, even love, with all its effects, too often works but harm. He acted to the best of his judgment, but it was a widely-erring judgment.

The actions of the uneducated seem to me typified in those of Frankenstein, that monster of many human qualities, ungifted with a soul, a knowledge of good and evil.

The people rise up to life; they irritate us, they terrify us, and we become their enemies. Then, in the sorrowful moment of our triumphant power, their eyes gaze on us with mute reproach. Why have we made them what they are; a powerful monster, yet without the inner means for peace and happiness?

John Barton became a Chartist, a Communist, all that is commonly called wild and visionary. Ay! but being visionary is something. It shows a soul, a being not altogether sensual; a creature who looks forward for others, if not for himself.

And with all his weakness he had a sort of practical power, which made him useful to the bodies of men to whom he belonged.³⁴

The author's sympathies for Barton are sustained until the moment that he adopts a political course of action. At that point, his thoughts have a "morbid power," his "realities have the feeble sickliness of dreams," and his "dreams are fierce realities of agony." The narrator appears to be unable to fathom his consciousness, and the crux of her difficulty lies in her statement that "The actions of the uneducated seem to me typified in those of Frankenstein, that monster of many human qualities."

Mrs. Gaskell mistrusted her hero's actions, and that mistrust created serious problems for her as an artist. She was unable to 'move' her character towards a

³⁴Ibid., pp. 162-163.

conflict and confrontation which would bring into focus all the issues of the novel; she could present his problem in sharp and vivid scenes, create sympathy for him with the suasive power of the narrative voice, and highlight his situation by using secondary characters and stories, but she could not have him adopt a course of action which would affirm a universal truth about mankind's relation to the world. She wanted to "give utterance to the agony which, from time to time, convulses this dumb people; the agony of suffering without the sympathy of the happy,"³⁵ but that purpose was, in a literary sense, self-defeating, because the "dumb people" whose "eyes gaze on us with mute reproach" are, by definition, incapable of generating the large action of a novel. They could be successful subjects for brief vignettes--Mrs. Gaskell contributed some brilliant short pieces about the working class to Household Words--but their presence as major characters in a novel demanded something more of the author than sympathy for their suffering.

Like Dickens, Mrs. Gaskell perceived the worker as the helpless victim of 'the system,' caught between the dictates of political economy and Christian morality. Both

³⁵Preface to first edition of Mary Barton.

authors emphasized the worker's bewilderment and confusion; Stephen Blackpool and John Barton are aware of the "muddle,"³⁶ and their mental suffering is the essential feature of their condition. Some of the most powerful chapters in Mary Barton show John sitting silently in a darkened room and brooding on the incomprehensible scheme of things, and in those moments he resembles Ahab pacing the deck of his silent ship. Likewise, Stephen Blackpool is most vivid as a character when he struggles to articulate his sense of the "muddle" and finally gives up in mute despair. These are high points in their respective novels, but they could not be sustained indefinitely because they rely on the characters'

³⁶John Barton makes numerous attempts to articulate his sense of injustice, but he invariably fails to express more than his bitterness and confusion. His disquisition on capital and labor concludes with the mute appeal, "Han they [the masters] ever seen a child o' their'n die for want of food?" Ibid., p. 60. Barton's struggle for understanding and self-articulation is reflected in his passionate but disconnected speech to the Trade Unionists:

I wish to say that I, for one, ha' seen enough of what comes from attacking knob-sticks, and I'll ha' nought to do with it no more. . . . I've thought we han all on us been more like cowards in attacking the poor like ourselves; them as has none to help, but mun choose between vitriol and starvation. . . . It's the masters as has wrought this woe; its the masters as should pay for it. Him as called me coward just now, may try if I am one or not. Set me out to serve masters, and see if there's ought I'll stick at.

Ibid., p. 182.

essential passivity. In the absence of significant action on the part of the characters, the authors had to 'work around' them, and employ other devices in the novel in order to highlight their pathos or helplessness.

Dickens transcended the difficulties of a working-class subject in Hard Times when he made industrial civilization the focus of his novel: Coketown with its smoke and hissing engines, and Sleary's Circus with its bright colors and happy animals, are the major 'characters' who generate the novel's action. Mrs. Gaskell, on the other hand, tried to make John Barton the principal focus of the novel, and she used numerous fictional devices to support him in that role before she finally abandoned him. During the extended period of his brooding isolation, his importance as a character is signified by the response of his friends and family to his absence. Later on, the narrative voice takes over and assumes the burden of his character by explaining the implications of his actions. There is evidence throughout the novel of Mrs. Gaskell's attempt to dramatize the workers' helplessness--to 'make something' with characters who are unable to act--particularly in the exhortations of the narrative voice:

Oh! I do think that the necessity for exertion, for some kind of action . . . in times of distress, is a most infinite blessing, although the first efforts at such seasons are painful. Something to be done implies that there is yet hope of some good thing to be accomplished, or some additional evil that may be avoided; and by degrees the hope absorbs much of the sorrow.

It is the woes that cannot in any earthly way be escaped that admit least earthly comforting. Of all trite, worn-out, hollow mockeries of comfort that were ever uttered by people who will not take the trouble of sympathizing with others, the one I dislike the most is the exhortation not to grieve over an event "for it cannot be helped." Do you think if I could help it, I would sit still with folded hands, content to mourn? Do you not believe that as long as hope remained I would not be up and doing? I mourn because what has occurred cannot be helped. The reason you give me for not grieving, is the very and sole reason for my grief. Give me nobler and higher reasons for enduring meekly what my father sees fit to send, and I will try earnestly and faithfully to be patient; but mock me not, or any other mourner, with the speech, "Do not grieve, for it cannot be helped. It is past remedy."³⁷

These attempts to sustain interest in a passive character are invariably clumsy, and Mrs. Gaskell may have recognized the need for an active character like Mary who would be constantly faced with "the necessity for exertion."³⁸ Mary must choose among her rival lovers, find her missing father, reveal her love for Jem, and search out the missing witness for Jem's murder trial. She inevitably becomes the

³⁷Ibid., p. 237.

³⁸Ibid., p. 236.

principal figure of the novel, and John recedes into the background despite the author's intentions. "So many people overlook John B or see him merely to misunderstand him," Mrs. Gaskell complained in a letter to a friend, "that if you were a stranger and had only said that one thing (that the book shd have been called John B) I should have had pleasure in feeling that my own idea was recognized."³⁹ Presumably, she struggled to preserve the idea of "the bewildered life of an ignorant thoughtful man of strong power of sympathy, living in a town . . . full of striking contrasts," but could not generate the novel's action from that idea.

Mrs. Gaskell's failure to realize her artistic purpose stems from her mistrust of "the actions of the uneducated," and that mistrust indicates that she could not overcome the barrier which divided the Two Nations. As a resident of Manchester, she shared the view of her contemporaries that "The separation between the different classes, and the consequent ignorance of each others habits and conditions, are far more complete in this place than in any country of . . . Europe, or the agricultural parts of

³⁹Letter #39 to Miss Lamont, Letters, p. 70.

our own kingdom,"⁴⁰ but she felt the effects of that separation although she argued against them. From one point of view, Mary Barton can be read as an account of the author's struggle to overcome the barrier between herself and her subject, and engage herself fully with a character whom she regarded as radically different from herself and yet, somehow, essentially similar.

Like Disraeli, Mrs. Gaskell dramatized the contrast between the Two Nations and allowed her working-class characters to present their 'views' on the subject, but these scenes are self-contained and relatively lifeless. The Davenport cellar with its broken window panes and "wet brick floor, through which the stagnant, filthy moisture of the street oozed up" is contrasted with the Carson home which is a "good house, and furnished with disregard to expense," and the disparity prompts Barton's complaint that "They'n screwed us down to the lowest peg, in order to make their great big fortunes." However, these chapters have a documentary quality, and as compared with Sybil, there are relatively few of them. The narrative voice generally speaks for the characters, describes their state of mind,

⁴⁰From the Love and Barton handbook of 1842, quoted by Briggs, Victorian Cities (New York & Evanston, 1964), p. 111.

explains their point of view, and pleads their case:

At all times it is a bewildering thing to the poor weaver to see his employer removing from house to house, each one grander than the last, till he ends in building one more magnificent than all . . . while all the time the weaver, who thinks he and his fellows are the real makers of this wealth, is struggling on for bread for his children . . . he is, I say, bewildered and (to use his own words) "aggravated" to see that all goes on just as usual with the mill-owners . . . while the workman loiters away his unemployed time in watching these things, and thinking of the pale, uncomplaining wife at home, and the wailing children asking in vain for enough of food. . . . The contrast is too great. Why should he alone suffer from bad times?⁴¹

The working-class character rarely articulates his own views. In the "Meeting Between Masters and Workmen," (chapter XVI) "the five wild, earnest-looking men" totally ineffective in their attempt to plead their cause to the masters of Manchester. They appear ridiculous, pathetic, dangerous, or foolish, and they walk away with nothing but Harry Carson's caricature-portrait for their pains. In that scene, Mrs. Gaskell tried to dramatize the mutual alienation of the classes and the failure of communication between them, but she may also have indicated something of her own problem in writing a novel about the working class.

The most successful moments in the novel occur when

⁴¹pp. 19-20.

Mrs. Gaskell treats her characters as individuals rather than members of a class, and describes the tangible quality of their everyday lives rather than the "deep romance" of the critical periods. In the vignette of "A Manchester Tea-party," for example, the characters move about freely in a richly-detailed setting ("a red-hot fire, smouldering under a large piece of coal," "a cupboard, apparently full of plates and dishes, cups and saucers," "resting against the wall . . . a bright green japanned tea-tray, having a couple of scarlet lovers embracing in the middle," etc.), and they reveal those qualities of tenacity, warm devotion, generosity, and friendliness which later novelists like D. H. Lawrence admired. John Barton comes to life as he presides over the gathering at his table while keeping watch over the fire, and the substantial features of his personality are concretized in small friendly gestures towards Alice Wilson, or in his injunction to Mary to buy an extra pound of ham and six-penny-worth of rum. Mrs. Gaskell succeeds best when she is least conscious of her literary theme or purpose, and she allows her affection for the characters to take precedence over her concern for their destinies. Job Legh, a figure far removed by age and inclination from the arena of social strife, is a vivid

example of Mrs. Gaskell's achievement when she deals with working-class characters as individuals.

Another successful 'character' in Mary Barton is the city of Manchester which hovers closely in the background and gives a special stamp to the scenes and characters. The novel is subtitled "A Tale of Manchester Life," largely because the conditions in Manchester (the separation of the classes, frequent fluctuations in the economy, and high degree of class-consciousness) provide the basis for the novel's action. Moreover, the characters are described as typical Mancunians: John Barton is "a thorough specimen of a Manchester man" and Job Legh is the type of "a class of men in Manchester, unknown even to many of the inhabitants." The situations and characters in Mary Barton are unmistakable products of an industrial civilization which has its own special ambience. Unlike Disraeli or Kingsley, Mrs. Gaskell did not perceive the industrial city as a corruption of some ideal city or the working-class district as an unfortunate accretion to the center of town, nor did she regard the industrial worker as a traditional 'labourer' or artisan forced into a new and foreign situation. In the first few chapters of the novel, Mrs. Gaskell distinguishes the special character of a "busy,

bustling, manufacturing town," and she notes the difference between "the rural inhabitants in comparison with the natives of the manufacturing towns." John Barton is "born of factory workers, and himself bred up in youth . . . among the mills," and his keen intelligence, sober disposition, and grim sort of pride distinguish him from his "less sensible-looking" country-bred friend. Likewise the city of Manchester is distinguished from other cities like London, for example, which Barton perceives as a strange and wonderful place. Manchester is a city created by, and devoted to, the business of manufacture; like Dickens' Coketown, it is a 'severely workful' place where the "noise of tongues and engines" defines the quality of life for its citizens.

The Manchester of Mary Barton only vaguely resembles the industrial city as it appears in the other social-problem novels. Disraeli perceived the city with the jaundiced eye of the Blue-book pamphleteer, and described its conditions on the basis of Parliamentary reports which were outdated even before Sybil was published. Kingsley, the country gentleman, saw only the horror of urban slums with their rat-infested cellars and rampant cholera. Dickens, with characteristic sentimentality, observed only

the evidence of working-class suffering and the bleak monotones of the workers' daily existence. However, Mrs. Gaskell lived in Manchester, knew the blessings as well as abuses of industrialism, and shared some of the Mancunians' pride in a city which they regarded as "a new type of power on earth."⁴² She recorded the harshness of industrial life and the workers' suffering in times of economic depression, but she also had an eye for the vitality of the city, its clutter and congestion, the warm intimacy of the working-class district, and the workers' sense of well-being in "the good times." There are shades and nuances in her portrait of Manchester; small shops and engineering firms as well as large mills and factories, seamstresses and singers as well as mill and factory workers, and the cheerful observances of a Sunday morning and afternoon as well as the bleak business of the workdays. Her descriptions of the economic depression with the "terrible gloom" in the workers' homes and the "hungry wails" of the children is balanced by her view that "The evil and the good of our nature came out strongly then . . . there was Love

⁴²People's Journal, 1847, quoted by Briggs, p. 89.

strong as death; and self-denial among rude, coarse men."⁴³ She shared De Tocqueville's view of Manchester as a place where "humanity attains its most complete development and its most brutish . . . civilization works its miracles and civilized man is turned almost into a savage," and Carlyle's view that it was "Every whit as wonderful, as fearful, as unimaginable as the oldest Salem or prophetic city."⁴⁴ The industrial city appeared to Mrs. Gaskell to be an exciting and variegated scene for a genuine "romance" rather than a lifeless subject for a documentary exposé.

However, Mrs. Gaskell subordinated her portrait of Manchester, just as she subordinated the figure of John Barton, to the character of Mary and the familiar problems of the Victorian novel of sentiment. She was unable to make 'society' an active agent in her novel; it was merely a 'scene,' a richly-detailed setting or background, for what she perceived as the real business of life, the play of personal character in the light of unchanging moral imperatives. Mrs. Gaskell's use of society in her novel is perhaps best brought out by comparison with later novelists like Gissing or Hardy who portrayed society as an active

⁴³pp. 52-53.

⁴⁴Past and Present, p. 237.

protagonist in their novels, a countervailing force to individual characters develop and grow. Mrs. Gaskell perceived society as something simply 'there,' the irremediable and irrefutable fate of the individual whose life is challenged by it. Perhaps the pull of her Christian morality was too strong for her to perceive society as anything other than a manifestation of God's will; she may have recoiled from the notion that man's social condition, to some extent the great determinant of his destiny, was the product of numerous forces and circumstances, that it affected the shape of individual characters and could, in turn, be affected by it. She may also have been too closely tied to the traditions of the English novel as established by Fielding, Austen, and Scott in which society is either a background for the play of colorful personalities or an intricate but static mechanism to be taken apart and analyzed. Bleak House and Hard Times--both of them novels in which society has an independent character and existence--had not yet been published when Mrs. Gaskell began writing Mary Barton, and she had no literary precedents on which to rely for her "Tale of Manchester Life."

Had Mrs. Gaskell fulfilled her intentions in writing Mary Barton, the novel would have been a ground-breaking

achievement in the literature about the working-class. However, the novel as it was published is centered on the figure of Mary, and therefore deserves to be regarded in the context of Victorian popular fiction. On its own merits, it would be of little lasting interest, but its failures are instructive as an index of the Victorian novelist's difficulties in dealing with the subject of the working class, and its achievements--however limited they may be--provide a useful standard for assessing the work of later novelists who dealt with a similar subject. Towards the end of the century, writers like Gissing, Hardy, and Lawrence could write about the working class with greater ease and success than Mrs. Gaskell, in part because they lacked her inhibitions. They could describe a worker's consciousness because they were themselves members of a lower class, and could therefore identify themselves fully with their characters. Furthermore, the working class had proved its political effectiveness and its capacity for organized action in the labor movement of the 1880's, and the novelists at the end of the century could perceive the worker as an active consciousness rather than a stereotyped brute or savage. They could also describe him, without pity or fear, as an active agent within the

social system. The emergence of 'pressure politics' after 1884 implicitly sanctioned organized social protest as an instrument of procedural justice, and undermined the earlier writers' assumption that working-class activism was an index of social chaos or a prelude to revolutionary violence.

The later novelists were not morally bound to an ethic of "patient suffering" or to a view of society as a divinely determined order; they perceived society as an active force in the lives of men and, to a greater or lesser degree, applauded man's efforts to assert his will against it. In the novels of Gissing, Hardy, and Lawrence, 'society' is a palpable and unavoidable presence, and the working-class hero is its mighty antagonist.

CHAPTER III

CHARLES KINGSLEY'S ALTON LOCKE:

THE IDEALIZED INDUSTRIAL HERO

Only five years intervene between the publication of Sybil and that of Alton Locke, but the style and tone of the later novel indicate a significant change in the political climate of the country. There is notably less hysteria in Alton Locke than in Sybil. Although Kingsley's novel portrays a working-class riot and one of its central issues is the hero's relation to working-class violence, the prospect of revolution and the apocalyptic sense of foreboding do not loom largely over all the scenes and characters. By comparison with Sybil, the narrative voice in Alton Locke is subdued and thoughtful (Kingsley was no doubt incapable of Disraeli's eloquence but his writings show a considerable flair for dramatic rhetorical effect), and the scenes or exposés of working-class life inspire compassion and indignation more than a terror before the explosive forces lurking beneath the surface of society.

Kingsley's characters are 'rounder' and more

recognizably human than Disraeli's: they are not divided into saints and villains, and their sense of themselves is not determined solely by their relation to the upper classes. They have professional and personal problems as well as social and political ones, and their range of options and purposes in life is wider and more complex than in Disraeli's novel. As a result, the working class is presented as something more than a group defined by its dependent relation to another group; it is also a community with a common culture, and its experience is guided and controlled by certain traditions and mores. Kingsley struggles to portray the problems of the workers 'from the inside.' He recreates their living experience and works out their destinies on the basis of that experience, and not from the exalted heights of a transcendent historical-political vision. He shows a greater willingness to see things as they are, and his novel has a density of specification, a kind of 'realism' about working-class life, which is lacking in Sybil.

Kingsley was the first 'social problem' novelist to penetrate the 'nether world' of industrial society and recognize the broad variety of human and social types living there. Disraeli saw only the 'poor' or the 'lower

orders,' and he discriminated only between rural and urban types, or factory workers and miners. Mrs. Gaskell's range was likewise limited: she subtitled her novel "A Tale of Manchester Life" and her characters were drawn exclusively from a relatively narrow class of intelligent urban factory operatives. Kingsley, on the other hand, managed somehow to see it all: his working-class district is populated with small shopkeepers and tradesmen, booksellers, landladies, servants, and independent artisans. Like Dickens, he perceived the gentle gradations of status in the lower and lower-middle class, and he discriminated among a broad variety of types which an outside observer might casually lump together as the 'lower orders.' He went possibly further than Dickens, because he explored the sweat-shops of industrial workers and the meeting-rooms of Chartists and trade unionists, and his portrait of life among the poor has the sharp outlines of uncompromised reality. Not until several decades later, when George Gissing wrote Workers in the Dawn, was there another attempt to present as varied and truthful a picture of urban working-class life.

In view of the fact that Alton Locke is a novel-with-a-purpose, and that Kingsley wrote to propagate his

doctrines of Christian Socialism, it seems remarkable that the novel reveals so much insight into the working man. Kingsley was, after all, a country gentleman and a minister of the Church of England, and he must have encountered the scenes of poverty in the London slums with the same spirit of dismay and disbelief that Henry James experienced later in the century. Unlike James, Kingsley struggled to understand the depths of the working-class character (there are remarkable similarities between Alton and Hyacinth Robinson: both characters are infatuated with upper-class women, both are overwhelmed by the elegance and order of upper-class life, and both suffer from an inability to articulate their aspirations to the members of the upper class). Kingsley's lengthy correspondence with a 'reformed' Chartist (who served as the model for Alton) is evidence of his desire to understand a style of mind which seemed, on the face of it, incomprehensible to a member of the upper class, and his use of Alton as the first-person narrative voice in the novel signifies an unprecedented attempt to subordinate his own vision to that of the worker. Henry James in The Princess Cassamassima could only circumnavigate the 'lower depths,' observe his characters from a distance, and hint at their inarticulate longings or foolish

aspirations, but Kingsley tried to penetrate the skins of his working-class characters and make their consciousness the central focus of the novel.

Alton Locke is the model of a type of hero who reappears in various forms in the nineteenth-century novel: the working-class autodidact who aspires to sweetness and light and struggles to rise above his humble or sordid beginnings. Alton anticipates Gissing's Arthur Golding, Hardy's Jude, and, to some extent, Lawrence's Paul Morel--all of them artists of sorts whose sensibilities have been sharpened by the agonies of a working-class childhood. They try to find order and beauty in the world of art, and they try to impose their wills upon a society which refuses to recognize their abilities or sensibilities. There is a dual conflict in all these novels--the individual vs. society and beauty vs. the 'real' world--and the novels generally tend to indict a society which neglects aesthetic values and stifles the higher aspirations of its members. All these novels have an anti-industrial theme: like Dickens' Hard Times they oppose the ugliness of industrial civilization with the golden world of beauty and imagination. Mr. Sleary's circus represents the world of 'fancy' as opposed to the world of 'fact,' and the other

novelists contrast 'art' with the raw realities of industrial society, but their impulse is the same: they recognize the bitter conflict between art and the life of the lower classes, and they condemn the social system which is responsible for that opposition.¹ To some extent, these novels have a political theme (even if the character is not directly involved with working-class politics): they raise the question whether such a society should be maintained.

Kingsley was the first social-problem novelist in England to recognize the spiritual aspirations of the working class. He apparently sympathized with those social reformers who claimed that "The prejudices of society have hitherto regarded hand-labour as some-thing opposed to the cultivation of the intellect; and that the poor, like women, had no business to think might be the rule of life whilst unfit to receive a higher."¹ As Parson Lot (the pseudonym Kingsley adopted when writing in Politics for the People), Kingsley encouraged the worker "to refresh his eyes and

¹In the agitation for a Ten Hours Bill in 1847, the workers argued that such a measure would increase their educational opportunities. After the bill was passed, they rejoiced that "the progress of principle is giving the lie to the past." Ten Hours' Advocate, February 27, 1847.

heart with beautiful shapes and sweet colouring, when they are wearied with dull bricks and mortar, and the ugly colourless things which fill the workshops and factory." He urged him to escape the "grim city--world of stone and iron, smoky chimneys and roaring wheels, into the world of beautiful things," not only to lighten the burden of his life, but to shape his character and give him a "fellow-feeling with noble men and noble deeds." "Your hearts are fresh, thoughtful, kindly," he declared to the workers, "you only want to have these pictures [in the National Gallery] explained to you, that you may know why and how they are beautiful, and what feelings they ought to stir in you."²

In his lectures to the workingman, Kingsley wanted to bring the worker into the mainstream of English culture, narrow the cultural distance between the classes, and forge a relationship between the disparate worlds of art and industry.

Kingsley's idea of the working man's condition looks forward to the Naturalist school of novels later in the century, but only to a limited degree. Kingsley could not fully imagine a confident, intelligent, and self-assured

²"The Worker in the National Gallery--No. 1," Politics for the People, May 6, 1848, in Victorians on Literature and Art, ed. Robert L. Peters (New York, 1961), pp. 183-185.

workers, nor could he condemn the social system as an instrument of oppression. He believed that a significant segment of the working class could be educated, but only with the beneficent intervention of the educated classes (who would explain beauty to the "hardworn heart" of the worker), and that the social system would improve if only the workers could restrain their individual wills. Unlike the later novelists, Kingsley denounced individualism and advocated 'cooperation'; he wanted more 'society' and more 'system' than already existed. Gissing's socialism was in the service of his more basic anarchic impulse, but Kingsley's socialism was an attempt to organize a society which seemed to be crumbling beneath the combined pressures of laissez-faire individualism and working-class protest. For that reason, he remains a 'social problem' novelist, struggling to preserve the idea of society against the threat posed by the working-class movement, and struggling to reconcile his sympathy and respect for the workers with his conviction that they were incapable of intelligent self-determination. The remarkable thing about Alton Locke is that the struggle is presented in the consciousness of a working-class character.

The central event in Alton Locke, and the turning-point in Kingsley's own history, was the National Convention of 1848, the great Chartist fiasco which reassured the ruling classes that the events on the Continent were not likely to be enacted upon English soil. After the Chartists' defeat, the attitude of the ruling classes towards the workers was considerably modified. They experienced a new largesse of spirit and a deeper philanthropic concern for the workers' economic condition. With the fear of revolution abated, concern for order and hierarchy in a precarious society also diminished. In the glow of mid-century prosperity the ruling classes could look with a friendlier eye upon the plight of the suffering workers whose procession into London on April 10 turned from a terrifying show of strength to a pitiable march of beggars.³

In this heady atmosphere of relief, elation, and confidence Kingsley began his career as a propagandist

³See Preston William Slosson, The Decline of the Chartist Movement (London, 1967), pp. 169 ff, and Elie Halévy, A History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century, Vol. IV (New York, 1961), pp. 236-237.

for the cause of the working man.⁴ He took up the cause with his typical ebullience. Like most gentlemen of his time, Kingsley had grown up with fear and contempt for the working classes. As a boy in Bristol, he saw the riots which, he later said, made him "for years the veriest aristocrat, full of hatred and contempt for those dangerous classes, whose existence I had for the first time discovered."⁵ Although his attitude mellowed somewhat in later years, he continued to view the workers as a dangerous mob, and he stayed in London for the demonstration in the hope of doing something to prevent the inevitable bloodshed. He expected to see the newly-created demos rising up from the nether-world of the industrial cities; instead, he saw a familiar spectacle of hungry beggars, all of them pleading for 'rights.' These figures were neither the brutalized nor romanticized creatures of Disraeli's

⁴Slosson, pp. 169 ff., describes the generous spirit of the ruling classes following the Chartist fiasco. This view is confirmed at the end of Alton Locke when Lady Eleanor tells Alton, "Believe me, that tenth of April which you fancied the death day of liberty, has awakened a spirit in high as well as low life, which children yet unborn will bless." Charles Kingsley, Alton Locke (London, 1896 edn.), p. 368.

⁵Cited by R. B. Martin, The Dust of Combat (New York, 1960), p. 28.

fevered imagination. They were simply poor people, the roots of whose discontent might be understood by a rural parson whose congregants were only a step removed from the urban workers.

Kingsley recognized that the degraded spiritual condition of his congregants was the direct consequence of their poverty, and that Christian sentiments could not flourish in the foul atmosphere of their cottages. Like many other rural clergymen, Kingsley believed that the physical melioration of his parishioners was a prerequisite for their moral regeneration. In a lecture to ladies entitled "The Country Parish" Kingsley said:

A lady can go into a poor cottage, lay down the law to the inhabitants, reprove them for sins to which she has never been tempted. . . . If you want Christ's lost lambs really to believe that He died for them, you will do it better by one little act of interest and affection than by making them learn by heart whole commentaries . . . do not apply remedies which they do not understand to diseases which you do not understand.⁶

These same paternalist attitudes Kingsley transposed to the working class.

Kingsley's first address to the workmen of England, written the night after the demonstration, exemplifies his

⁶Lectures to Ladies at Working Men's College (1855), pp. 56-57.

ambivalent position as father, friend, and moral authority of the workers. He explained in a letter to his wife that he wanted "to help these poor creatures to the truest alms--to words--to . . . anything which may keep one man from cutting his brother's throat tomorrow or Friday."⁷

In that first address, written on placards, Kingsley demonstrated the ambivalence characteristic of the social-problem novelist and the mid-century social reformer. Alternately praising the workers for their "noble patience" and condemning them for their "bitterness and headlong rage," he described them in the stereotypes of helpless victims and intemperate rioters. Finally, he pleaded with them not to confuse false freedom with true freedom or temporal with ultimate well-being, and to trust in God and His ordained ministers, the "working clergy":

WORKMEN OF ENGLAND!

You say that you are wronged. Many of you are wronged; and many besides yourselves know it. Almost all men who have heads and hearts know it--above all, the working clergy know it. They go into your houses, they see the shameful filth and darkness in which you are forced to live crowded together; they see your children growing up in ignorance and temptation, for want of a fit education; they see the intelligent and well-read men among you, shut out from a Freeman's

⁷Cited by Guy Kendall, Charles Kingsley and His Ideas (London, 1947), p. 47.

just right of voting; and they see too the nobel patience and self-control with which you have as yet borne these evils. . . .

WORKMEN OF ENGLAND! you have more friends than you think for. Friends who expect nothing from you, but who love you, because you are their brothers, and who fear God, and therefore dare not neglect you, His children; men who are drudging and sacrificing themselves to get you your rights; men who know what your rights are, better than you know yourselves, who are trying to get for you something nobler than Charters and dozens of Acts of Parliaments. . . . You may disbelieve them, insult them--you cannot stop their working for you, beseeching you . . . to turn back from the precipice of riot which ends in the gulf of universal distrust, stagnation, starvation. You think the Charter would make you free--would to God it would! The Charter is not bad; if the men who use it are not bad! But will the Charter make you free?

Will it free you from slavery to ten-pound bribes? Slavery to beer and gin? Slavery to every spouter who flatters your self-conceit, and stirs up bitterness and headlong rage in you? That I guess is real slavery; to be a slave to one's own stomach, one's own pocket, one's own temper. . . . Who would dare refuse you freedom? . . . But there will be no freedom without virtue, no true science without religion, no true industry without the fear of God, and love to your fellow citizen.

Workers of England, be wise, and then you must be free, for you will be fit to be free.⁸

Kingsley's derogatory view of the workers' characters and his sympathetic understanding of their suffering was fairly typical of the Carlyle-inspired social reformer who coupled a radical critique of industrial society with a conservative approach to social change. What was peculiar to

⁸Ibid., p. 48.

Kingsley was the tone of gentle condescension, in some measure made possible by the removal of the revolutionary threat and a philosophy whereby the church becomes the agent of social reform. In Kingsley's program, the "working clergy" would not only assume leadership of the working-class movement but direct it along lines of its own choosing.

The clergy had formerly tried to combat the religious apathy among the workers⁹ with scoldings and admonitions, blaming the poor for their condition and chastising them for neglecting worship. Some clergymen saw poverty as a sign of moral laxity and they exhorted their congregants to abandon the vices of lust, intemperance, and sloth which led them to their degraded condition. The majority, however, saw poverty as a fact of life inalterable for some people, and they preached the Gospel of Contentment and the promise of heavenly reward for the long-suffering. Since Christianity was, in the words of Arthur Young, "that truly excellent religion which exhorts to contentment and submission to the higher powers,"¹⁰ it followed, according

⁹See Desmond Bowen, The Idea of the Victorian Church (Montreal, 1968), p. 254, and K. S. Inglis, The Churches and the Working Classes in Victorian England (London, 1963), pp. 51-52.

¹⁰From An Inquiry into the State of Mind Among the Lower Classes, cited by J. L. and Barbara Hammond, The Town Labourer (New York, Doubleday edn., 1968), p. 203.

to the Bishop of Chester, that the "evil of irreligion" was responsible for the social unrest among the masses.¹¹ Perhaps unwittingly the clergy adopted the views of the political economists who held that inequalities of wealth and fortune were part of the immutable laws of nature:

Differences of rank, power, and riches between man and man is no doubt God's appointment, as much as differences of health and strength. And when we speak or think unkindly of our neighbor, for being nobler or richer or of more consequence than ourselves, we do in fact grumble against our Maker, and set up ourselves as better judges than He of what is really good for us. And if we die in such a temper as that, our end can be no other than everlasting destruction.

On the other hand, a cheerful submission to authority, and a desire to find one's superiors in the right, and such a respect for them and ourselves . . . are real parts of sound Christian wisdom.¹²

This sort of thinking led Kingsley to complain that the Bible had become "a mere special constable's handbook--an opium dose for keeping beasts of burden patient while they were being overloaded."¹³ His version of the Christian

¹¹H. W. Majendie, "Charge to the Clergy of the Diocese of Chester," Gentleman's Magazine, LXXI (1801), p. 729.

¹²John Keble, Sermons: Occasional and Parochial (1868), p. 223.

¹³Second letter of Parson Lot in Politics for the People.

social gospel came in direct opposition to established theological opinion.

Towards the middle of the century clear-sighted clergymen recognized that the established approach had failed and that the church would have to forge a new social policy if it was to attract the working classes. The need for reform was felt in churches of every denomination. One Congregational minister in 1850 admitted to his working-class audience, "You have a character and wants peculiar to the class. . . . Religion is beginning to be conscious that she does not, with her present appliances, meet your requirements."¹⁴ The proliferation of charitable church organizations throughout the century indicates the church's growing acceptance of a direct responsibility for the physical melioration of the working classes. The Church of England as the 'National Church' felt itself particularly called upon to serve the needs of the whole nation, and to develop a policy which would accommodate the needs of the working classes. It could no longer afford "to exalt her mitred front in courts and parliaments" as Edmund Burke had urged, and instead set out to serve the

¹⁴G. W. Conder, Six Letters to Working Men on Christianity (1850), p. 4.

needs of the people. As early as 1833, a Church of England clergyman warned, "Our Establishment does not fulfill the purposes of its institution . . . from inherent defects, added to a culpable ministration, it is estranged from the affections of the people, in numbers scarcely national, a sect among many."¹⁵

In the course of the nineteenth century, the Church of England developed a social gospel and broke with a dearly-held tradition by affirming a direct relation to the political and social forces of the time. Pusey was instrumental in directing the vital energies of the Church into her new mission among the poor:

We need missions among the poor of our towns; organized bodies of clergy living among them; licensed preachers in the streets and lanes of our cities . . . we need clergy to penetrate our mines, to migrate with our emigrants, to shift with our shifting population, to grapple with our manufacturing system as the Apostles did with the slave system of the ancient world. . . . Beautiful as is the relation of the parish priest to his flock, lovely as are the village homes of our village pastors, and gentle as are the influences radiating from those who 'point to heaven and lead the way,' yet is there now an appalling need of further organization, for a harder, more self-denying, self-sacrificing warfare. . . .¹⁶

¹⁵Charles Williams, Considerations on the Present State of the Church (1833), p. 7.

¹⁶Councils of the Church from the Council of Jerusalem to the Council of Constantinople (1857), p. 14.

The Church of England consequently became vanguard of the spiritual reformation in mid-century England, and the rhetoric of the church's involvement in social issues reflects a humanitarian and philanthropic concern for the condition of the people.

There may also have been a political motive for the Church of England's involvement in social issues. Whether by acts of charity or severe moral preachment, the Church, it was believed, could palliate the workers' resentment of the privileged classes, and recreate the national spirit which had been eroded by the forces of industrialism. Possibly for that reason Engels predicted that "necessity will force the working-men to abandon the remnants of a belief which, as they will more and more clearly perceive, serves only to make them weak and resigned to their fate, obedient and faithful to the vampire property-owning class."¹⁷

In that vein, Kingsley claimed that Christian Socialism could provide the workers with an alternative to revolutionary violence, and he hoped that the "Christianization of Labour" would obviate the need for police

¹⁷The Condition of the Working Classes, etc., p. 238.

repression of the organized workers. His first contribution to The Christian Socialist angered the editor because of its implicit suggestion that the value of the movement was its ability to restrain the workers' violent passions:

I want to send you the first of three letters on the Frimley murder, and our present reign of terror, showing that the Christian organization of labour might have prevented it all and an increase of police is a mere ruinous driving inward of the disease.¹⁸

Kingsley was clearly thinking of the Church's restraining influence when he wrote his first message to the workmen of England on the night of April 10. His words were designed to "keep one man from cutting his brother's throat" and they expressed the standard views of the time: the workers' troubles are due in large measure to their vices, political reform is no true reform, and the men ought to trust to their spiritual superiors to guide and control their destinies. No practical program for reform was set forth, no novel perspective on their problems offered, no measures proposed which would suggest that the author was in any way a 'socialist.'

Kingsley had only the vaguest notion of socialism when he became involved in the movement. The important

¹⁸ Cited by Una Pope-Hennessy, Canon Charles Kingsley (London, 1948), p. 103.

thing in 1848 (the year Alton Locke was conceived) was to fill the void left by Chartism with a new faith in the constructive and redemptive power of Christianity, and to bring the workers within the pale of the National Church. He had, therefore, to wean the working class from the two cultural traditions inspiring rebellious sentiment: radical-secularism and dissenting-Methodism.¹⁹ The first had a line of descent from Tom Paine through atheist radicals like Owen and culminated in Marx, and the other derived from the Methodist revival with its spirit of communitarianism and milleniarism. These two traditions coalesced in the character of Alton, and Kingsley's purpose in the novel as in the Christian Socialist movement was to demonstrate their failures and to provide an alternative mode of thought and action.

Towards that goal Kingsley had to convince the workers that he was not like the clergymen described in John Wade's Black Book of 1820, "rapacious, insolent and luxurious, having no fear of God before his eyes; neglectful

¹⁹See E. J. Hobsbawm, Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour (London, 1964), p. 372, and E. P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (London, 1963), pp. 28-47.

of his spiritual concerns; waging increasing war against liberty, knowledge and humanity; exerting all his influence to promote tyranny, and enslave and debase his fellow creatures."²⁰ In his first message to the workmen of England Kingsley identified himself as one of the "working clergy," thereby affirming his brotherhood with the degraded masses. In one of his most controversial sermons Kingsley preached

that the business for which God sends a Christian priest to a Christian nation is to preach liberty, equality, and brotherhood in the fullest, widest, simplest meaning of these three terms. . . . I say those words express the very pith and marrow of a priest's business. I say that they preach liberty, equality and brotherhood to the poor and the rich for ever and ever. . . . Woe unto you who are full for ye have received your consolation already. . . . Woe unto you that make a few rich to make many poor. Woe unto you that make merchandise out of the needs of your brethren. Woe unto you for God the Father of all is against you. . . .²¹

By attaching this social gospel to Christianity and particularly to the Church of England, Kingsley was attacking the basis of the radical-secularist and dissenting-Methodist traditions. To the one he showed that Christianity was not inimical to egalitarian notions but rather

²⁰p. 320.

²¹Delivered in 1851 in St. John's Church, cited by Pope-Hennessy, p. 106.

justified and supported them, and to the other he demonstrated that the centralized authority of the National Church was not interposed between the common man and his God but represented the community of all men in the brotherhood of Christ.

F. D. Maurice, Kingsley's personal mentor and the leading spirit of the Christian Socialist movement, said that the mission of the Christian Socialists was to rid Christianity of its "caste morality"²² and to act as "mediators . . . between young England of the middle and upper classes, and the working people."²³ Unlike Disraeli's Young Englanders, they rejected the ethic of noblesse oblige and the vision of the church as the grand and noble institution of feudal times. Instead they insisted on the equality of all men in Christ and adopted a Biblical view of the church where Christ the shepherd humbly walks among His flock. Kingsley struggled to detach himself from the prestigious clerical aristocracy, and even went so far as to declare himself "a Church of England parson and a Chartist" at one public meeting of workingmen, although

²²Social Morality (1866), p. 453.

²³F. Maurice, The Life of Frederick Denison Maurice, I (1884), pp. 477-478.

his view of Chartism remained the same as when he wrote his first placard to the workmen of England. Apparently, the import of that statement was his declaration of common cause with the working class, whether or not he agreed with its specific programs. Above all, Kingsley wanted the worker to see him as a friend and equal:

It has long been intolerable to me to be regarded as an object of distrust and aversion by thousands of my countrymen--just because I am a clergyman--just because I am a clergyman, the very office which ought to have testified above all others for liberty, equality, brotherhood for time and eternity. . . . I would shed the last drop of my life-blood for the social and political emancipation of the people of England, as God is my witness; and here are the very men for whom I would die fancying me an aristocrat.²⁴

It remains unclear what Kingsley meant by the words 'equality' and 'socialism,' and in what sense he disclaimed any connection with the aristocracy. Although Kingsley preached against the landed aristocracy, Thomas Hughes, his long-time colleague in the Christian Socialist movement, said of him, "He was by nature and education an aristocrat in the best sense of the word, believing that a landed aristocracy was a blessing to the country, and that no country would gain the highest liberty without such a class, holding its own position firmly, but in sympathy

²⁴Cited by Pope-Hennessey, p. 81.

with the people."²⁵ Kingsley may have turned conservative after the failures of the Christian Socialist cooperatives, or he may have become more outspoken in the course of time, but his statements in his later years confirm the view that he was an aristocrat. In one of his letters he stated his belief that there were congenital differences and hereditary tendencies which made the working class unfit for leadership, and he cited his own experience in educating the rural poor to prove it.²⁶ The House of Lords was, in his view, the repository of the entire heritage of moral civilization and the representative of the "hereditary principle":

No elective body can represent the hereditary principle. The House of Lords are the true representatives of everyone who has anything--a picture, a fork--a Yankee clock to hand to his children. Even Mr. Bright's house-plate is represented by them. If the House of Lords were abolished Mr. Bright's children would discover the fact by the introduction of laws which would injure the value of all hereditible property, would tax (under the name of luxuries) the products of art and civilization, would try to drive capital into those trades that supplied most necessities for back and belly, would tax the rich for the sake of the poor with very ugly results for civilization.²⁷

²⁵Cited by Kendall, p. 72.

²⁶Letter to Professor Lorimer, December 17, 1966.

²⁷Cited by Pope-Hennessy, pp. 245-246.

Kingsley opposed the abolition of the House of Lords because it would endanger the rights of private property, threaten to impose a welfare state, and pose a grave threat to what was later called 'culture.'

Kingsley's socialism was in no way related to democratic political theories. In his Preface to Alton Locke written in 1854 Kingsley wrote:

I frankly say that my experience of the last five years gives me little hope of any great development of the true democratic principle in Britain, because it gives me little sign that the many are fit for it. . . . Democracy means a government not merely by numbers of isolated individuals, but by a Demos--by men accustomed to live in Demoi, or corporate bodies, and accustomed, therefore, to the self-control, obedience to law, and self-sacrificing public spirit, without which a corporate body cannot exist: But that a 'democracy' or mere numbers is no democracy, but a mere brute 'arithmetocracy,' which is certain to degenerate into an 'ochlocracy,' or government by the mob, in which the numbers have no real share: an oligarchy of the fiercest, the noisiest, the rashest, and the most shameless, which is surely swallowed up either by a despotism, as in France, or as in Athens, by utter national ruin, and helpless slavery to a foreign invader.²⁸

Kingsley's fears were typical, and they were reiterated countless times during the century. What makes them remarkable is that they were expressed by a self-styled

²⁸preface to Alton Locke written in 1854 and addressed to the working men of Great Britain, 1896 edn., p. xliv.

"Chartist" who prided himself on his egalitarian sentiment.

Like most radical-conservatives of his time, Kingsley was concerned about the 'merit' principle which he felt was threatened by the workers' demands. According to John Malcolm Ludlow, the principal theoretician of the movement, the impetus for individual excellence had to be preserved if the Christian Socialists did not intend to defeat their goals:

Some French Associations have agreed to pay equal wages to all; but this is a grave error . . . to pay equal wages would be to take from the talented, the strong, or the industrious, for the sake of giving to the simple, the weak, and the idle. The effect would be, in our present state of society, that the Associations would be in danger of being filled with indifferent workmen, and that most of the good workers would remain with competitive employers.²⁹

It seems clear that Kingsley's socialism did not commit him to the cause of democracy or economic egalitarianism. His commitment to Christian Socialism implied only that he was dedicated to the physical melioration of those competent and efficient laborers who were being oppressed by exploiting employers. He tried to show those workers that they could achieve more by associating with one another for

²⁹The Constitution of the Society for Promoting Working Men's Associations. Cited by Charles E. Raven, Christian Socialism (London, 1968), p. 191.

their common benefit than by combining to destroy the power of the ruling classes. He made no provision in his scheme for the 'lumpenproletariat,' those "simple . . . weak . . . and idle" persons who, it may be argued, were the spiritual victims of the competitive system of production. Unlike Owen, Kingsley did not believe that a change in the modes of production could effect an essential change in the characters of the producers. He seems rather to have argued that those workers who were morally fit could associate to change the mode of production, and in that way help themselves even if society remained imperfect.

Kingsley's socialism was not a far-reaching scheme for the regeneration of society; it merely offered a channel for the energies and frustrations of the "talented . . . strong . . . industrious" worker--like Alton Locke.

Socialism as interpreted by Maurice, Ludlow, and Kingsley was not the revolutionary bugbear it formerly had been. Maurice first heard of the movement from Ludlow who had seen the revolution in Paris and written to him about it. Ludlow claimed that Socialism had acquired an unmistakable hold on the consciences of the Parisian workmen, and that it must be Christianized or it would shake

Christianity to its foundations.³⁰ Maurice took Ludlow's letter as a summons to an "English theological reformation, as the means of averting an English political revolution."³¹ Maurice made it clear that he was no revolutionary and that he hoped "to separate . . . that Socialism, which Mr. Southey and other eminent Conservatives believed to be the best solution of the practical difficulties of England, from Communism, Red Republicanism, or any anarchical opinion whatsoever."³² He rejected the religion which had become a "scheme for bribing or terrifying men into compliance with certain rules and maxims . . . a scheme or method of obtaining selfish prizes which men are to compete for, just as they do for the things of the earth,"³³ but he rejected equally any association with revolutionary labor politics designed to change the "old constitution" of society. The alternative to 'association' was revolution, as Kingsley ominously warned in his pamphlet "Cheap Clothes and Nasty":

³⁰Life of Maurice, I, p. 453/

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid., II, p. 92.

³³Cited by Inglis, p. 263.

The thing [association] must be done, and speedily; for if it be not done by fair means, it will surely do itself by foul. The continual struggle of competition, not only in the tailors' trade, but in every one which is not, like the navigator's or engineer's, at a premium from its novel and extraordinary demand, will weaken and undermine more and more the masters, who are already many of them speculating on borrowed capital, while it will depress the workmen to a point at which life will become utterly intolerable; increasing education will serve only to make them the more conscious of their own misery; the boiler will be strained to bursting pitch, till some jar, some slight crisis, suddenly directs the imprisoned forces to one point, and then--

What then?

Look at France, and see.³⁴

The Christian Socialists wanted to ameliorate the class-struggle, but they had no intention of eliminating the classes. On the contrary, they found social stratification not only inevitable but also desirable. The word 'socialism' notwithstanding, Maurice and Kingsley had far more in common with Disraeli than with Owen, because their notion of an 'organic society,' masked by such terms as 'divine purpose' or 'God's order,' reflects his same concern for a hierarchical society in which the classes are bound by reciprocal duties and responsibilities. Disraeli characterized those relationships as a spirit of noblesse oblige in the ruling classes, and reverence and obedience

³⁴In 1896 edn. of Alton Locke, p. xxv.

in the lower classes, while the Christian Socialists wanted all men to exercise the virtues of charity and patience in a spirit of brotherly love; but they all had the same idea. They wanted to undo the harmful social effects of laissez-faire capitalism by substituting an altruistic ethic based on service, love, or duty for the competitive and self-serving ethic of Utilitarianism. In this context, 'socialism' and 'equality' can be seen as ethical and emotive terms rather than political-economic ones. They imply brotherly love and a spirit of cooperation rather than universal suffrage or the redistribution of property, and their proponents are opposed alike to the "unsocial Christians" like the Utilitarians and the "unchristian socialists" like the Owenites.

The social ideal of the Christian Socialists was a kind of apartheid of the classes, a situation in which the workers would develop along their own lines (with the financial support and leadership of their philanthropic superiors) while the positions of the upper classes remained secure. This model was threatened in mid-century England by the financial prosperity which increased social

mobility and made possible "the career open to talent,"³⁵ and the Christian Socialists preached against the workers' desire to rise out of their class as if it were a crime second in importance only to their impulse for revolutionary violence. In his Preface to Alton Locke, addressed to the working men of Great Britain, Kingsley wrote:

Happy is the man who does the duty which lies nearest him, who educates his family, raises his class, performs his daily work as to God and to his country, not merely to his employer and himself; for it is only he that is faithful over a few things who will be made, or will be happy in being made, ruler over many things.

In a similar vein, Maurice wrote in his Tracts on Christian Socialism:

We will help you . . . not by bringing you into some new circumstances, but by encouraging you to struggle in and with those circumstances in which you are placed. We would have you just what you are--tailors, shoemakers, bakers, printers; only we would have you in these positions be men feeling and sympathizing with each other. And we will tell you how you may be this, and what will hinder you from being this. We will help you in fighting against the greatest enemy you have, your own self-will and selfishness. . . . This is what we mean by Christian Socialism.³⁶

It remains unclear why the Christian Socialists

³⁵For a discussion of social mobility and its implications in nineteenth-century England see E. J. Hobsbawm, The Age of Revolution (New York, 1962), chap. x.

³⁶Cited by Raven, p. 90.

wanted to maintain the distinction between the classes. (It seems unlikely that they were impelled solely by a self-serving desire to protect their superior social position.) They may have regarded a social hierarchy as the only conceivable form of social order, or they may have doubted that the worker could ever fully overcome the class-distinctions of his birth and breeding. Like Gissing later in the century, they may have believed that one's class constituted an inalterable destiny, and that the attempt to rise out of it was necessarily doomed to fail. Gissing never conclusively decided whether the social system or the rigidity of human personality was responsible for the worker's destiny; he merely dramatized the tragic fact that "To the relatively poor . . . education is in most cases a cruelty" (New Grub Street).

For a variety of reasons (not least of which was the fact that Gissing came from a relatively lower-class background), Gissing was able to identify with the struggles of the sensitive and talented worker, and his work, at its best, has the quality of genuine tragedy. Kingsley, on the other hand, was an outside observer looking in on the lives and labors of the poor. Despite his efforts to understand the feelings of a character like Alton, his

sympathies were necessarily limited, especially in view of the fact that he came to be interested in the worker in a roundabout way, though his greater concern for the church and the fate of society. For him, the fact (as he perceived it) that the worker could never truly rise above his class was not particularly tragic--unless, of course, the worker failed to see it. It was simply a neutral fact of life, one which could be overlooked at the expense of personal and social suffering. Alton is therefore not a tragic character, one who wins sympathy by virtue of his courageous struggle with an inalterable Fate, but a melodramatic figure who has made an error in judgment and suffered the inevitable consequences. At times, he seems to approach tragic dimensions (when Kingsley was apparently swept away by his sympathy for the main character), but these moments are brief, and the 'reformed' Alton who is the narrator of the novel is quick to assure the reader that the agonies he experienced as a young man were a result of his mistaken judgment about his relation to society, or a just retribution for his wayward social ambitions.

Though Kingsley could apparently not conceive of an intelligent, self-assured worker, one who could independently

achieve aesthetic taste and balanced reason, he believed that there was a special character and value to working-class culture. In his view, it was the duty of benevolent members of the upper class to foster and nourish the workers' capacity for reason, and to direct it along its own lines of development. Lady Ellerton, the Young-England type heroine who saves Alton at the end of the novel, shows him how he can reconcile his literary aspirations with his class-loyalties:

See if you cannot help to infuse some new blood into the aged veins of English literature; see if you cannot, by observing man in his mere simple and primeval state, bring home fresh conceptions of beauty, fresh spiritual and physical laws of his existence, that you may realize them here at home . . . in the cottages, in the play-grounds, the reading-rooms, the churches of working men.

. . . Your ignorance of cultivated English scenery, and of Italian art, will enable you to approach with a more reverent, simple, and unprejudiced eye the primeval forms of beauty--God's work, not man's.³⁷

Kingsley perceived a rough and muscular quality in working-class culture, and he regarded it as a valuable antidote to the effete decadence or soulless materialism of the prevailing cultural standards. The mouthpiece for that point of view is Sandy Mackaye, the feisty old bookseller who berates Alton for his elegant verse and tries to waken

³⁷p. 303.

in him a sense of class pride:

Are ye gaun to be like they puir aristocrat bodie,
that wad sooner hear an Italian dog howl than an
English nightingale sing, and winna harken to Mr.
John Thomas till he calls himself Giovanni Thomasino;
or do ye tak yourself for a singing-bird, to go all
your days tweedle-dumdeeing out into the lift, just
for the lust o' hearing your ain clan clatter? Will
ye be a man or a lintie? . . . why, if God had meant
ye to write about Pacifics, He'd ha' put ye there--
and because He means ye to wrote about London town,
He's put ye there--and gien ye an unco sharp taste o'
the ways o't. . . .³⁸

Armed with this vision, it seems remarkable that Kingsley was unable to sustain his interest in his main character. As in all the social-problem novels, the character of the hero deteriorates at some point, the issues which were raised are dropped or evaded, the point of view shifts, and the novel concludes on an alien note. The character of Alton changes towards the end of the novel, and those admirable qualities of ambition and endurance are rejected as the hero becomes weak and submissive. Alton is transformed from a spirited young man to a quasi-mystical dreamer, and the self-reliant autodidact is saved from his confusion by the gentle ministrations of an aristocratic angel of mercy. The problems of his literary and educational future are dropped, and so are the social issues

³⁸p. 66.

raised by his career as a tailor in the London sweat-shops. Alton emigrates to America to make a fresh start in the New World where nature is uncorrupted and society is innocent. Perhaps more important, the style of the novel shifts from an uncompromising, hard-bitten realism to a vague and dreamy romanticism, as if to illustrate that all of Alton's energies were but sound and fury, signifying nothing. It seems as if Kingsley, in the final moment, recoiled from his main character and denied the basic premises on which the novel was built.

Perhaps the novel suffers, as the other social-problem novels do, from the author's greater concern for the fate of society than for any individual characters. Alton's political and literary aspirations challenged the idea of a stable hierarchical society, and his ending may represent Kingsley's idea of a just retribution for social crimes. On the other hand, it may be that the novel was flawed at its inception. A 'reformed' Chartist is the narrator of the novel, a repentant sinner who pleads for understanding at the same time that he pronounces judgment on his former life, and the ending only magnifies the confusion which exists throughout the work. It is never quite clear whether the novel is a moral fable delivered in the

form of a confession, or a dramatic account of a working man's life told from the first-person point of view.

Kingsley himself was apparently unable to decide how to treat his character, and the novel suffers from the sort of ambivalence expressed in his first message to the workmen of England or in his radical-conservative political theories.

Kingsley was unable fully to trust the working man or to identify himself with his struggles, and he was unable to decide whether the social system or the working man's character was the cause of the social crisis. The ending of the novel is simply 'sad'; it signifies nothing about Alton's character or the state of society. If anything, it signifies the barrier between Kingsley and his subject, and it does so all the more strongly because that barrier was almost removed.

Kingsley's ability to perceive the variety of working-class life and the subtle nuances of its culture reflects a notion of 'class' far more empirical than Disraeli's--and more useful to the novelist. Though both novels share some common assumptions, Alton Locke presents a far more complicated conception of the class structure

than Sybil does. Both portray a stratified society in which there exists a vertical order of classes ranging from 'superior' to 'inferior.' These classes are distinguished by permanent interests which are conditioned primarily by the different relations to the means of production. In both novels, the characters are conscious of themselves as members of a class, although they may differ in their specific conception of what a class is: a position in the social hierarchy, a community of interests, economic or otherwise, or a sense of distinction and isolation from members of another group. These criteria for a class-structured society exist in both novels, but the conception of the relation between the classes differs radically from Sybil to Alton Locke.³⁹

Kingsley's conception of the class structure reflects a scheme of gradation rather than a scheme of dependence. As opposed to Disraeli's "two nations" Kingsley portrays a variety of classes, at least three or four, whose boundaries overlap at the margins so that the aristocracy of labor merges imperceptibly with the lower middle

³⁹For a discussion of various structural models of society see Stanislaw Ossowski, Class Structure in the Social Consciousness (New York, 1963), pp. 134-138.

class and Alton's first cousin, George, of upper middle-class background, becomes allied to the aristocracy. Furthermore, there is no objectively measurable criterion which separates the classes, although wealth is still the most important determinant of one's class. There are numerous variables like birth, education, source of income, etc., which determine a character's place in the social hierarchy. Consequently, the concept of the working man is rich and multifaceted, and Alton's character is specified with details of his religious background, occupation, educational opportunities, and so on. The society in which Alton lives and moves is also more variegated and carefully detailed than the two nations of Sybil. Kingsley's upper strata cannot be lumped together as merely the rich-rulers-exploiters, and instead of the stereotyped Marneys and Mowbrays he describes a host of merchants, manufacturers, clergymen, capitalists and landed aristocrats, each of whom, though having a peculiar interest in maintaining one or another aspect of the existing social order, belongs to a different stratum of the upper class.

The idea of the working class is far more empirical in Alton Locke than in Sybil. Kingsley regards the workers as a group brought into being by the combined pressures of

industrialism and capitalism. His hero is not born a working man; he is made into one as he moves from the home of rural Dissenters into the factories of the big city, and his character develops in response to the concrete circumstances of his life. There is no exalted authorial voice to lend larger dimension to Alton's story, no broad and sweeping vision which lifts Alton out of his time and propels him backwards into the feudal past or forward into the nation's future. Alton is what he is: a Chartist, a tailor, and a poet, struggling with the difficult and complicated pressures of industrial society. If his story lacks the panoramic scope and radiant vision of Sybil, it gains its excellence through the poignant mundane details of the actual life of a struggling worker.

The novel appears to have been written for two audiences, with a political purpose for each. To a working-class audience, Alton Locke conveys the message of Kingsley's first placard written to the workmen of England: the events of 1848 have redounded to the workers' greater suffering and confusion, the workers ought to place their trust in the beneficent upper classes and particularly the "working clergy" of the Church of England, and they must exert themselves to achieve the moral fitness which

will ultimately make them free. To an upper-class audience, the novel is designed to present a compassionate and sympathetic account of a workman's character, and to remove the barriers of ignorance and suspicion between the classes which serve to escalate the class-conflict. Kingsley wrote two prefaces to the novel, one to the workers and the other to the undergraduates of Cambridge, in which he highlights his dual purposes. In his Preface to the workers, Kingsley stated that he wrote his book "in the fear of God, that I might speak what seems to be the truth of God,"⁴⁰ the "truth" being synonymous with the message outlined above. To the undergraduates at Cambridge, Kingsley declared:

I have tried to express in this book what I know were, twenty years ago, the feelings of clever working men, looking upon the superior educational advantages of our class. . . .

Those political passions, the last outburst of which it described, have, thank God, become mere matter of history . . . it is well--indeed it is necessary--for every student of history to know what manner of men they are who become revolutionaries, and what causes drive them to revolution; that they may judge discerningly and charitably of their fellow men, whenever they see them rising, however madly, against the powers that be.⁴¹

The novel pulls in two--sometimes divergent--

⁴⁰p. xlii.

⁴¹p. xxxii.

directions. On one level, it is designed as a moral fable, the object of which is to demonstrate the failure of revolutionary ideologies and their disastrous effects upon the lives of the workers. Alton's life is an object lesson in poor judgment and good intentions, and his fateful history a warning to the working-class reader not to follow in his footsteps. On another level, the novel is history and exposé, designed to acquaint the upper-class audience with the pressures and problems in the lives of intelligent young workingmen, and with the social conditions which lead them to adopt a belligerent and often self-defeating stance towards society. Seen in this light, Alton's life is a pathetic attempt to overcome insuperable odds, and it presents an implicit plea to the more fortunate members of society to lend their sympathy to the working-class effort for social reform.

As a moral fable or dramatic portrait, the novel's greatest vitality lies in those chapters which describe the making of Alton's mind, particularly the early chapters which treat his childhood in a Dissenting home. His memory of the family Bible-readings, particularly the tales of the Old Testament prophets like Barak and Gideon, confirm the findings of historians like Elie Halevy or E. P.

Thomson who claim that the Dissenting tradition lay at the heart of the working-class consciousness. Alton's first and most powerful memories are associated with his fundamentalist childhood faith, and with the awareness it gave him that the world was a grim place in which the man of God must do battle with the forces of evil.

In the light of his fundamentalist faith and a vision of the world derived from The Pilgrim's Progress, Alton comes to identify London as the City of Destruction and himself as the young Christian in search of salvation. His mother tries to teach him that his station in life "was the cross which God had given me to bear," but he rebels against her passive acquiescence, and harbors an apocalyptic longing to "flee miles away . . . breathe the air of heaven once, and die." In the sunless and airless garret of a London sweat-shop where he works as a tailor, that longing is intensified, and Alton finally turns to books ("my first act of disobedience") to find the "sad strength which comes from the eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil."

Compelled by the rationalist philosophies and his longing for truth and beauty, Alton is weaned from his childhood faith, but something of its patterns of thought

remain with him. He still regards the world as evil, and he struggles to find some way of coping with it or changing it. The old Scotsman Sandy Mackaye becomes a major influence in his life. Sandy is the proprietor of a small bookshop, a rugged old man who is a veteran of the French Revolution and a hero in the Tom Paine tradition: independent, courageous, and with an uncompromising commitment to common sense. Sandymeers at Alton's vague longings after a formal education, and urges him to acquire knowledge through self-discipline and self-help. His influence is offset by Crossthwaite, an angry young Chartist who advocates massive political action and urges Alton to redeem himself along with the other members of his class in a violent overthrow of the ruling classes. The two men represent different moral and political philosophies, and Alton alternates between one and the other in his attempt to find a suitable channel for his energies.

"The turning point of my whole short life," he says in retrospect, is a visit to the Dulwich Gallery where, for the first time he confronts the vision of pure Beauty. The painting of Guido's Saint Sebastian evokes an ecstatic experience of inarticulate wonder: "My heart swelled within me, my eyes seemed bursting from my head with the intensity

of my gaze, and great tears, I knew not why, rolled down my face."⁴² Still reeling from his experience with the painting, he turns and sees Lillian Winnstay, the daughter of the dean of Cambridge, with whom he immediately becomes infatuated. Like Hyacinth Robinson, he perceives the woman, the idea of beauty, and the lives of the upper class as a great unreachable ideal, and the perception leaves him with confused feelings of longing, envy, frustration, and bitter outrage.

Following that experience, Alton recognizes the cultural gap which divides the classes. His lack of formal education, his impossible infatuation with a woman of the upper classes, and his bitter struggle for survival are merged in his consciousness as evidence of social injustice, and his anger erupts with a fury born of all his frustrations:

Why have I not as good a right to speak to her, to move in the same society in which she moves, as any of the fops of the day? Is it because these aristocrats are more intellectual than I? I should not fear to measure brains against most of them now; and give me the opportunities which they have, and I would die if I did not outstrip them. Why have I not those opportunities? . . . What right have they, if this said refinement be so necessary a qualification, a difference so deep--that without it, there is to be an everlasting gulf between man and man--what right have they to refuse to let me

⁴²p. 54.

share in it, to give me the opportunity of acquiring it?⁴³

Sandy responds in his typical fashion, with contempt for the gross or effete values of the upper class, and with a sense of pride in the special character of working-class culture:

Wad ye ha' them set up a dancing academy for working men, wi' "manners tocht here to the lower classes"? They'll no break up their ain monopoly; trust them for it! Na: if ye want to get amang them, I'll tell ye the way o't. Write a book o' poems, and ca' it "A Voice fra' the Goose, by a Working Tailor"--and then--why, after a dizen years or so of starving and scribbling for your bread, ye'll ha' a chance o' finding yoursel' a lion, and a flunkey, and a lickie o' trenchers--ane that jokes for his dinner, and sells his soul for a fine leddy's smile--till ye presume to think they're in earnest, and fancy yoursel' a man o' the same blude as they, and fa' in love wi' one o' them--and then they'll teach you your level, and send ye off to gauge whuskey like Burns, or leave ye to die in a ditch as they did wi' puir Thom'.⁴⁴

Sandy urges Alton to become a "People's Poet," to use the special experiences of his class and culture and create a new, more muscular, conception of Beauty. However, the Dean of Winnstay dissuades Alton from that purpose, and tells him that art is incompatible with harsh social realities, and that politics or social problems contaminate the purity of the genuine aesthetic experience:

⁴³p. 59.

⁴⁴pp. 140-141.

Ah, young man . . . if you were once embroiled in that political world, of which you know so little, you would soon be crying like David, "Oh, that I had wings like a dove, then I would flee away and be at rest!" . . . if you must be a poet, why not sing of nature, and leave those to sing political squabbles, who have no eye for the beauty of her repose?⁴⁵

Alton is confronted with a variety of confusing choices, each of which has to be worked through before his final conversion to Christian Socialism. He could be proud and independent as Sandy suggests, and pursue his education free from the restraints of foppish pedagogues and professors, or he could throw in his lot with Crossthwaite, and do battle, however suicidal, with the "system." Finally, he could try to escape his class and marry Lillian Winnstay by giving up politics and placing his "Pegasus in Harness," as Eleanor put it, to the upper class.

Torn by his warring impulses, Alton yields alternately to one and the other until all his possibilities are exhausted. Sandy Mackaye's 'moral force' type of Chartism appeals to him, but he finds the wisdom in it "utterly impracticable, too often merely negative." Sandy opposes the militant activists on the grounds that they are "the slaves o' warse than priests and kings--the slaves o' their ain

⁴⁵pp. 140-141.

lusts an' passions--the slaves o' every loud-tongued knave an' mountebank that'll pamper them in their self-conceit," but he has no practical course of action for the workers. On the other hand, Crossthwaite is young and vigorous and full of fiery conviction that "liberty is at the very doors. As a 'physical force' Chartist, Crossthwaite's slogan is "Fight! that's the word, and no other. . . . No Charter,-- No social reforms! We must give them ourselves, for no one else will." Like Dean Winnstay, Crossthwaite regards Alton's literary aspirations as something incompatible with his political concerns. "Can you deny that you've been off and on . . . between flunkeydom and The Cause, like a donkey between two bundles of hay?" he asks Alton, and adds, "can you expect to eat your cake and have it too?"

Impelled by his working-class loyalties, Alton yields to Crossthwaite's demands and undertakes the dangerous mission of spreading Chartist principles among distressed agricultural workers in the south. The mission fails: Alton unintentionally inspires his audience to mob violence and he is jailed for his efforts. He is badly shaken by the experience, but he doesn't lose heart until April 10 when he realizes that "the People's Cause was lost--the Charter a laughingstock." For whatever reason,

"the people would not rise... . . And then futility after futility exposed itself."

The events of April 10 leave Alton broken in spirit, confused and suicidal. Sandy Mackaye died the previous day, agonized by his grim forebodings, and on the following day, Alton is informed that Lillian is engaged to his worthless cousin George. As he staggers blindly through the streets, Alton meets with the contemptuous jeers and epithets of joyous shopkeepers. He recognizes his failure as a man, a Chartist, and a poet, and he determines to commit suicide when he is recalled to his senses by the sight of another worker about to throw himself into the Thames. Hopeless despair seems to be a general affliction, and only the most primitive moral instinct impels Alton to save his friend. Having been recalled from his suicidal purpose, Alton stumbles home to his own bed where he takes sick with brain fever.

Alton's delirium is the final culmination of his chaotic experience. The ugliness and misery of his surroundings coupled with his aspirations to truth and beauty, his high ambition thwarted at every turn by lack of opportunity, his capacity for friendship growing alongside a smoldering rage at universal injustice--all the conflicting

elements of his life erupt in his wild ravings. The serious issues raised by his life and history recede into the background or become nothing more than fragments or images for his nightmare, with the unhappy implication that they were all the time merely benign symptoms of his incipient madness. At the end of the novel, Alton lies confused and helpless, and only the kind ministrations of Lady Eleanor save him from death.

Alton undergoes a kind of ritual purification in his delirium, purging himself of those complexities which presumably led him to his sorry state. He becomes child-like and vulnerable, and dreams his death and resurrection into manhood. Lady Eleanor appears in his dreams as a mixture of mother and madonna, and she teaches him the scheme of his moral and physical regeneration:

And Eleanor came by, and took my soul in the palm of her hand . . . and carried it to a cavern by the sea-side, and dropped it in; and I fell and fell for ages. . . .

And Eleanor said, "he who falls from the golden ladder must climb through ages to its top. He who tears himself in pieces by his lusts, ages only can make him whole again. The madrepore shall become a shell, and the shell a fish, and the fish a bird, and the bird a beast; and then he shall become a man again, and see the glory of the latter days."⁴⁶

⁴⁶p. 264.

Alton dreams his mystical evolution from a soft crab to a remora, ostrich, mylodon, baby-ape, child, and finally to a king. The last words spoken to him in his dream are uttered by Lady Eleanor:

Your penance is accomplished. You have learned what it is to be a man. You have lost your life and saved it. He that gives up house, or land, or wife, or child, for God's sake, it shall be repaid him an hundred-fold. Awake!⁴⁷

The nature of Alton's penance or of his crimes is never explained, but the message is clear that something (or everything) of his former life was sinful, and that his childlike confusion and suffering is a just retribution for his youthful sins. Weakened by his illness and only half-conscious of the meaning of his dreams, he spends the following days and weeks in constant conversation with Eleanor, "the true demagogue," who preaches to him the principles of the true Christian gospel. Like a chastened and obedient child, he listens to the "angel out of heaven" who has devoted her life and her fortune to helping the poor and is now determined to save his soul. Eleanor reverses the religious lessons of his childhood and presents him with a new example of the holy ministry. She neutralizes the stern and loveless Calvinism of his mother's with her

⁴⁷p. 276.

lessons in Christian love and mercy, refutes the atheism of his young manhood by reconciling science with religion, and teaches him that the clergy are not all like his opportunist cousin George, but rather the agents of God to bring equality and brotherhood to earth. She explains the political implications of Christianity, describes Jesus as "the great Reformer; and yet . . . the true conservative," calls the Bible "the ground of all charters," and labels the clergy "democrats, proclaiming to the slave and the barbarian a spiritual freedom and a heavenly citizenship." Alton absorbs the teaching of his new mentor, and rises from his sick-bed a fully reformed Christian.

Given Kingsley's standards, Alton is regenerated morally after April 10 and made fully human by virtue of his conversion to Christianity. He does penance for his 'sins' and is absolved of all responsibility for the Chartist reign of terror. In a literary sense, however, his character collapses and the distinguishing features of his personality disappear. In fact, the fictional quality of the novel disappears: the final chapters are a kind of Socratic dialogue in which Alton plays the simpleton to the wise Lady Eleanor. He innocently asks some perfunctory questions and is answered at length with thoughtful

(though somewhat heavy-handed) arguments. In the course of his conversion, Alton loses all his grace, force, intellect, and fine feeling, and those admirable qualities of his young manhood are reinterpreted in the light of his new philosophy. What was formerly his keen intellect becomes in retrospect nothing but spiritual pride, his aspiration to truth and beauty mere vanity, his high ambition only arrogance, and his outrage at universal injustice an evasion of personal responsibility. At the end of the novel, he is fully reborn into a character of unredeemed pathos, and he dies a Beautiful Victim, testifying to the goodness of God and the imperfection of His earthly world. His final poem, beginning with the lines, "Weep, weep, weep, and weep/ For pauper, dolt, and slave," is the maudlin epitaph to his life as a "People's Poet."

The change in Alton's character and in the style of the novel reflects an uneasy transition in Kingsley's social philosophy: the point where he withdraws sympathy from the workers, condemns their actions, and assumes leadership of their movement. Something of this uneasy transition appears in Kingsley's first placard to the workmen of England where he alternately justifies their rage and condemns their efforts, finally concluding that

true salvation lies within, although there is a need for external reforms. The message is garbled, and ultimately so is the novel which followed shortly afterward. The early part of the novel reflects Kingsley's sympathy with the workers' struggles, and seems almost to justify the actions and attitudes which resulted in the uprising of April 10. All of this is undermined at the end when Alton recognizes his spiritual autonomy from the social system and disavows the political activism or literary aspirations of his former life.

The conclusion of Alton Locke magnifies a problem which has existed all along in the narrative point of view, and brings into focus Kingsley's difficulties with making a working-class character an independent spokesman. A reformed Chartist is the narrator of the novel, and he alternately justifies and condemns the feelings of bitterness, outrage, and envy which led him to rise up against the powers that be. On the one hand, the narrator fulfills Kingsley's purpose which was "to express . . . the feelings of clever working men, looking upon the superior educational advantages of our class." One chapter entitled "How Folks Turn Chartists" seems clearly designed to awaken the conscience and sympathies of a middle-class reading

public, and the narrator addresses the conscientious reader with an emotional appeal:

Those who read my story only for amusement, I advise to skip this chapter. Those, on the other hand, who really wish to ascertain what working men actually do suffer--to see whether their political discontent has not its roots, not merely in fanciful ambition, but in misery and slavery most real and agonising--those in whose eyes the accounts of a system, or rather barbaric absence of all system, which involves starvation, nakedness, prostitution, and long imprisonments in dungeons worse than the cells of the Inquisition, will be invested with something at least of tragic interest, may, I hope, think it worth their while to learn how the clothes they wear are made, and listen to a few occasional statistics, which, though they may seem to the wealthy mere lists of dull figures, are to the workmen symbols of terrible physical realities--of hunger, degradation, and despair.⁴⁸

There follows a poignant description of the miserable conditions of the sweat shops, and of the desperate men who saw in Chartism their only hope. However, the vivid graphic effects of these chapters are cancelled by the reformed Alton who denies that the workers' characters are shaped by their circumstances, or that their actions are understandable responses to intolerable conditions. The reformed Alton does penance for his ignorant failure to recognize his true freedom:

⁴⁸p. 77.

And so I began to look on man (and too many of us, I am afraid, are doing so) as the creature and puppet of circumstances--of the particular outward system, social or political, in which he happens to find himself. An abominable heresy, no doubt; but, somehow, it appears to me just the same as Benthamites, and economists, and high-churchmen, too, for that matter, have been preaching for the last twenty years with great applause from their respective parties. One set informs the world that it is to be regenerated by cheap bread, free trade, and that peculiar form of the 'freedom of industry' which, in plain language, signifies 'the despotism of capital'; and which, whatever it means, is merely some outward system, circumstance, or 'dodge' about man and not in him. Another party's nostrum is more churches, more schools, more clergymen--excellent things in their own way--better even than cheap bread or free trade, provided only that they are excellent. . . . For my part, I seem to have learnt that the only thing to regenerate the world is not more of any system, good or bad, but simply more of the Spirit of God.

About the supposed omnipotence of the Charter, I have found out my mistake.⁴⁹

In order to deny the validity of Chartist politics, Kingsley had to cancel, or at least control, his sympathies for (the early) Alton. It seems almost as if he conceived two characters at the same time--one for his political, and the other for his artistic purpose--and tried to amalgamate them in the same person. One character has the potential of a genuine tragic hero: he is a strong and essentially noble figure placed in difficult circumstances, and acting from a hubris which is at the same time the cause of his

⁴⁹ p. 285.

downfall and the source of his distinction from ordinary men. The other is a stock character of popular fiction, the repentant sinner who is justly punished for his misdeeds but who attracts sympathy because of his maudlin self-abasement.

Kingsley's ambivalence towards the working man need not have been detrimental to his art, if only he had been willing to admit or sustain it. Gissing experienced a similar ambivalence, and, at his best, dramatized it to create some of his finest work. However, Kingsley felt compelled to make a didactic point or an unambiguous political statement, and in that sense his work suffers because of his 'purpose.' According to James Martineau, Kingsley failed as an artist because of his compulsion to 'reason':

We have few greater teachers than Mr. Kingsley, yet none more certain to go astray the moment he becomes didactic. The truths which move him most he reads off at a glance; and the attempt to exhibit them to others as the result of intellectual elaboration naturally fails. His genius is altogether that of the artist for the apprehension of concrete reality, not that of the philosopher, for finding in thought the grounds and connections of what he perceives. With rare qualifications for seeing, feeling, and believing right, were he to abstain from reasoning, he would not often be wrong.⁵⁰

⁵⁰Cited by Stanley Baldwin, Charles Kingsley (Ithaca, 1934), p. 174.

The "truths which move him most" are in the scenes of working-class life in the home, church, and factory, and these redeem Alton Locke as a work of art. With the exception of Elizabeth Gaskell, Kingsley surpassed all the 'social problem' novelists in his ability to portray the actual life of the worker with sympathy and genuine interest. He rarely resorted to sentimentality, caricature, or sensationalism, and when he did, it seems clear that his didactic purpose impeded his artist's vision. Perhaps Kingsley's greatest literary contribution was that he moved beyond the popular stereotypes of the comic, pathetic, or horrifying worker and perceived the tragic element in the struggles of the poor. To him, they were real people, not abstract figures of his private morality play. For that reason, he could take them seriously, describe their situation honestly, and, in effect, make them suitable subjects for literature. Sandy Mackaye may have expressed Kingsley's own views when he asked Alton to see the poor as tragic figures in a contemporary epic:

Yon lassie, rejoicing in her disfigurement and not her beauty--like the nuns of Peterborough in auld time--is there na poetry there? That puir lassie, dying on the bare boards, and seeing her Saviour in her dreams, is there na poetry there, callant? That auld body owre the fire, wi' her "an officer's dochter," is there na poetry there?--tragedy--

With hues as when some mighty painter dips
His pen in dyes of earthquakes and eclipse.

Ay, Shelley's gran'; always gran'; but Fact is grand-
er--God and Satan are grander. All around ye, in
every gin-shop and costermonger's cellar, are God
and Satan at death-grips; every garret is a haill
Paradise Lost or Paradise Regained; and will ye
think it beneath ye to be the People's Poet?⁵¹

In Alton Locke, Kingsley became a kind of "People's Poet."

The flaw, perhaps even the tragic flaw, is that in the
novel Alton could not do likewise.

⁵¹p. 72.

CHAPTER IV

GEORGE ELIOT'S FELIX HOLT:

THE MISTRUST OF POLITICS

Felix Holt was published in 1866, a year before the passage of the second major Reform Bill. The political atmosphere at the time George Eliot was writing her novel was much calmer than that which prevailed in the frenzied 1830's and 1840's. Although the prospect of reform was greeted with the usual fears and misgivings by the upper classes, the movement to extend the suffrage encountered more apathy than alarm.¹ Perhaps the upper classes felt that the major change had already been effected in 1832 and that anything which followed was merely a footnote to the initial disaster. It may also be that the relative prosperity of the years following 1848, and the relative calm on the continent, allowed the second major Reform Bill (there were minor changes in 1859-60) to pass with only faint murmurs of protest.

¹Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Politics and Ideology: The Reform Act of 1867," Victorian Minds (New York, 1968), p. 336.

The fears of the upper classes in the 1860's were focussed not so much on bloody revolution, civil war, or the prospect of social chaos, as on the broad cultural implications of a democratic England. Walter Bagehot expressed the typical anxiety when he wrote:

It must be remembered that a political combination of the lower classes, as such and for their own objects, is an evil of the first magnitude; that a permanent combination of them would make them . . . supreme in the country; and that their supremacy, in the state they now are, means the supremacy of ignorance over instruction and of numbers over knowledge.²

The leading intellectuals were not afraid for their economic or physical survival, although there were some members among them who still equated democracy with socialism. They felt themselves to be concerned for the future of English culture and the preservation of civilized tastes and standards of excellence. Democracy was seen as the rule of average men, or worse yet, the rule of the poor and ignorant.³ Like Robert Lowe, many Englishmen saw looming before them "that bare and level plain, where every ant's nest is a mountain and every thistle a forest tree."⁴ "When the leap in the

²The English Constitution (London, 1952), p. 272.

³See Francis W. Coker, Recent Political Thought (New York, 1934), pp. 308 ff.

⁴Hansard, Parliamentary Debates 183: 1650 (May 31, 1866).

dark is made," one Liberal wrote, "when the franchise is given to cottagers who pay a weekly rent of eighteen pence, when we have, not merely household suffrage, but hovel suffrage also, nobody knows who are to be the future governors of England."⁵

The argument against democracy had yet another aspect: a mistrust of the psychology of crowds and a suspicion that the workers would exercise their new-found powers in strange and unknown ways. Robert Lowe felt that England was about "to enter upon a new era, when the bag which holds the winds will be untied, and we shall be surrounded by a perpetual whirl of change, alteration, innovation, and revolution."⁶ The riot scene in Felix Holt expresses above all else the unpredictability of the mob, the "mad crowd," "the mass of wild chaotic desires and impulses," "the dangerous mass," etc.⁷ In that scene, it appears that the mob has a life of its own, and that it tends to act on spontaneous impulse or follow a powerful leader, whatever his principles or program.

⁵Homersham Cox, A History of the Reform Bills of 1866 and 1867 (London, 1868), p. 278.

⁶3 Hansard 188: 1540 (July 15, 1867).

⁷George Eliot, Felix Holt, intro. by George Levine (New York, Norton edn., 1970), pp. 323 ff.

The proponents of reform generally held a different view of the working class' psychology. Some of them believed that democracy would have no significant impact on the state of society because "the private relations of the working man will be engrafted into our political system. He will vote with his master, his employer, his preacher, his society and sometimes commit the unpardonable crime of voting as his landlord asks him to vote."⁸ The Conservative party was swayed by Disraeli's vision of a Tory Democracy, and many of its members supported reform on the grounds that it would strengthen the interests of the aristocracy. One of Disraeli's critics claimed that his policy reflected "a vague idea that the poorer men are the more easily they are influenced by the rich; . . . an impression . . . that the ruder class of minds would be more sensitive to traditional emotions; and an indistinct application to English politics of Napoleon's . . . supposed success in taming revolution by universal suffrage."⁹ However, many Liberals questioned the "natural deference" of the worker.

⁸The Times, May 23, 1867.

⁹Viscount Cranborne, Quarterly Review, cxxvii (1869), pp. 541-542.

John Stuart Mill warned, "As soon as any idea of equality enters the mind of an ordinary English working man, his head is turned by it. He ceases to be servile, he becomes insolent." Mill was afraid of the "general ignorance and incapacity" of the workers as well as their tendency to act in the name of "interests not identical with the general welfare of the community."¹⁰

Many Liberals felt that a program of massive public education was required to protect the populace against the despotism of the rude majority. "I believe it will be absolutely necessary that you should prevail on our future masters to learn their letters," declared Robert Lowe. "This question is no longer a religious question, it has become a political one. It is indeed the question of questions; it has become paramount to every other question that has been brought before us."¹¹ Lowe believed that the 'insolence' of the masses and the 'despotism' of the majority would be felt even if the workers were to be absorbed into the existing political parties. He was afraid that the

¹⁰Principles of Political Economy, ed. J. M. Robson (Toronto, 1965), p. 109, and Representative Government (Everyman edn.), p. 234.

¹¹3 Hansard 188: 1549 (July 15, 1867).

government would be composed of "two parties of competition who, like Cleon and the Sausage-seller of Aristophanes, are bidding for the support of the Demos."¹² Those fears were echoed by Walter Bagehot who predicted that "the well-taught and rich men should constantly offer to defer" to the decision of "a set of poor ignorant people" and "vox populi will be vox diaboli if it is worked in that manner."¹³

The fear of vox populi, the concern for established cultural traditions, and the anxiety about the status of individual excellence are major impulses behind George Eliot's political philosophy. She was apparently not terrified of the workers' violence, although she had witnessed the riots in Nuneaton when she was a young girl, and the scene probably impressed her in much the same way as the Bristol riots did the young Kingsley. Her discomfort with the worker was primarily cultural. She associated him with gin, folly, unreflected impulse, and possibly the sort of stupidity which she satirized in the figure of Mrs. Holt and in her essay on "Servant's Logic."¹⁴ The riot scene in

¹²Robert Lowe, 3 Hansard 187: 797 (May 20, 1867).

¹³The English Constitution, p. 271.

¹⁴First published in the Pall Mall Gazette, 17 March 1865. In that essay she writes, "The majority of

Felix Holt, unlike the one in Sybil, is not designed to show the blood-lust of a mob led by the likes of Bishop Hatton and his gang of Hell-Cats. It is rather designed to show the weakness of the workers' individual characters and their mindless frenzy when collected in a mob. The scene makes an argument against democracy not by evoking terror, but pity and disdain.

George Eliot's political stance was as 'defensive' as Disraeli's, but the values she defended were precisely the opposite of her predecessor's. Disraeli argued against democracy (in Sybil) in the name of a hierarchic and corporatist ideal, while George Eliot argued in the name of liberal individualism. Disraeli proposed that a strong

minds are no more to be controlled by strong reasons than plum-pudding is to be grasped by sharp pincers. . . . In reasoning with servants we are likely to be thwarted by discovering that our axioms are not theirs. For example, they presuppose that an effect may exist without a cause, that like causes will constantly produce unlike effects, that all may mean only some, that there is no difference between little and none, that any two or more circumstances which can be mentioned will account for a given fact, and that nothing is impossible, except that they can have been in the wrong. . . . Reason about things with your servants, consult them, give them the suffrage, and you produce no other effect in them than a sense of anarchy in the house, a suspicion of irresoluteness in you, the most opposed to that spirit of order and promptitude which can alone enable them to fill their places well and make their lives respectable. The Essays of George Eliot, ed. Thomas Pinney (New York, 1963), pp. 391-397.

central government enact paternalistic programs in order to secure the social order. He wanted the Members of Parliament to be mere delegates of their respective parties, obligated to vote with that party regardless of their personal convictions. George Eliot, on the other hand, saw the State as an arm of the social structure, and she felt that it played only a limited role in directing the lives of its individual members. In her view (as expressed by Felix Holt), "all the schemes about voting, and districts, and annual Parliaments, and the rest, are engines, and the water or steam--the force that is to work them--must come out of human nature--out of men's passions, feelings, desires."¹⁵ "The greatest power under heaven," Felix claims, is "the ruling belief in society about what is right and what is wrong, what is honorable and what is shameful."¹⁶ Furthermore, George Eliot regarded the M.P. as an independent representative of government, charged with responsibility for considering each measure, deliberating on the common good, and voting in the name of what is "called Right in the world."¹⁷ She

¹⁵p. 302.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 303.

vested political authority and her hopes for society in the lone and rational individual who makes moral choices and assumes responsibility for his actions.

Despite the strong qualifications of her deterministic beliefs, George Eliot held a profound conviction in the freedom of the will and the possibilities for individual excellence.¹⁸ In one of her letters, she argued against "necessitarianism" and supported the "practice of willing strongly, of willing to will strongly . . . that being what you certainly can do and have done about a great many things in life."¹⁹ The aims and spirit of the working-class movement threatened her humanistic values just as they threatened Disraeli's vision of the corporate ideal. She regarded the workers' insistence on political power as an expression of their refusal to accept responsibility for their lives, and therefore an indication of their lack of readiness for political power. "A fool or idiot," says Felix, is someone who "expects a vote to do for him

¹⁸See George Levine, "Determinism and Responsibility," A Century of George Eliot Criticism, ed. Gordon S. Haight (Boston, 1965), pp. 352-355.

¹⁹The George Eliot Letters, VI, ed. Gordon S. Haight (New Haven, 1955), p. 99.

what it never can do."²⁰ Furthermore, she believed that the workers would create a tyranny of "ignorant numbers" by delivering power into the hands of men "who have no opinions, but who pilfer the words of every opinion"²¹ instead of men who are committed to "what is right." Like Mill, she viewed democracy as a "government of mediocrity" which produces "Instead of great energies guided by vigorous reason, and strong feelings strongly controlled by a conscientious will . . . weak feelings and weak energies, which therefore can be kept in outward conformity to rule without any strength either of will or reason."²²

George Eliot argued against democracy in the name of (what Gertrude Himmelfarb calls) "the Liberal ideology of intelligence." Like Mill and Bagehot, she based her political position upon "the conviction that reason, education, and intelligence were the basis of a sound polity."²³

²⁰Felix Holt, p. 301.

²¹Ibid., p. 303.

²²"Of Individuality as one of the Elements of Well-Being," On Liberty (Library of Liberal Arts edn.), p. 85.

²³See Himmelfarb, pp. 385-386, for a discussion of the Liberal ideology.

However, that conviction led her to denigrate the political enterprise altogether, on grounds both theoretical and practical, and to regard politics as a faulty instrument for securing social justice or improving the quality of life in society. She regarded the working class, in its existing state, as a "drunken and stupid" majority which could only achieve the "power to do mischief--to undo what has been done with great expense and labor, to waste and destroy, to be cruel to the weak, to lie and to quarrel, and to talk poisonous nonsense."²⁴ "Till they can show that there's something they love better than swilling themselves," Felix says of his fellow workers, "extension of the franchise can never mean anything for them but extension of boozing."²⁵ At the same time, the narrator in Felix Holt declares that "No system, religious or political, has laid it down as a principle that all men are alike virtuous, or even that all people rated for 80 houses are an honor to their species."²⁶ In the absence of any standard for judging the virtue of the electorate or

²⁴Felix Holt, p. 301.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 136.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 365.

representatives of government, George Eliot reasoned, no government could be wholly just. Underlying her argument against democracy there is a more profound argument against politics and the political vocation, and an appeal, in the manner of Dickens and Mrs. Gaskell, for the restoration of personal morality as a guide to the conduct of social life.

George Eliot's political philosophy points in two directions: to the Liberal ideology with its insistence on intelligence as the basis for a sound polity, and the social criticism of men like Carlyle and Arnold who regarded political activism as a symptom of their sick society. Carlyle believed that the concern for "mere political . . . arrangements" reflected the "mechanical" nature of industrial civilization. Felix's claim that "the schemes about voting, and districts, and annual Parliaments, and the rest, are engines, and . . . the force that is to work them--must come out of human nature" calls to mind Carlyle's critique of politics in "Signs of the Times":

Men are grown mechanical in head and heart, as well as in hand. They have lost faith in individual endeavor, and in natural force, of any kind. Not for internal perfection, but for external combinations and arrangements, for institutions, constitutions--for Mechanism of one sort or other, do they hope and struggle.²⁷

²⁷The Works of Thomas Carlyle, II (New York, Scribner's edn., 1904), p. 63.

Carlyle's notion that politics represented an unwholesome structure of feeling appears in most of the social-problem novels (and even later novels, viz. James' Princess Casamassima), and especially in Felix Holt.

Many of the major Victorian intellectuals consistently opposed the political vocation with the internal struggle for perfection. Newman was perhaps the most extreme in his rejection of political and social pursuits. In his view, "the whole visible course of things, nations, empires, states, politics, professions, trades, society . . . come from evil, and they are the instruments of evil."²⁸ He regarded salvation as a private and internal pursuit. "What have we, private Christians, to do with hopes and fears on earth, with schemes of change . . . or dreams of reform,"²⁹ he asked. Matthew Arnold likewise proposed an ideal based upon the "inward operation" of isolated men. "Culture," he declared, "places human perfection in an internal condition," and cultivated persons were those "who are mainly led, not by their class spirit,

²⁸J. H. Newman, Sermons on the Subjects of the Day (1843), p. 119.

²⁹Parochial and Plain Sermons, 1834-42 (1868), IV, p. 160.

but by a general humane spirit, by the love of human perfection."³⁰ In a similar vein, George Eliot idealized those characters who cultivate their heart's holy affections and reject the opportunity for social advancement. Caleb Garth in Middlemarch declares, "That signifies nothing--what other men would think. I've got a clear feeling inside me, and that I shall follow."³¹ Felix follows the dictates of his "sacred feelings, making a sacred duty either to my own manhood or to my fellow man."³²

George Eliot's critique of politics is signified by her "Radical" hero's refusal to commit himself to a political course of action. Felix is not afraid to fight against authority--he considers it "blasphemy to say that a man ought not to fight against authority"--but he does so only in the name of his "sacred feelings." He wants to direct his life in the light of his private moral vision, and he rejects any abstract moral or political philosophy which would depersonalize his efforts. Even though he realizes that there's "not much" his life "could be

³⁰Culture and Anarchy (Cambridge, 1957), p. 47.

³¹(Riverside edn., 1968), p. 412.

³²Felix Holt, p. 451.

turned into,"³³ he believes that "the only failure a man ought to fear is failure in cleaving to the purpose he sees to be best."³⁴ Felix is a "Radical" presumably because he has the spirit of independence and the sense of personal dignity which animated the early Radicals like Tom Paine. However, he lacks Paine's confidence in the natural dignity of man sui generis, and he refuses to ally himself with "boozers" whose political aspirations are founded upon "vain expectations" and "thoughts that don't agree with the nature of things."

Felix's claim to radicalism is not as tenuous as it appears at first glance: he appeals to the workers' moral consciousness in the hope that they will eventually become morally fit for political involvement. To that extent, he resembles the scores of social reformers (including the "utopian" socialists like St. Simon and Fourier) who wanted to improve the lot of the proletariat as a prerequisite for their political action, but regarded the workers as incapable of initiating the process of social reform.³⁵ They addressed themselves to the moral conscience

³³Ibid., p. 64.

³⁴Ibid., p. 442.

³⁵See Alfred Fried and Ronald Sanders, eds., Socialist Thought (New York, 1964), p. 72, for a discussion of the early socialists' attitude towards the working class.

of mankind and tried to mobilize the workers' moral energies (but not their self-interest) in the service of their fraternal ideals. By the same token, the radical-conservatives in England, men like Carlyle and Ruskin, sympathized with the working-class condition, but they opposed or ignored the possibility of the workers' independent efforts to achieve social change, largely because they doubted the workers' moral and intellectual capacities. Felix is not necessarily a hypocrite for preaching political conservatism while claiming to be a radical; he arrives from a long tradition of social reformers who questioned the working-class character.

The political philosophy expressed in Felix Holt signifies the social-problem novelist's typical anxiety about the consequences of working-class activism. George Eliot's critique of politics on the grounds that it constitutes a diversion of moral energies, and her objection to reform in the name of the Liberal ideology of intelligence, reflect her doubts about the workers' capacity for organized and purposeful action. However, Felix Holt is not simply a political (or anti-political) tract; there is a deeply-felt drama of renunciation in the novel, and it suggests that George Eliot conceived her political

theme in relation to Mrs. Transome's problem of resigning herself to an inalterable fate. George Eliot's letter to J. Sibree following the French Revolution of 1848 may help to explain some of the ambivalent impulses behind her political philosophy:

I would consent . . . to have a year clipt off my life for the sake of witnessing such a scene as that of the men of the barricades bowing to the image of Christ, 'who first taught fraternity to men.' One trembles to look into every fresh newspaper lest there should be something to mar the picture. . . . I should have no hope of good from any imitative movement at home. Our working classes are eminently inferior to the mass of the French people. In France the mind of the people is highly electrified; they are full of ideas on social subjects; they really desire social reform--not merely an acting out of Sancho Panza's favourite proverb, 'Yesterday for you, today for me.' The revolutionary animus extended over the whole nation, and embraced the rural population--not merely, as with us, the artisans of the towns. Here there is so much larger a proportion of selfish radicalism and unsatisfied brute sensuality . . . than of perception or desire of justice, that a revolutionary movement would be simply destructive, not constructive. . . . And there is nothing in our constitution to obstruct the slow progress of political reform. This is all we are fit for at present. The social reform which may prepare us for great changes is more and more the object of effort both in Parliament and out of it. But we English are slow crawlers.³⁶

The letter expresses both a wish and a fear, a desire to see the working class actively engaged in politics and a terror

³⁶Letter to J. Sibree, February 1848, in George Eliot's Life, as Related in Her Letters and Journals, ed. J. W. Cross (Edinburgh and London, New edn., 1887), pp. 98-99.

of the "brute" workers rising up to destroy the "common estate of society . . . that treasure of knowledge, science, poetry, refinement of thought, feeling and manners."³⁷

There is both sympathy for the workers and a withdrawal of sympathy, together with an underlying belief that political reform is ineffective if not preceded by moral reform.

George Eliot shared with the social-problem novelists a contempt for the principle of self-interest which, in their view, sanctioned the law of the jungle as the order of social life. According to Felix, the electoral process is "the proceedings of the fishes" in which the strong fish gobble up the weak, because "three-fourths of the men in this country sees nothing in an election but self-interest, and nothing in self-interest but some form of greed."³⁸ Felix's evaluation of the motives behind the struggle for reform was shared by other Victorians, many of whom felt that the institutions of the country were endangered by the voracious appetites of the aspiring

³⁷"Address to the Working Men, by Felix Holt," first published in Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, January, 1868.

³⁸Felix Holt, p. 153.

workers. During the Reform debates in 1867, Lord Shaftesbury remarked that the struggle for democracy, undertaken in the name of the workers' self-interest, posed a threat to the entire national establishment:

It has occurred to me . . . that we have in a great measure outgrown our institutions. There is an expansive force among the people. The advance of wealth, the increase of education, the capacity or at least the ambition, that every man now feels to occupy a higher station than that in which he has been placed by Providence--all these things tend to make men dissatisfied with the institutions of the country, because they fancy themselves cribbed, cabined, and confined by the restrictions which these institutions impose.³⁹

Matthew Arnold went somewhat further, and identified the Englishman's "freedom to do as he likes" with the loss of culture entirely. "Violent indignation with the past, abstract systems of renovation applied wholesale," and "a new doctrine drawn up in black and white for elaborating down to the very small details a rational society for the future," were in his view the "novel and untried ways" which were "alluring to the feet of democracy."⁴⁰ For these reasons, George Eliot was concerned for the preservation of "the common estate of society" after the passage of the Reform Bill.

³⁹₃ Hansard 158: 1926.

⁴⁰Culture and Anarchy, pp. 65-66.

The Victorians could not conceive of a stable political process in which each man votes in his own interest, or a cohesive community in which the members are concerned exclusively with their private happiness, or a cultured society operated on the principle of majority rule. In the absence of a social contract which protected minority rights, the English relied on the respect for tradition and the discipline of a moral code to prevent the chaos and tyranny of a democratic state ruled by "ignorant numbers." Burke regarded "the collective wisdom of the ages and of generations" as a counterweight to man's independent will and reason, and Arnold, in a similar fashion, regarded "culture" as a counterweight to "anarchy." In this view, "culture" is an idea with political implications: it serves as a bridge between the individual who pursues his private interests and the larger community which demands his subordination. Despite his insistence that "culture" was an "inward operation" of isolated men, Arnold claimed that the individual is "required, under pain of being enfeebled in his own development if he disobeys, to carry others along with him in his march towards perfection." Likewise George Eliot who held up the values of independence and private reason believed that "our moral progress

may be measured by the degree in which we sympathize with individual suffering and individual joy."⁴¹

The 'individualists' of the nineteenth century agreed that a stable society was necessary for the maintenance of personal freedoms, and they invariably fell back upon some secular version of Christian values in order to reconcile the interests of the individual and the community. Arnold had "culture," Mill a "religion of humanity," and George Eliot an idea of "duty," and all of these were in some sense translations of Christian values. George Eliot remained emotionally tied to Christianity long after she renounced its dogmas, largely because of her "conviction in the efficacy that lies in all sincere faith."⁴² She praised Evangelicalism because it "had brought into . . . society that idea of duty, that recognition of something to be lived for beyond the mere satisfaction of self,"⁴³

⁴¹Letter to Charles Bray, November 15, 1857, George Eliot's Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals (London, 1885), I, p. 472. On this subject see Basil Willey, "George Eliot, Conclusion," Nineteenth Century Studies (London, 1964), pp. 247-260.

⁴²Cross, 1885 edn., II, p. 343.

⁴³Scenes of Clerical Life (World's Classics edn.), p. 319.

and she praised Methodism because it brought to "rough men and weary-hearted women" a "faith which . . . lifted their imagination above the sordid details of their own narrow lives."⁴⁴ In her view, Christianity provided a system of values which directed the energies of the individual towards personal excellence and the common good.

However, her Christian values were supported by a rationalist argument rather than a belief in divine reward and punishment. "The divine will," she wrote, "is simply so much as we have ascertained of the facts of existence which compel obedience at our own peril."⁴⁵ Those irrefutable "facts of existence" were what she perceived as the organic relation between the individual and society, and the determined status of both. In one of her essays she explained the relation between the characters of the individual social members and the nature of the social order:

The external conditions which society has inherited from the past are but the manifestations of inherited internal conditions in the human beings who compose it; the internal conditions and the external are related to each other as the organism and its medium, and development can take place only by the gradual constantaneous development of both.⁴⁶

⁴⁴Adam Bede (World's Classics edn.), p. 38.

⁴⁵Cross, 1885 edn., III, p. 48.

⁴⁶"The Natural History of German Life," Westminster Review, LXVI (July, 1856). In Essays of George Eliot, p. 287.

She believed that a social revolution was doomed to fail because it could not alter the character of the social members, despite the exertions of individual wills. In her view, the social order and the character of its members were closely related, and both were a product of complex historical forces. The attitude of stoic resignation in individuals and social classes was, in this light, a necessary adjustment to the "nature of things," because that which "has grown up historically must die out historically, by the gradual operation of necessary laws."⁴⁷

Unlike Disraeli, Coleridge or Carlyle, George Eliot saw no intrinsic value in the 'organic' society, and she was not inspired by the vision of the corporate ideal. On the contrary, she regarded 'organicism' as a cold "fact of existence" which sometimes has tragic implications for the well-meaning individual. There is nothing charismatic or hyperbolic about his vision; she had no regard for the "pernicious falsification" of the feudal myth and no respect for the Young England movement which she considered "the aristocratic dilletantism which attempts to restore 'the good old times' by a sort of idyllic masquerading, and to grow feudal veneration and fidelity as we grow

⁴⁷Ibid.

prize turnips."⁴⁸ She rejected the merely theoretical approach to social or ethical problems, whether it was reflected in the high idealism of the Young Englanders or the stern practicality of the Utilitarians who believed that "all social questions are merged in the economical science, and that the relations of men to their neighbours may be settled by algebraic equations."⁴⁹

Her moral and social philosophy shows that George Eliot was committed to "realism," to seeing things as they are without "vain expectations, and . . . thoughts that don't agree with the nature of things." She believed that a policy of social reform, if it were to be effective, must be based upon a "real knowledge of the people," and that the social reformer must bear in mind

the natural history of the social classes . . . the degree in which they are influenced by local conditions, their maxims and habits, the points of view from which they regard their religious teachers, and the degree in which they are influenced by religious doctrines, the interaction of the various classes on each other, and what are the tendencies in their position towards disintegration and development.⁵⁰

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 272.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid., pp. 272-273.

The 'organic' society was, for her, not a wishful fantasy but an inalterable natural law, and her ethic of duty and self-restraint was not a function of her altruistic impulses but her sober assessment of man's individual possibilities in a largely determined world. Her political conservatism, like her personal morality, was not based upon a partisan ideology but an unprejudiced and clear-eyed observation of what seemed to be natural laws.

The commitment to "realism" lies behind the art as well as the social philosophy of the author. In her essay on "Realism in Art," George Eliot opposed "realism" to "falsism" (rather than "idealism") and expressed her aversion to those novels which fail to provide an authentic portrait of actual social realities. She regarded as a particularly "grave evil" the "unreality" of those novels which purport to deal with the subject of the working class.⁵¹ "If we need a true conception of the popular character to guide our sympathies rightly," she declared, "we need it equally to check our theories to direct us in their application."⁵² In her view, the artist who professed to paint the life of the people was morally bound

⁵¹Ibid., p. 270.

⁵²Ibid., p. 272.

to present a true picture of his subject:

The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies. Appeals founded on generalizations and statistics require a sympathy ready-made, a moral sentiment already in activity; but a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the raw material of moral sentiment. . . . All the more sacred is the task of the artist when he undertakes to paint the life of the people. Falsification here is far more pernicious than in the more artificial aspects of life. It is not so very serious that we should have false ideas about . . . the manners and conversation of beaux and duchesses; but it is serious that our sympathies with the perennial joys and struggles, the toil, the tragedy, and the humour in the life of our more heavily-laden fellow men should be perverted, and turned towards a false object instead of the true one.

This perversion is not the less fatal because the misrepresentation which gives rise to it has what the artist considers a moral end. The thing for mankind to know is, not what are the motives and influences that ought to act on the labourer or the artisan, but what are the motives and influences which do act on him.⁵³

She rejected the idea that art could be a vehicle for the expression of the artist's wishful fantasies or his political purpose. The artist, like the social reformer, must concern himself with objective reality and avoid the pitfalls of abstract idealism on the one hand, and bloodless theory on the other.

⁵³Ibid., pp. 270-271.

George Eliot elevated the habit of objectivity to the level of a moral imperative; she regarded "that attention to what is apart from themselves" as "the raw material of moral sentiment." Her credo as artist, moralist, and political thinker reflects her determination to see things as they are, untainted by personal prejudice or preconceived dogma. In her art as in her philosophy, she held up the value of personal discipline as a pre-requisite for discovering the truth, enlarging the moral sympathies, and achieving the virtue of tolerance based upon understanding rather than indifference.

George Eliot regarded 'self-interest' as the antithesis of 'reason' (rather than 'virtue'), and the pursuit of private pleasures as the opposite of the love of truth. In this respect, she resembled the Liberals of her time, notably Mill, who subordinated the hedonistic principles of Utilitarianism to the rational ones, and declared that the most valuable pleasures would be those which were desired by the best judges. Like George Eliot, Mill felt that a narrow definition of 'self-interest' conflicted with man's greater interests, and that intellectual pleasures had greater value than physical pleasures:

It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, are of a different opinion, it is because they only know their own side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides.⁵⁴

Implicit in Mill's argument is the assumption that intellectual pleasures are inconsistent with selfish indulgence, and that the ideal state would require a wise leader to decide the kinds of happiness which should be made available to its members.

George Eliot also shared with the Liberals of her time their central dilemma: they rejected the principle of 'self-interest' to the same extent that they exalted the value of the 'self.' In the name of their faith in human reason, they criticized a civilization which, in Mill's words, tended to promote "a general similarity among mankind"⁵⁵ (v. George Eliot's lament on the passing of the old coach-roads), and they held up an ideal of individuality or culture to counteract the enervating effects of that civilization. On the other hand, their fear of the uncultivated and irrational demos led them to reject 'self-interest' as a motive for participating in

⁵⁴Utilitarianism (Everyman edn.), p.9.

⁵⁵On Liberty, p. 89.

politics, and finally to repudiate the 'self' as the ultimate locus of authority. The prospect of democracy generated an ideological crisis for men like Mill and Robert Lowe, and forced them to radically redefine their (fundamentally) Utilitarian position.

George Eliot's vision of the 'organic' society places her in the Conservative tradition, strictly speaking, but her ties to the Liberals are perhaps stronger. The starting-point for her political theory is the individual social member whose moral and physical condition determines the structure of social policy, and to that extent her politics are Liberal. Furthermore, her moral values, and their basis in a Religion of Humanity, have more in common with the Liberalism of Mill than the Conservatism of Young England or Christian Socialism; her notion of 'duty' is in no way related to Disraeli's ethic of noblesse oblige. Disraeli regarded 'duty' as a form of conduct designed for the welfare and stability of the corporate social whole. George Eliot, on the other hand, regarded 'duty' as a kind of renunciation based upon the awareness that (as Maggie Tulliver discovers) "Our life is determined for us, and it makes the mind very free when we give up wishing and only think of bearing what is laid upon us."⁵⁶ The melancholy

⁵⁶Mill on the Floss (Edinburgh and London, 1860), p. 327.

tone of that renunciation distinguishes George Eliot from the Tory conservatives of the previous generation; it signifies her desire that individuals (or social classes) might be fully capable of determining their own destinies, and her mournful resignation to the fact that man's psychology and his status in society must invariably limit his freedom and the uses of his reason.

Like most of George Eliot's novels, Felix Holt is not formally structured around one central theme or story. A variety of stories parallel and counterpoint one another, connect by cross-cutting, separate, and finally produce a harmonious impression. From one point of view, the novel is designed to show the differences between the social classes and the failure of a social policy which is not based upon "the natural history of our social classes." The characters represent a cross-section of society in the town of Treby Magna at the time of the first reformed election, and they are presented in terms of their "maxims and habits," "religious teachers," "religious doctrines," etc. Transome Court and Malthouse Yard, the estate of aging aristocrats and the cottage of a Dissenting minister, reflect the main features of social-cultural contrast, and

the other characters in the novel--the elegant de Barry's, dubious Mr. Chubb, ignorant Mrs. Holt, self-righteous Rev. Lingon, and various Tuckers and Spratts gathered in the pub or on the streets--fill out the picture of a variegated social structure. The separate stories of the individual characters converge during the course of the election, and the outcome reflects "the mutual influence of similar destinies"⁵⁷ as well as the subtle influences of the past upon the present.

From another point of view, the novel is designed to demonstrate universal moral truths, and to portray the sameness of the human condition in superficially different circumstances. Mrs. Holt and Mrs. Transome are both mothers to rebellious sons, Harold and Felix are both Radicals and suitors to the same woman, Rev. Lyon and Mrs. Transome are both parents with an onerous secret, Esther and Mrs. Transome are both women who have to struggle to subdue their imperious wills, and all the characters are forced to discover the fact that their lives are largely determined by forces beyond their control. In terms of its moral philosophy, the novel demonstrates the irrelevance of politics

⁵⁷Felix Holt, p. 51.

more than the futility of political reform; the theme lies in Esther's discovery that character, and not class, is the major determinant of one's happiness. In that light, the political background of the novel, the upheaval created by all the agitated hopes of the inhabitants of Treby Magna, appears as an ironic reminder of the vanity of human wishes.

The political and moral themes of the novel reinforce one another and because both lead to the conclusion that the political enterprise is a waste of human energies. The point of view is not entirely new; to some extent all the social-problem novelists denigrated the political solution to social problems, or proposed a personal ethic as a remedy to social ills. Disraeli and Kingsley emphasized 'Mammonism,' and Mrs. Gaskell and Dickens stressed 'hard-heartedness,' as the main cause of class conflict; but they shared essentially the same diagnosis of the social problem in terms of psycho-moral failings, and proposed a sentiment (benevolence, sympathy, love, etc.) as a cure for the disease. The romance element in their novels serves the dual purpose of solving and dissolving the social problem: 'love' is the means of regenerating a sick society as well as the path to personal salvation in spite of that society.

George Eliot likewise provides a personal solution to social problems, but not because she regards society as defective in humane qualities. She is less interested in 'love' than 'duty,' and she sees society as an unalterable fact of existence, neither cruel nor kind. There are no scenes of poverty and social misery in Felix Holt. The social problem is the personal problem: the personal failure to accept responsibility or come to terms with the determinist principle results in social chaos. The political and personal elements of the novel are related because determinism governs the processes of public and private life; it is a metaphysical fact. The characters who come to terms with that fact in their private lives are also reconciled to the existing order of things. Felix Holt is more profoundly anti-political than any of its predecessors, not because it rejects political solutions, but because it refuses to recognize the validity of political questions.

The most impressive character in the novel, and probably the most significant representation of George Eliot's philosophy, is the figure of the aging aristocrat, Mrs. Transome. She is a tragic figure of imposing proportions, a classical study in Fate, Pride, and nemesis. Mrs. Transome demonstrates the tragic condition of humanity

which is the struggle for dignity in a situation determined by forces beyond one's control. As a woman, Mrs. Transome is subject to the dispositions of her husband, lover, and son. Her possibilities for forceful and independent action are limited by her sex, and motherhood provides her with little more than a short-lived illusion of power. She is furthermore an aristocrat, bred to the habits and manners of an earlier generation. As a young girl in Miss Lingon's school, she was taught to sit well on horseback, write a pretty hand, and paint small figures in water-colors, but none of these skills serve her in an industrial age. At a time when the aristocracy is generally in decline and her estate is being financially mismanaged by a ruthless former lover, she suffers not only the injury but the insult of poverty. She is also struggling with impending old age and the gradual diminution of her once considerable beauty. Most important, however, she suffers from the burden of her secret past and lives with the fear that her adulterous union with Jermyn, and Harold's illegitimacy, will be brought to light. She faces two painful choices: she can continue to be exploited by her former lover in exchange for his implicit promise of silence, or she can risk exposure and the loss of her last feeble claim on Harold's affection.

Given these possibilities, she lives out her life in loneliness and dread.

Mrs. Transome's story provides a parallel and counterpoint to all the major characters in the novel. Like Mrs. Holt, she is a mother; like the Rev. Lyon, a character burdened by a secret; and like Esther, a woman who must learn to submit her will to the man she loves. The parallels demonstrate the equality of all human beings in their subjection to the same natural laws; the differences reflect the degree to which personal morality (which is the function of one's free will) can influence the quality of one's personal life within predetermined limits. For example, the Rev. Lyon does not suffer as Mrs. Transome does when the past is exposed. His moral values are sound, and his daughter to whom he has conveyed those values actually sympathizes with him when she discovers his secret. In effect, his morality generates the conditions of his absolution and redeems him from the bondage of his past. Likewise, Esther's moral choice saves her from the fate of Mrs. Transome. When she recognizes that her freedom is limited by her sex, she chooses to marry a man worthy of her complete devotion rather than one whom she can control.

However, Mrs. Transome's importance in the novel is

larger than the comparison or contrast she offers to other moral types. Her tragic condition is the starting-point of George Eliot's criticism of political reform. The image of the aging lady declining in status, health, and fortune, and burdened by an inescapable past, is a palpable demonstration of the truth that man's heredity, environment, and history constitute an ineluctable 'fate.' If the individual is so utterly determined, it follows that society (which reflects the characters of its individual members) cannot be significantly changed by the magical fiat of Parliamentary law.

The relationship between the individual and society, or the whole and its parts, was a feature of George Eliot's novels after The Mill on the Floss, in which an independent heroine discovers the need for submission to irrefutable social laws. In Felix Holt the process of discovery is reversed. The novel is set against the background of a changing society rather than a static one: the old coach-roads are being replaced by the railroad, the young aristocracy as exemplified by Harold Transome is abandoning its political traditions, and young, well-educated workingmen like Felix are animated by a new-found consciousness of class. In the turbulent atmosphere of the first reformed election,

individuals who are ostensibly engaged in social and political issues gradually discover the limits of the political enterprise in the facts of their personal histories, the dictates of their individual human natures, and the demands of their social relationships.

In the words of Jerome Thale, the novel has its "rise in the immediacies of politics and . . . final issue in self-knowledge."⁵⁸ Harold's political ambitions are defeated by the disclosure of past events, and he is left at the end to work out his relation to a family and a tradition he had arrogantly disdained. Likewise Felix is humbled by his experience in the election, and he abandons his "self-flattering belief in a visionary virtue" for "the ordinary fruits of the spirit."⁵⁹ At the end of the novel, the self-styled "demagogue of a new sort . . . who will tell the people they are blind and foolish" is happily married and left to work out his "fine purpose" from the cozy confines of the domestic sanctuary. Most dramatically, Esther repudiates her legal claim to Transome Court and

⁵⁸Jerome Thale, The Novels of George Eliot (New York, 1959), p. 104 n.

⁵⁹Felix Holt, p. 76.

returns to the familiar scene of Malthouse Yard. She recognizes that her upbringing at the hands of the Rev. Lyon, and her needs as a woman, have dictated the conditions for her happiness which cannot be fulfilled by a change in social status. Self-knowledge for all these characters brings a re-direction of energies from the social to the personal sphere, and finally the evolution of a new sympathy and regard for others which can be the basis for genuine social reform.

Self-knowledge is an ambiguous concept in that it denotes one's recognition of freedom as well as necessity. The concept is embodied in the character and ideology of Felix who is a workingman by virtue of his free choice as well as the accident of his birth or the facts of his childhood conditioning. Felix refuses to change his class or his course of life, not because of "any peculiar virtue" but because of his "inward vocation":

Some men do well to accept riches, but that is not my inward vocation. I have no fellow-feeling with the rich as a class; the habits of their lives are odious to me. Thousands of men have wedded poverty because they expect to go to heaven for it, but I wed it because it enables me to do what I most want to do on earth.⁶⁰

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 270.

But despite his declamations of solidarity with the working class, Felix is primarily committed to his personal fulfillment. He chooses a craft as a watchmaker because it entails a minimum of personal compromise and a maximum of personal freedom; he rejects the opportunity to advance into the middle class because its labor is dehumanizing and alienating. Felix is highly critical of the "blind and foolish" workers, but he joins their ranks, and affirms his roots, as an alternative to assimilation in the anonymous ranks of the respectable middle class:

I have my heritage--an order I belong to. I have the blood of a line of handicraftsmen in my veins, and I want to stand up for the lot of the handicraftsman as a good lot, in which a man may be trained to all the best functions of his nature than if he belonged to the grimacing set who have visiting cards, and are proud to be thought richer than their neighbors.⁶¹

He is identified not with the working masses, but the individual artisan who takes pride in his craft.

Felix despises the materialism of the middle class for psychological as well as moral reasons. He is in some ways a vague prototype of the artist-intellectual cum worker which was to be popularized later in the century by such writers as Gissing, Morris, Hardy, and Lawrence: the worker who is opposed to the impersonal 'system' and who

⁶¹Ibid.

rejects its material advantages in the name of independence and personal pride. Felix has a horror of "employment that obliges me to prop up my chin with a high cravat, and wear straps, and pass the live-long day with a set of fellows who spend their money on shirt-pins."⁶² He refuses to play a role for the sake of material rewards, or to adopt social norms imposed by others. His "rude, cravatless image" and deliberately blunt manners reflect his contempt for ordinary social amenities and, in fact, for ordinary life (one of the lessons he must learn is that ordinary life is not only tolerable but valuable). When the Rev. Lyon points out that successful people are often in the best position to procure benefits for the less fortunate, Felix buttresses his position with the rather priggish argument that wealth is inherently corrosive to the spirit. "Let a man once throttle himself with a satin smock," he says, "and he'll get new wants and new motives. Metamorphosis will have begun at his neck-joint, and it will go on till it has changed his likings first, and then his reasoning."⁶³ Felix is primarily committed to his self-

⁶²Ibid., p. 65.

⁶³Ibid., pp. 66-67.

realization, and to that end he rejects the world and its wealth, and even the temptations of his own senses.

Felix is not motivated by the Christian ideals of ascetic purity or humility, although he accepts the Christian dichotomy of flesh and spirit. He is impelled by personal pride, and he dedicates himself to the social welfare because he recognizes (as Esther later does) that a life lived without sublime motive is not a life lived intensely. Like Mill's ideal social reformer, Felix is educated to his true interests, and he knows the priority of certain pleasures over others. He tells the Rev. Lyon that he was converted to the cause of the working man after six weeks' debauchery when he experienced not guilt but contempt for the life of mere physical pleasure:

If I had not seen that I was making a hog of myself very fast, and that pig-wash, even if I could have got plenty of it, was a poor sort of thing, I should never have looked life fairly in the face to see what was to be done with it. I laughed out loud at last to think of a poor devil like me, in a Scotch garret, with my stockings out at heel and a shilling or two to be dissipated upon, with a smell of raw haggis mounting from below, and old women breathing gin as they passed me on the stairs--wanting to turn my life into easy pleasure. Then I began to see what else it could be turned into.⁶⁴

His conversion is more a self-affirmation than a self-denial.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 64.

He recognizes that what is commonly considered 'virtue' is an essential condition for man's self-fulfillment, and that personal discipline is a pre-requisite for genuine self-advancement.

Felix regards the principle of self-interest as a kind of cancer which, by degrees, consumes the individual as well as the social organism. In the individual it functions as a rapacious and acquisitive impulse which gradually absorbs all the other human faculties and perverts the rational processes by which men make moral judgments. In his view, the social organism is affected in the same way. Felix sees the election as an exercise of self-interest, and the result of the election, as long as it is conducted in this manner, as a tyranny of the strong and greedy over the weak and vulnerable:

"Where's the good," he thought, "of pulling at such a tangled skein as this electioneering trickery? As long as three-fourths of the men in this country see nothing in an election but self-interest, and nothing in self-interest but some form of greed, one might as well try to purify the proceedings of the fishes, and say to a hungry codfish--'My good friend abstain; don't goggle your eyes so, or show such a stupid, gluttonous mouth, or think the little fishes are worth nothing except in relation to your own inside.'"⁶⁵

Given his view that "the schemes about voting . . . are

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 153.

engines . . . and the force that is to work them must come out of human nature," Felix believes that political reform must be preceded by the moral regeneration of the people. The cure for the social ill is the same as the one for the personal: the exercise of discipline and self-control. "Till they [the workers] can show there's something they love better than swilling themselves with ale," he feels, "extension of the suffrage can never mean anything for them but extension of boozing." Only "the ruling belief in society about what is right and what is wrong" can save society from the power of "ignorant numbers."

Despite his high moral tone, Felix claims to be a pragmatist. He tells the workers that the movement for reform is based on "vain expectations" and "thoughts that don't agree with the nature of things":

A fool or idiot is one who expects things to happen that never can happen: he pours milk into a can without a bottom, and expects the milk to stay there. The more of such vain expectations a man has, the more he is of a fool or idiot. And if any working man expects a vote to do for him what it never can do, he's foolish to that amount, no more.⁶⁶

Practical considerations lead Felix to adopt a political position with which Disraeli could sympathize. However,

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 301.

Felix is impelled by a harsh, almost cynical, pessimism and not the inspiration of some far-off ideal. In his personal and political goals Felix maintains a guarded view of the possibilities of success. He does not "mean to be illustrious" or "make a new era." "Where great things can't happen," he says, "I care for very small things."⁶⁷ He recognizes his limitations because of the weakness of his human nature and the determined quality of his existence as a social creature. He likewise recognizes the limitations of any program of social reform because of the stubborn characters of the individual social members. However, his recognition of the intractable "nature of things" only intensifies his commitment to the personal and social challenge. The greater his awareness of personal and political limitations, the more he is devoted to the challenge of exercising his moral freedom.

The pre-requisite of human and social progress in Felix Holt as in all of George Eliot's novels is the lone individual whose primary commitment is to his self-discovery and self-fulfillment in accordance with his social realities. Like Adam Bede and Caleb Garth, Felix takes on the

⁶⁷Ibid., p. 443.

responsibility of moral choice and rational judgment. He measures all the accepted 'notions' and ideologies against his own experience, and undertakes a course of action dictated primarily by his 'sacred feelings.' The imperatives of law or religion are subordinate to the dictates of his conscience or the impulses of his heart, since all forms of external authority are devices of man's own making which are potentially impediments to the sweep of human progress. At his trial Felix defends himself on the curious grounds that his personal philosophy, and not his adherence to law, is the measure of his guilt or innocence:

I'm not prepared to say I never would assault a constable where I had more chance of deliberation. I certainly should assault him if I saw him doing anything that made my blood boil: I reverence the law, but not where it is a pretext for wrong, which it should be the very object of law to hinder. I consider that I should be making an unworthy defence if I let the court infer from what I say myself . . . that because I am a man who hates drunken motiveless disorder, or any wanton harm, therefore I am a man who would never fight against authority: I hold it blasphemy to say that a man ought not to fight against authority: there is no great religion and no great freedom that has not done it, in the beginning. It would be impertinent of me to speak of this now if I did not need to say in my own defence that I should hold myself the worst sort of traitor if I put my hand either to fighting or disorder--which must mean injury to somebody--if I were not urged to it by what I hold to be sacred feelings, making it a sacred duty either to myself or my fellow man. And certainly . . . I never held it a sacred duty to try and get a Radical

candidate returned for North Loamshire by willingly heading a drunken howling mob.⁶⁸

Felix accepts no external authority as absolute, but establishes his own standard of values on the basis of his deepest sympathies. Like Adam Bede, he knows that "It isn't notions sets people doing the right thing--it's feelings."⁶⁹

Felix is the spokesman for a truth which Esther must discover through painful experience: the Law is an abstract notion which is often irrelevant to the conduct of life, and it provides an imperfect guideline for the decisions which shape one's destiny (the unsympathetic lawyer Jermyn, to whom "moral vulgarity cleaved . . . like an hereditary odor,"⁷⁰ is a case in point). Esther is the legal heiress to Transome Court, but her experience and her sex have assigned her a system of values and order of emotional priorities which are inconsistent with a life of easy luxury. "After all, she was a woman, and could not make her own lot. . . . Her lot is made for her by the

⁶⁸Ibid., pp. 450-451.

⁶⁹Adam Bede, p. 182.

⁷⁰Felix Holt, p. 119.

love she accepts."⁷¹ Esther could not give up her love for Felix without sacrificing the "motive that gives a sublime rhythm to a woman's life." Like Felix, she discovers her true nature when she is given the opportunity to change her station. The mere legal fact of her social status proves to be irrelevant to her experience, and she rejects the favors of fortune because of her 'sacred feelings.'

Esther's choice of her poor but honest lover is, unlike Mary Barton's, no testimony to the supreme power of love or the greater virtues of the humble life. Esther is not impelled by blind sentiment or innocent virtue: her love and admiration for Felix become progressively more compelling as she gradually discovers that her only real choice in life is the man to whom she could submit her will. She rejects Harold because "she had no sense of inferiority or just subjection" when she was with him; "there were even points in him for which she felt a touch not of angry but of playful scorn." On the other hand, "with Felix she had always a sense of dependence and possible illumination."⁷² She has no illusions about the virtues

⁷¹Ibid., p. 414.

⁷²Ibid., p. 412.

of the poor, and she chooses Felix with the full consciousness that she is "paying a heavy price"⁷³ for her woman's love.

Esther's story demonstrates that men are free, if only to discover a higher and nobler authority to which they can submit their wills. Her experience refutes the assumption of social reformers that a change in external circumstances creates a change in the individual's character or improves his chances for happiness, and it corroborates Felix's abiding belief that "there's some happiness for a man other than changing his station."⁷⁴ The opportunity for wealth and social advancement occasions a "revolutionary struggle"⁷⁵ in Esther's spirit, and forces her to reconsider her moral and emotional priorities. In the course of that struggle, she purges herself of a narrow self-interest, discovers a broader and nobler sense of herself, and incidentally exemplifies the futility of reform as a means of promoting the happiness of the social members. The sudden change in Esther's external circumstances

⁷³Ibid., p. 474.

⁷⁴Ibid., p. 443.

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 474.

have no effect on the shape of her destiny. "Esther had undergone something of an inward revolution"⁷⁶ and that obviated the need, or even the desirability, of an 'outward' one.

Although Esther is hardly a worker, her story is a practical demonstration of Felix's political philosophy. Her womanhood functions as a metaphor for the condition of the worker in much the same way that Sybil Gerard's femininity made her a representative of the People in Disraeli's novel. Like Mrs. Holt, Mrs. Transome, and Annette Ledru, Esther is unconditionally dependent upon the men in her life, and "her lot is made for her by the love she accepts." In this regard she is no different from the Tuckers and Spratts, the "pence-counting, parcel-tying generation" that fills the pews of the Rev. Lyon's chapel, and, for that matter, the mindless mob which needs "a man with a definite will and an energetic personality . . . as a sort of flag."⁷⁷ Esther frankly admits, "I am weak--my husband must be greater and nobler than I am,"⁷⁸ and one

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Ibid., p. 326.

⁷⁸Ibid., p. 484.

of the novel's political points is that the "blind and foolish" workers must likewise recognize the limits of their abilities and their collective place in a functional social scheme.

The 'woman question' is explicitly discussed in the novel, presumably because of its relevance to the political issues. The debates about democracy and the condition of women center on the definition of 'freedom' and 'authority,' and the resolution which applies to the political problem is equally valid for the woman problem. Both groups must accept those limitations which are inherent in "the nature of things," and submit to an authority which embodies sound moral principles. Mrs. Transome's suffering is due, in part, to her failure to accept the reasonable and necessary boundaries of her "imperious will." To that extent, her suffering is the inevitable nemesis for her narcissism and quest for power. On the other hand, she suffers because of the defective quality of her chosen masters. Jermyn is an unfeeling villain who exploits her because of her helplessness and his greed, while Harold is a well-intentioned but nevertheless oppressive autocrat who accords her only semi-human status. Harold expects his mother to be contented with cushions and carriages just as

he expects his political constituency to be contented with slogans, superficial appearances, and small bribes. Mrs. Transome wrongly concludes that "God was cruel when he created woman"⁷⁹; the woman's problem, like the worker's, is, according to Eliot, her subjection to willful and arbitrary authority.

Felix's authority, on the other hand, is founded upon the moral principles to which he is committed. Esther rightly observes that he "seemed to bring at once a law and the love that gave strength to obey the law."⁸⁰ His problem is that he expects too much of women, but only to the extent that he expects too much of himself. Felix is essentially priggish; in the kind view of the Rev. Lyon he is 'deluded' by a "visionary virtue higher than the ordinary fruits of the Spirit." He complains that women think too little about serious problems, and that they trivialize their own lives and their husbands' with "small airs and small notions, about as applicable to the business of life as a pair of tweezers to the clearing of a forest."⁸¹ Felix is somewhat contemptuous of ordinary

⁷⁹Ibid., p. 380.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 272.

⁸¹Ibid., p. 74.

life and the dull occupations of the domestic scene, and he is a stern pedagogue to the woman whom he undertakes to instruct in "the business of life." Nevertheless, he dignifies his women while Harold reduces them, largely because he is not "fond of mastery" for its own sake, as Harold is.

Esther is 'liberated' as a woman (and as a member of the working class) because she submits her will to Felix on the grounds of universal moral principles which they share. At first she gains respect for the members of her class as she comes to recognize the "passion and struggle . . . delight and renunciation, in the lot of beings who had hitherto been a dull enigma to her."⁸² She is "exalted" by a "new sympathy" for her father because "her acquaintance with Felix Holt . . . had taught her to doubt the infallibility of her own standard, and raised a pre-sentiment of moral depths that were hidden from her."⁸³ Finally, she admits her love for Felix, and "her woman's lot was perfect . . . the man she loved was her hero . . . her woman's passion and reverence for rarest goodness rushed together in an undivided current."⁸⁴ Esther's

⁸²Ibid., p. 259.

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 456.

complete submission to the will of her lover is only in 'the nature of things,' because "the best part of a woman's love is worship."⁸⁵

In George Eliot's view, the education of women was a necessary preparation for their unique functions in society, and entirely consistent with their physical and psychological differences from men. She believed that "a more thorough education will tend to do away with the odious vulgarity of our notions about functions and employment, and to propagate the true gospel that the deepest disgrace is to insist on doing work for which we are unfit--to do any sort of work badly."⁸⁶ She repudiated "the vulgar alarm of men lest women be 'unsexed'" as a consequence of their education:

We can no more afford to part with that exquisite type of gentleness, tenderness, possible maternity suffusing a woman's being with affectionateness, which makes what we mean by the feminine character, than we can afford to part with the human love, the mutual subjection of soul between a man and a woman--which is also a growth and a revelation beginning before all history.

The answer to those alarms of men about education is, to admit fully that the mutual delight of the sexes in each other must enter into the perfection of life, but to point out that complete union and sympathy

⁸⁵Ibid., p. 363.

⁸⁶Cross, 1885 edn., IV, p. 425.

can only come by women having opened to them the same store of acquired truth or belief that men have, so that their ground of judgment may be as far as possible the same.⁸⁷

The education of women and, by extension, the education of the workers could only help them accept their limitations and undertake their special functions. They would recognize that "No good can come to women, more than to any class of male mortals, while each aims at doing the highest kind of work, which . . . only the few can do well."

Education is a pre-requisite for liberty as the Rev. Lyon defines the term:

The right to rebellion is the right to seek a higher rule, and not to wander in mere lawlessness. Wherefore . . . liberty is not license. And I apprehend . . . that there is a law in music, disobedience whereunto would bring us to the level of shrieking maniacs or howling beasts: so that herein we are well instructed how true liberty can be nought but the transfer of obedience from the will of one or of a few men to that will which is the norm or rule for all men. . . . And even as in music, where all obey and concur to one end, so that each has the joy of contributing to a whole whereby he is ravished and lifted up into the courts of heaven, so will it be in that crowning time of the millennial reign, when our daily prayer will be fulfilled, and one law shall be written on all hearts, and be the very structure of all thought, and be the principle of all action.⁸⁸

⁸⁷Ibid., p. 468.

⁸⁸Felix Holt, p. 157.

The Rev. Lyon tacitly rejects the Augustinian definition of freedom as the submission to Divine Authority as well as the Marxist view that freedom is the recognition of necessity. In his view, an individual is free within certain limits: he can choose a course of action based upon his highest principles and operate within a social context largely determined by others. His happiness lies in his ability to function within the larger scheme.

The egotist, the character who acts out of unlimited confidence in his private will and personal destiny, is not only obnoxious but also foolish. Harold Transome is the egotist, "trusting in his own skill to shape the successs of his own morrows, ignorant of what many yesterdays had determined for him beforehand."⁸⁹ He adopts political ideologies and marries women for the sake of convenience, and manipulates both friends and enemies in order to achieve his private ambitions. He regards people as inanimate objects which are subject to his control. His favorite butler, for example, he remembers as "a neat little machine . . . an old machine though,"⁹⁰ and he

⁸⁹Ibid., p. 189.

⁹⁰Ibid., p. 21.

regards his mother as a mere ornament for his home. He consistently likens society to a forest of trees to be cleared and planted at his will. He turns Radical because "the Radical sticks are growing . . . and half the Tory oaks are rotting," and he is confident that he can "remove the rotten timbers" of society "and substitute fresh oak."⁹¹ The revelation that Jermyn is his father comes as a shocking blow to his inflated ego: "for the first time the iron had entered into his soul, and he felt the hard pressure of our common lot, the yoke of that mighty resistless destiny laid upon us by the acts of other men as well as our own."⁹²

From a political point of view the conclusion of the novel is anti-climactic: the Radicals having been roundly defeated, things remain much the same as they were in Treby Magna. The only significant changes are in the lives of the characters who were affected by the election and its assorted crises. Harold is duly chastised for his arrogance, Felix and Esther are happily married, and the "honest Trebians" are left believing "somehow . . . more in everything good." It is a conclusion dictated by the

⁹¹Ibid., p. 44.

⁹²Ibid., p. 470.

author's moral philosophy as much as her fidelity to literary convention:

We see human heroism broken into units and say, this unit did little--might as well not have been. But in this way we might break up a great army into units; in this way we might break the sunlight into fragments, and think that this and the other might be cheaply parted with. Let us rather raise a monument to the soldiers whose brave hearts only kept the ranks unbroken, and met death--a monument to the faithful who were not famous, and who are precious as the continuity of the sunbeams is precious, though some of them fall unseen and on barrenness.⁹³

Although Felix Holt is not quite a novel-with-a-purpose, it suffers from some of the defects of the genre, notably in its shifting tonalities and its characterization of the working-class hero. George Eliot's critics and biographers note the difficulty she experienced in writing the novel, as if she were straining to achieve a new level of truth in her art. Romola marks a kind of turning-point in her career when she abandoned the reminiscences of her childhood and the nostalgic portraits of rural life in favor of a more serious, or at least deliberate, delineation of character in a studied historical setting. Felix Holt continues that process of her artistic development, although the scene of the novel is in a more familiar

⁹³Ibid., p. 189.

territory. Like Romola, Felix Holt demanded considerable research, in law as well as history, and the novel shows the clumsy seams where the author grafted her conception of the 'truth' on to the more spontaneous visions of her imagination. From an imaginative point of view, Mrs. Transome seems to be the inspiration for the novel, and the political and social questions, along with the characters of Felix and Esther, appear to be something like exegesis on the major text.

As Henry James points out, the titular hero of the novel is "little more than an occasional apparition; and indeed the novel has no hero."⁹⁴ His "radicalism, the pretended motive of the story, is choked amidst a mass of subordinate interests,"⁹⁵ and "he and his principles" play a "brief . . . part and are . . . often absent from the scene."⁹⁶ Henry James pronounces Felix "a fragment" and declares that the novel has "only a heroine."⁹⁷ Clearly

⁹⁴"The Novels of George Eliot," Atlantic Monthly, 18 (October, 1866), in A Century of George Eliot Criticism, p. 47.

⁹⁵Ibid., p. 51.

⁹⁶"Felix Holt, the Radical," first published in The Nation 3 (16 August 1866), in A Century of George Eliot Criticism, p. 47.

⁹⁷"The Novels of George Eliot," p. 47.

the major part of the action belongs to Esther, a conventional Victorian heroine, and Felix is merely a mouthpiece for the ideas which influence her, or an allegorical figure of Goodness in her private drama. He is the hero of the novel because he expresses the correct opinions, but he is entirely peripheral to the dramatic action.

Even as a moral type, Felix is a dull and unimpressive figure. There is no vital source for his morality; his opinions and principles are bloodless formulas dissociated from the raw elements of personality. In effect, he has no personality--no nervous qualities, intellectual tensions, or elusive psychological properties. Henry James sees him as a character entirely without passion:

He is distinguished for his excellent good sense. He is uncompromising yet moderate, eager yet patient, earnest yet unimpassioned. He is indeed a thorough young Englishman, and, in spite of his sincerity, his integrity, his intelligence, and his broad shoulders, there is nothing in his future to thrill the reader.⁹⁸

Felix lives by, and for, his moral principles. He regards life as a "solemn . . . thing"⁹⁹ to be lived in the light of "right opinions," and he will not be deterred by the

⁹⁸"Felix Holt, the Radical," p. 41.

⁹⁹Felix Holt, p. 128.

"shallow stuff" which Esther calls "taste" or "sensibility." In his stern view of "the business of life," mere impulses or fine feelings are nothing but "tarts and confectionery."¹⁰⁰ "The creature who has the sensibilities that you call taste, and not the sensibilities that you call opinions," he tells Esther, "is simply a lower, pettier sort of being--an insect that notices the shaking of the table, but never notices the thunder."¹⁰¹ He insists on living a "manly life," and to that end he rejects love and marriage because they make men "slaves to the petty desires of petty creatures." In short, Felix is priggish, sententious, and ultimately boring, and his "shaggy-haired, cravatless image" which presumably testifies to his moral earnestness fails to make him more attractive.

It may be that Felix is a hero because of those qualities and not in spite of them. George Eliot demands of her heroes a stoic dedication to moral principle, and they are consequently "marked by . . . [a] singular rigidity of outline and fixedness of posture."¹⁰² Felix is disqualified

¹⁰⁰Ibid., p. 129.

¹⁰¹Ibid., p. 127.

¹⁰²"The Novels of George Eliot," p. 51.

for dramatic action because he is invulnerable to temptation, and his activities must necessarily be confined to thinking and speaking, or rather preaching. All his actions are filtered through his moral consciousness: he can perform the ordinary tasks of ordinary men, but only because of his opinions on the subject of "the dignity of labor," and not out of a genuine feeling for the work at hand. As a figure of unwavering rectitude, he maintains strict control over all his impulses and remains stolidly virtuous while the more dramatic action falls to the lot of fallible human creatures. Felix's ideals are successfully portrayed in vivid minor characters: Mrs. Transome's servant, Denner, for example, conveys all of Felix's stoical sense of duty in the manner with which she arranges her mistress' dress. However, a character like Denner or Felix is incapable of generating any large action, precisely because of his fixed virtues and invulnerability to temptation. Felix can and does provide a moral standard by which other characters aspire, but his direct influence is limited unless he is a deliberate demagogue or social nuisance.

Felix's stoicism is not intrinsically interesting: it lacks the drama of Christian piety or the passion of

ascetic idealism. As one of George Eliot's critics observed, Felix "brings no pietistic exaltation to his work, and only preaches the doctrine of self-denial from the social point of view and in its least attractive shape."¹⁰³ His ideology amounts to militant passivity in the name of no future reward. He is a Radical who is opposed to the Radical candidate, and a political activist whose main purpose is to prevent the Trebians from taking too active an interest in politics. He believes that external reform is primarily a matter of internal reform, and that internal reform begins with the loss of hope in the external. He has "that stoical resignation which is often a hidden heroism"¹⁰⁴ but it is a kind of heroism which makes action or passion on a grand scale impossible. His story is necessarily anti-climactic, because the more he understands the "tremendous uncertainty" about "the amount of result [a man] . . . may see from his particular work," the greater will be his "care for very small things."¹⁰⁵ Henry James complains

¹⁰³John Morley, "Felix Holt, the Radical," first published in Saturday Review, 21 (16 June 1866), in A Century of George Eliot Criticism, p. 35.

¹⁰⁴Cross, 1885, edn., VI, p. 99.

¹⁰⁵

about Felix that "We find him a Radical and we leave him what?--only utterly married,"¹⁰⁶ but that very ordinary conclusion is a necessary consequence of the hero's moral values.

Felix's role as a moral-political ideologue conflicts with his other role as an idealized country artisan. As an idealized artisan, he should meet the requirements which George Eliot laid down in Adam Bede: "an inheritance of affections nurtured by a simple family life of common need and common industry . . . faculties trained in skillful courageous labour . . . painstaking honest men, with the skill and conscience to do well the tasks that lie before them" (chap. xix). The idealized artisan is a familiar figure in Victorian literature as an example of pre-industrial innocence and an implicit criticism of the dehumanizing effects of the factory system. Adam was such a figure but Felix is not. Felix is pre-eminently conscious of himself as someone opposed to his society and his time. There is nothing spontaneous about him (despite the author's transparent attempt to humanize him in a tender moment with little Job) or his identification with the working class.

¹⁰⁶"Felix Holt, the Radical," first published in The Nation, 16 August 1866. In A Century of George Eliot Criticism, p. 40.

Felix is a product of the Industrial Revolution and he has been dislocated from his roots: his speech is without rural dialect, his education and experience are broader than the average townsman's, his occupation is not a cherished family tradition, and he is fully conscious of himself as a member of a class. The very high level of consciousness which makes Felix a moral-political ideologue disqualifies him as a representative of the traditional country artisan.

Nor is Felix a representative of the industrial working class. His class-consciousness is motivated by moral and cultural reasons, and not the economic pressures of capitalist exploitation. He rejects and derides the laborers and miners who are the more typical representatives of the working class, and he ridicules their 'leaders,' the political agitators and "boozers" who gather in the ale-house to grumble against society. He criticizes them in terms of the moral values of the peasant-artisan and the religious values of the Dissenting church. In his view, they are not an oppressed group but a lawless, selfish, greedy, and ignorant mob in no way superior to their so-called exploiters.

Felix is a working man because his "natural history" is the same as that of the working class. His vision

of the world as a dangerous pitfall to the man of high principle is traceable to his Dissenting roots. He takes for granted that "worldly success" is a spiritual distraction, and he is "determined never to go about making my face simpering or solemn, and telling professional lies for profit; or to get tangled in affairs where I must wink at dishonesty."¹⁰⁷ He is the heir to the Rev. Lyon in his spirit of independence and his decision to "determine for myself" a course of action in life. His identification with the workers reflects his commitment to "the labor and common burthen of the world"¹⁰⁸ as a matter of moral principle, but he in no way identifies with the working-class movement.

Felix is no 'proletarian,' but a handicraftsman, and in that sense a 'labor aristocrat'¹⁰⁹ whose skill and education differentiate him from the ordinary laborer to the extent that he is almost of another class. His skill has not been superseded by machinery nor its practitioners unionized; in effect, he is a pre-industrial artisan

¹⁰⁷Felix Holt, p. 267.

¹⁰⁸Ibid.

¹⁰⁹See E. J. Hobsbawm, "The Labour Aristocracy in Nineteenth Century England." In Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour (London, 1964).

transposed into an age of industrial social change. The conditions of alienation and exploitation do not apply to him and he does not apply it to the workers below him. His 'Radicalism,' such as it is, lies in his determination to direct human affairs in the light of moral principles,¹¹⁰ and in the spirit of independence which is his heritage from Tom Paine, William Cobbett, and the Nonconformists. Those principles and that spirit are, in the mid-nineteenth century, the bases for a conservative political position, because the workers are not the independent and rational men in whom the early Radicals placed their hopes. Felix sees the problems in society and the condition of the workers totally in moral terms; he recognizes no economic determinant and he has no interest in questions of distributive justice. Despite the fact that he is active in the election, he has no real interest in matters of procedural justice, either; he is concerned only with the character of the individual social members. Like the early Radicals (many of whom were revolutionary artisans), he reduces the argument about different types and forms of government to a more fundamental question about the nature of man.

¹¹⁰Felix Holt, p. 77.

Felix's ambiguous status as a working-class character reflects a tension in George Eliot's political and social philosophy. Like many liberal thinkers of her time, she was impulsively drawn to the vision of the early social reformers who had an unbounded faith in the ability of independent and rational men to create a just society. On the other hand, she was doubtful about the practicability of their program. Like Mill, she struggled with the paradox that rampant individualism acted out on the political scene gives rise to its exact negation, and that social mobility is not necessarily attended by any melioration of social suffering. The Reform Bill of 1832, the rise of a powerful middle class, the policies of state intervention in social problems, and the struggle for universal suffrage all tended to unsettle the social order without securing any advantage to the laboring masses. Felix represents George Eliot's disillusionment with the dream of the early radicals and their animating faith in the possibility of social progress. He is a worker in the Tom Paine tradition who is transposed into an industrial society and forced to redefine his political position. Felix recognizes that the workers are not independent and rational men, that increased opportunities for social

advancement exact a price of deracination and moral confusion, and that individuals must paradoxically remain within their communal contexts if they wish to maintain their individuality. In effect, he has the moral values of Tom Paine and the social sentiments of William Cobbett. He has the spirit of independence, faith in man's reason, and conviction about the fundamental equality of all men associated with Paine. On the other hand, he is responding to industrial conditions in which social gradations are rapidly collapsing and the human and natural resources of the country are being "drawn unnaturally together in great heaps." Under those conditions he struggles to restore himself to the concrete, local, and traditional working-class community rather than commit himself to universal ideals and the society of the future. He withdraws from the impersonal arena of the marketplace, rejects the machinery of government, and retreats to his small town, his craft, and his immediate friends and family. Felix is not a recognizable working-class character, but an ideological diagram.

Felix's moral values reflect George Eliot's critique of industrial civilization as a pernicious structure of feeling. She associates industrialism with a mood of rising expectations, unqualified materialism, arrested

moral energies, and public impatience with the existing order of things. Like the earlier social-problem novelists, she regards the Utilitarian ethic with its emphasis on the principle of self-interest as the root of the social evil. Unlike those novelists, she fails to examine the practical effects of that ethic on the lives of the workers. There are no Coketowns or Jacob's Islands in Felix Holt, no discussions of oppression or economic exploitation, and the workers' discontents are attributed primarily to their fondness for gin and neglect of church and family. George Eliot saw every level of society contaminated by the same moral disease, and her anger was directed against the spirit of selfishness, materialism, and moral lethargy which pervaded all the classes. Perhaps her perspective was influenced by the fact that the various working-class movements (trade union, political reform, etc.) revived in the 1860's, and the workers were no less involved than the capitalists in the national scramble for wealth and power. She may have also resented the advent of the Civil Service examinations (begun in the previous decade) which stirred the ambitions of the middle class,¹¹¹ and produced a group

¹¹¹See W. L. Burn, The Age of Equipoise (New York, 1964), p. 141.

of arrogant bureaucrats and colonial masters whose ethic was as inhumane as the Utilitarian. The figure of Harold Transome signifies George Eliot's criticism of the class newly-created by England's expanding empire. In any case, she had a novel view of industrialism and its effects on the workers: it has delivered too much opportunity into the greedy palms of the average Englishman. In tones that are typically Victorian, she pleaded for a 'culture,' a system of inner restraints, to prevent the impending 'anarchy' in personal and public life.

George Eliot regarded the problems of the working class almost exclusively in moral-cultural terms which are largely irrelevant to the systems of Marx or Disraeli. In her view, the working class was not a group newly-created by the combined pressures of industrialism and capitalism, nor was it a manifestation of the 'lower orders' which have existed from time immemorial. She defined the workers in terms of their antecedents, as pre-industrial peasant-artisans whose cherished cultural traditions were being modified (or corrupted) by the forces of social change. She did not perceive the workers as a group which exists in some relation of power to another group; they were, in her social scheme, an independent organ within the social

organism, functionally differentiated from all the other organs, and culturally adapted for their special role. George Eliot believed that the relation of the social parts to the whole was disturbed by the dislocations of industrialism, the moral fibre of the social members attenuated by the Utilitarian philosophy, and the prospect for genuine social advancement dimmed by a reckless faith in progress. The function of the worker-hero in this scheme of things was to resist assimilation into the social monolith, affirm his craft traditions, and assert his sense of community with other heirs to those traditions.

From a twentieth-century perspective, George Eliot's worker is a transitional figure from the passionate idealist of the early social-problem novels to the proletarian rebels of later fiction. Like Walter Gerard or Alton Locke, he criticizes industrial society for its spirit of materialism and competition, and tries to find a more Christian ethic on which to base his life. He also resembles the characters of Gissing, Hardy, and Lawrence in his sense of the working class as a cultural rather than political or economic entity, and his insistence on the independent validity (if not superiority) of its style of life. Felix is an early type of the non-conformist worker who rejects the

dreary respectability of the middle-class establishment, refuses to engage in alienating labor, and struggles to maintain a more personal style of life.

AFTERWORD

A NOTE ON GISSING, HARDY, AND LAWRENCE

The successful emergence of the working class in late nineteenth-century fiction is due, at least in part, to the appearance of several novelists who had intimate knowledge of the class they portrayed. Gissing and Hardy, though hardly of proletarian extraction (Gissing's father was a chemist and Hardy's a master-mason), were brought into direct contact with England's lower orders largely through personal misfortune, and they moved freely among people whom the social-problem novelist had regarded as dangerous. Their knowledge of the working class is reflected most significantly in their portraits of working class characters as active and independent agents of their own destinies. Gissing and Hardy were possibly the first English novelists to perceive the working man as a character with a consciousness. At a time when Henry James (in The Princess Cassamassima) and Joseph Conrad (in The Secret Agent) portrayed the worker as an inarticulate creature of confused aspirations and anarchic impulses, impelled to

revolutionary violence by his perplexity and envy of upper-class order, Gissing¹ and Hardy² portrayed him as an intelligent human being groping for full consciousness of himself. In the characters of Arthur Golding and Jude Fawley, they described the self-reliant working-class auto-didact whose intellectual aspirations and noble social purposes are frustrated by careless cosmic forces, the malicious designs of the social 'system,' and the inevitable weaknesses of the human will.

To some extent, the figures of the intelligent and self-conscious worker reflects the developments in the working-class movement during the final quarter of the nineteenth century. The decade of the 1880's witnessed a phenomenal growth in the trade-union movement and other working-class organizations, and it was also the decade in which England passed its last major reform bill. The working class came to be recognized by many Englishmen as

¹In his early novels, Workers in the Dawn and The Unclassed.

²In Jude the Obscure. As Irving Howe points out, Jude's social classification is uncertain; Jude "hovers somewhere between an old-fashioned artisan and a modern worker." In his intellectual aspirations, he represents "a sort of rural cousin to the self-educated worker." See Irving Howe, Thomas Hardy (New York and London, 1967), pp. 136-137.

a forceful pressure-group working within society rather than a peripheral or foreign power threatening to undermine it. The advent of this working-class movement may have allowed novelists like Gissing, Mark Rutherford, Hardy, and Bennett (in the Clayhanger novels) to portray the worker in a way that Dickens could not--despite Dickens' considerable sympathy for the workers and his identification with England's 'lower orders.' Dickens could not imagine that the Stephen Blackpools of society might be able to achieve a 'consciousness' or assume the initiative for their education and collective destiny. Like the early 'Utopian' socialists, the social-problem novelists did not recognize an independent will and spirit in those whom society had oppressed, and they placed their hopes for social reform in the Christian conscience or benevolent sympathies of an enlightened upper class. They regarded the worker as the dumb and inarticulate victim of the 'system' whose protest was nothing more than a frenzied and violent release of pent-up frustrations. By comparison, the later novelists perceived the worker as a character rising to consciousness in the workingman's clubs, socialist organizations, and 'friendly societies' where he met with his fellows to discuss common problems and deliberate

upon the possible solutions, and they described his actions in the light of his new-found self-awareness.

The new image of the worker reflects a greater degree of 'engagement' on the part of the novelist, a more profound sympathy with the problems and aspirations of the working-class, than could be found in the social-problem novel. For one thing, some novelists may have come to identify themselves with the working class because of their common fate in a materialistic society. This was probably the motive behind George Gissing's early enthusiasm for working-class radicalism. In The Unclassed, his hero Waymark describes the phenomenon which Raymond Williams calls "negative identification":³

I often amuse myself with taking to pieces my former self. I was not a conscious hypocrite in those days of violent radicalism, working-man's-club lecturing, and the like; the fault was that I understood myself as yet so imperfectly. That zeal on behalf of the suffering masses was nothing more nor less than disguised zeal on behalf of my own starved passions. I was poor and desperate, life had no pleasures, the future seemed hopeless, yet I was overflowing with vehement desires, every nerve in me was a hunger which cried to be appeased. . . . I identified myself with the poor and ignorant; I did not make their cause my own, but my own cause theirs.⁴

³Culture and Society (New York, 1958), pp. 175-176.

⁴(first edn. 1884, repr. 1901), ch. xxv.

A similar structure of feeling informs the social criticism of John Ruskin and William Morris, both of whom turned to the task of social reform in the hope of saving the role of the artist in industrial society. To some extent, they shared Carlyle's judgment of industrial civilization as a system founded on the worship of Mammon and a faith in mechanism. What Carlyle perceived as the absence of "Soul" in his society was regarded by Dickens and the other social-problem novelists as the lack of "feeling," and by art critics like Ruskin and Morris as the absence of "Vital Beauty." Ruskin and Morris were art critics before they were social critics; their interest in social problems stemmed from their concern for the future of art in a civilization which "reduced the civilized world to vulgarity."⁵ William Morris wrote that "the study of history and the love and practice of art forced me into hatred of the civilization which . . . would turn history into inconsequent nonsense, and make art a curiosity of the past, which would have no serious relation to the life of the present."⁶

⁵William Morris, "The Worker's Share of Art," in William Morris: Selected Writings and Designs, ed. Asa Briggs (Baltimore, 1962), p. 142.

⁶"How I Became a Socialist," Ibid., p. 36.

For this reason, above all, Morris declared that "the cause of Art is the cause of the people."⁷ Like Disraeli, he believed that the proponents of traditional civilized values formed a natural alliance with the workers.

Late Victorian novelists like Gissing and Hardy (and twentieth-century novelists like D. H. Lawrence and, later, Allan Sillitoe and Raymond Williams) found in their working-class characters a voice for their protest against the dehumanizing quality of life in industrial society. They perceived society as a system of ideas and values rather than a tangible physical reality, and they were concerned with the effects of that system on the human spirit. To that extent, they can be regarded as the literary heirs of Dickens and Carlyle. Lawrence's description of an industrial city call to mind Dickens' Coketown and Carlyle's grim reflections on Manchester:

The blackened brick dwellings, the black slate roofs glistening their sharp edges, the mud black with coal-dust, the pavements wet and black. It was as if dismalness had soaked through and through everything. The utter negation of natural beauty, the utter negation of the gladness of life, the utter absence of the instinct for shapely beauty which every bird and beast has, the utter death of the human intuitive faculty was appalling. . . .⁸

⁷Art and Socialism (repr. Nonesuch Morris), p. 635.

⁸Lady Chatterley's Lover (repr. 1950), pp. 173-174.

The notion that the working-class hero represented the last vestiges of an intuitive faculty in a mechanical world was not original with Lawrence; to some extent, all the social-problem novelists criticized the quality of life in industrial society and idealized the worker as a representative of an earlier and gentler time or as a spokesman for a more humane ethic. Disraeli's *Sybil* is a Saxon and a Roman Catholic whose modesty and innocence contrasts with the egotism and vanity of the newly-arrived Lord Mowbray. The cheerful domesticity in the Barton household counterpoints the languor in the Carson home, and the Rev. Lyon's cluttered cottage in Felix Holt counterpoints the solemn gloom in the Transome mansion. However, the social-problem novelist typically idealized the worker in a patronizing spirit and for the purpose of securing the sympathy of the reader. The idealized worker in those novels also served as a model of non-violence as opposed to other characters bent on revolution or mob-action. By comparison, Gissing, Hardy, and especially Lawrence appear to have genuinely believed that working-class culture constituted a wholesome alternative to the prevailing values.⁹

⁹Paul Morel is presumably Lawrence's spokesman in this dialogue with his mother:

"You know," he said to his mother, "I don't want

The social criticism of Ruskin and Morris undoubtedly helped to create the climate of ideas of the late Victorian novelist,¹⁰ and to direct the cultural protest of a writer like George Gissing (whose spiritual heir in the

to belong to the well-to-do middle class. I like my common people best. I belong to the common people."

"But if anyone else said so, my son, wouldn't you be in a tear. YOU know you consider yourself equal to any gentleman."

"In myself," he answered, "not in my class or my education or my manners. But in myself I am."

"Very well, then. Then why talk about the common people?"

"Because--the difference between people isn't in their class, but in themselves. Only from the middle classes one gets ideas, and from the common people--life itself, warmth. You feel their hates and loves."

Sons and Lovers (New York, repr. 1969), p. 256.

¹⁰Their impact, especially Ruskin's, can hardly be overstated. George Eliot said of Ruskin, "I venerate him as one of the great teachers of the day. The grand doctrines of truth and sincerity in art, and the nobleness and solemnity of our human life, which he teaches with the inspiration of a Hebrew prophet, must be stirring up young minds in a promising way." J. W. Cross, George Eliot's Life as Related in Her Letters and Journals (London, New edn., 1887), p. 239. In a similar vein, Gissing said of Ruskin, "In his lecture the other night . . . Ruskin hints that the degradation of the heavens is due to men's iniquity. Strange sight, the old fellow standing up in the London Institution and rebuking his hearers like a Hebrew prophet!" Letter to his brother, February 14, 1884, Letters of George Gissing to Members of His Family, collected and arranged by Algernon and Ellen Gissing (New York, repr. 1970), p. 136. According to Richard Hoggart, the 'earnest minority' of working men during the mid- and late-nineteenth century "read volume after volume of Morris and Ruskin." The Uses of Literacy (Boston, 1966), p. 261.

twentieth century is possibly someone like George Orwell) to the arena of working-class politics. Ruskin's belief that "the art of any country is the exponent of its social and political virtues"¹¹ was echoed in Gissing's claim that there existed a "necessary union between beauty in life and social reform."¹² Ruskin claimed that "The art, or general productive and formative energy, of any country, is an exact exponent of its ethical life. You can have noble art only from noble persons, associated under laws fitted to their time and circumstances."¹³ The notion that there existed an organic relation between the art and the 'way of life' in a given society impelled Ruskin and Morris to examine the industrial social system and its impact on the artist. Ruskin inveighed against "the great civilized invention of the division of labour" which results in the "degradation of the operative into a machine" and eventually destroys his capacity for "invention" or "variety." In his view, the demoralized condition of the workingman demonstrated that industrial civilization stul-

¹¹In the manuscript printed as an appendix to Modern Painters (Library edn.), II, pp. 388-389. Cited by Williams, op.cit., p. 136.

¹²Letter to his brother, February 14, 1884. Letters, p. 133.

¹³Modern Painters, p. 136.

tified the artistic spirit and made men "less than men."¹⁴ William Morris likewise believed that "all worthy schools of art must be . . . the outcome of the aspirations of the people towards the beauty and true pleasure of life,"¹⁵ and that such aspirations were impossible within the existing system. He claimed that "Socialism . . . is the only hope of the arts"¹⁶ because "these aspiration of the people towards beauty can only be born from a condition of practical equality of economical condition amongst the whole population."¹⁷ A crucial difference between Ruskin and Morris, the younger and older generation of Victorian critics, is that Morris was not content with diagnosing the social problem; he committed himself to the working-class movement and placed his faith for social reform in the awakening consciousnesses of the workers themselves. Gissing observed that distinction in a letter to his brother written in 1884:

¹⁴The Stones of Venice (London, 1903), II, ch. vi.

¹⁵"Art and the Future," William Morris: Selected Writings and Designs, p. 144.

¹⁶"The Worker's Share of Art," *ibid.*, p. 142.

¹⁷"Art and the Future," *ibid.*, p. 144.

I would make a chief point of the necessary union between beauty in life and social reform. Ruskin despairs of the latter, and so can only look on bygone times. Younger men (like W. Morris) are turning from artistic work to social agitation just because they fear that Art will be crushed out of the world as things are.¹⁸

In effect, Ruskin and Morris helped break down the dichotomy between Art and Society, or the Artist and the People, which the novelists of the 1840's felt so keenly. The idea that lower-class society had no place in a work of art is implicit in Disraeli's preface to Sybil, and Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Kingsley took pains to apologize for the apparent breach of artistic decorum in their novels about the 'condition of the people.' Disraeli was equally defensive about his use of political themes in his novels, but some of his contemporary critics nevertheless complained that "the novelist has turned colporteur to some board of political missions, and the propagandist of every soup-and-bread society assumes the disguise of a poet."¹⁹ Against this background of ideas, Ruskin and Morris demonstrated that aesthetic and social concerns were not antithetical, that a 'sincere' artist could be committed to issues of

¹⁸Letters, p. 136.

¹⁹See Edmund Speare, The Political Novel (Oxford, 1924), p. 28.

social reform, and that any work of art necessarily reflects something of the society and time in which it was produced.

Perhaps equally important, Ruskin and Morris, especially the latter, laid the foundation for a new conception of the working-class character, and helped make possible the portraits of Arthur Golding, Jude Fawley, and, later, Paul Morel--the working-class artists and intellectuals.²⁰ Ruskin was among the first social critics to

²⁰Several minor characters in the social-problem novels anticipate the figure of the proletarian intellectual. Sandy Mackaye, the bookseller in Alton Locke, and Job Legh, the naturalist in Mary Barton are both self-taught old men, veterans of strikes and revolutions, and beneficent mentors to an over-zealous younger generation. However, these are quaint or eccentric figures, and their nostalgic portraits seem to represent the kindly wisdom of old age rather than the intellectual aspirations of a newly-formed working class. Job Legh's fascination for insects and Sandy Mackaye's interest in the classical historians fail to reflect the intellectual tastes and habits of (what Hoggart calls) the 'earnest minority' of nineteenth-century workingmen. See Hoggart, pp. 260-262.

A Yorkshire satirist's sketch of a workingman's library, published in 1849, probably reflects the typical upper-class attitude towards the workers' intellectual aspirations. The writer shows a snobbish disdain for the workers' idea of 'great books,' and he is amused by the attempt to amalgamate the conflicting forces of the Jacobin and Dissenting traditions:

He has a library that he rather prides himself upon. It is a strange collection. . . . There is "The Pearl of Great Price" and Cobbett's Twopenny Trash," "The Pilgrim's Progress" and "The Go-Ahead Journal," "The

defend the dignity of labor on the grounds that the ordinary workman was potentially an artist, and that a corrupt social and economic system was destroying his "powers for better things" and his "efforts which might . . . lead to a noble issue." Although Ruskin was strongly aware of the absence of a creative spirit in the workers, and more concerned with diagnosing social abuses than rectifying them, his ideas about a possible spiritual "transfiguration" in the workers inspired a later generation to do battle for the would-be worker-artist he described:

You must either make a tool of the creature, or a man of him. You cannot make both. Men were not intended to work with the accuracy of tools . . . to make cogs and compasses of themselves. . . . On the other hand, if you will make a man of the working creature, you cannot make a tool. Let him but begin to imagine, to think, to try to do anything worth doing; and the engine-turned precision is lost at once. Out come all his roughness, all his dulness, all his incapability; shame upon shame, failure upon failure, pause after pause: but out comes the whole majesty of him also; and we know the height of it only, when we see the clouds settling upon him. And, whether the clouds be bright or dark, there will be transfiguration behind and within them.²¹

Wrongs of Labour" and "The Rights of Man," "The History of the French Revolution" and Bunyan's "Holy War," "The Age of Reason" and a superannuated Bible.
Cited by E. P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (London, 1963), p. 183.

²¹The Stones of Venice, II, ch. vi.

Ruskin deplored the "love of order" and the "demand for perfection" in industrial civilization, the habit of 'mechanization' (as Carlyle called it) which stifled the worker's creativity, and Morris, in a similar vein, lamented "the amount of talent, and even genius, which the present system crushes."²² Morris insisted that "popular art" was "the foundation on which all art stands" and that "the chief source of art is man's pleasure in his daily necessary work."²³ Against the background of these ideas, Gissing, Hardy, and Lawrence presented the working-class artist and intellectual as a figure in revolt against a social and economic system which destroys "all sense of beauty and enjoyment of life."²⁴ In Workers in the Dawn, Jude the Obscure, and Sons and Lovers, the working-class hero opposes the pressures of his society in the name of his aspirations towards truth and beauty.

A comparison between Alton Locke and the worker-artists of later fiction shows that the later novelists were

²²"Useful Work Versus Useless Toil," Selected Writings, p. 130.

²³"The Worker's Share of Art," *ibid.*, p. 140.

²⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 140-141.

more disposed to perceive a possible relation between the worker and the world of art and ideas. Kingsley emphasized the distance between the "dull bricks and mortar, and the ugly colourless things which fill the workshops and the factory," and the "paradise of refreshment" which is the National Gallery.²⁵ Alton is largely a pathetic character, especially when he struggles to move into a higher sphere of thought and experience. His ecstatic wonder at the portrait of St. Sebastian in the Dulwich Gallery and his hopeless infatuation for the daughter of Dean Winnstay underscore the social and cultural differences between the classes, and the chasm that divides the worker from the world of civilized tastes and values. A similar scene is described in The Princess Cassamassima when Hyacinth Robinson for the first time confronts the order and elegance in the lives of the upper classes, and finds himself confused by the experience. By comparison, Arthur Golding comes naturally to his artistic vocation. His sensibilities have been enlarged by his suffering, and his taste for beauty only enlivened by his exposure to the squalor of

²⁵"The Worker in the National Gallery," in Victorians on Literature and Art, ed. Robert L. Peters (New York, 1961), pp. 183-185.

the London slums. His failure to achieve his noble ambitions is no reflection on the innate disabilities of the workers; it signifies only the universal defects of human nature and the difficulties of resisting the pressures of a hostile society. The major difference between Kingsley and Gissing in their portraits of the worker-artists is the latter's belief in a working-class 'consciousness' which could be heightened by suffering and oppression, and his perception of a vital and indigenous working-class culture. Like Hardy and Lawrence, Gissing regarded the working-class autodidact as a genuine intellectual whose aspirations to truth and beauty are rooted in the tangible facts of a richly diversified experience. In fact, they may have regarded him as the only genuine intellectual in a commercial society in which the "formative energy" (as Ruskin called it) is devoted to the acquisition of money.

The hatred of a commercial culture impelled Morris and his followers to idealize the worker-artist who rebels, intellectually or politically, against the dictates of a corrupt society. Morris believed that "whatever is produced that is worth anything is the work of men who are in rebellion against the corrupt society of today--rebellion

sometimes open, sometimes veiled under cynicism, but by which in any case lives are wasted . . . which ought to be used for the exercise of special gifts for the benefit of mankind."²⁶ It was presumably in the spirit of Morris' criticism that Gissing described Arthur Golding as a character engaged simultaneously in Radical politics and the study of art. In a similar spirit, Hardy portrayed Jude Fawley as an aspiring intellectual, an artist of sorts, and a rebel against the oppressive customs and mores of his society. These characters, in their different ways, are searching for the 'organic' ideal which Carlyle and Disraeli held up as the antithesis of a 'mechanical' industrial civilization. Carlyle and Disraeli located that ideal in the feudal past, Morris and the young Gissing in the Socialist future, and Lawrence in "the quick of self" which "is alone the creative reality."²⁷ In the name of the 'organic' ideal, the social-problem novelists hoped to dampen the spirit of rebelliousness in the working class; in the name of that same ideal, the later novel-

²⁶"The Worker's Share of Art," Selected Writings, pp. 141-142.

²⁷"Democracy," in Selected Essays of D. H. Lawrence, ed. Robert Aldington (Baltimore, 1950), pp. 88-89.

ists encouraged it.

The figure of the working-class here in post-World War Two English fiction is rooted in the tradition established by Gissing, Hardy, and Lawrence. In some sense, Alan Sillitoe's long-distance runner is a modern descendant of Lawrence's more mettlesome heroes who defy the dictates of society in order to preserve their instinctual vitality or spontaneity. Lawrence's influence can also be felt in Raymond Williams' nostalgic portrait of a cheerful working-class home in Border Country. These later novelists seem to echo Lawrence's belief (as expressed by Paul Morel) that there exists more of "life itself, warmth . . . hates and loves" among the "common people" than the middle class. In a more important sense, they culminate a tradition begun by Gissing who first described the phenomenon of a developing consciousness in the workers. The figure of the self-educated proletarian, not uncommon in twentieth-century fiction, was unthinkable to the social-problem novelist who regarded the worker with pity, patronage, or fear. Those attitudes (which were, to some extent, supported by the historical reality of an undeveloped and disorganized working class) mark the significant difference between the early and late Victorian novels about the working class.

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