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'Some Explanation of this Hard, Real Life': The Problem of Evil in Mid-Victorian Literature and Culture

by

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This thesis is submitted to the University of Dublin, Trinity College
in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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INTRODUCTION

'The Knot Untied': Rewriting the Problem of Evil in Mid-Victorian England

> '[L]ife in this unpleasurable shape demand[s] some solution even to unspeculative minds; just as you inquire into the stuffing of your couch when anything galls you there, whereas eider-down and perfect French springs excite no question'.[1]

In her above explanation of the religious-mindedness of the labouring mid-Victorian masses, George Eliot's narrator in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) ties speculative inquiry to painful material circumstances. The heroine, Maggie Tulliver, is presented, following the ruin of her family, as a typical constituent of the working classes, that 'wide and arduous national life condensed in unfragrant deafening factories, cramping itself in mines, sweating at furnaces, grinding, hammering, weaving under more or less oppression of carbonic acid, or else, spread over sheepwalks, and scattered in lonely houses and huts on the clayey or chalky corn-lands'.[2] The narrator suggests that these urban and rural labourers lack a sufficiency of cushioning against a hurtful reality and are therefore prodded into unexpected forms of theological and philosophical inquiry, seeking, as Maggie does, 'some explanation of this hard, real life'.[3] A comfortable existence, on the other hand, fails to foster such speculation, with the rich described as being content to receive their theology second-hand from 'the superior clergy who are to be met with in the best houses'.[4] The narrator underscores the failure of the theology produced by the privileged classes of her day, which is 'written on velvet cushions to teach endurance to those who are treading with bleeding feet on the stones'.[5] Consequently, Maggie has to

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[1] George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, edited with an Introduction by Dinah Birch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 292.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid., p. 286.
[4] Ibid., p. 291.
[5] Ibid.

'mak[e] out a faith for herself without the aid of established authorities and appointed guides'.[6] In the absence of effective top-down theology, it is implied, the 'pressing' need of a large segment of the population for an explanation of their suffering will provoke them to innovate their own solutions.[7]

Maggie Tulliver's search for an explanation of her suffering places her in the company of a multitude of thinkers who have grappled with what is usually denominated the "Problem of Evil". Put in its most classic form, this is the problem of how to reconcile the existence of moral and natural evil with the existence of a benevolent and omnipotent Creator.[8] As the Victorian moral philosopher James McCosh put it in 1850, '[c]ould not God have created a world in which there was no suffering to tear the bodily frame, and no grief to cloud and shadow the soul?'.[9] This question has also been summarised, in terms more inclusive of attempts to make sense of evil within a non-theistic *telos*, as the '*existential* problem of whether and how a life laced with suffering and punctuated by death can have any positive meaning'.[10] It is this problem that *The Mill on the Floss* suggests was faced by myriad suffering Victorians who had been left, like Maggie Tulliver, to 'make out' an answer for themselves.

Like Eliot's novel, this thesis is interested in the ways in which the painful material realities experienced by very many Victorians prompted them to devise novel solutions to the problem of evil. The introduction and chapters that follow bear out Eliot's perception that this ancient theological quandary was revived by the experience of new forms of suffering associated with Britain's transformation into a modern, industrialised nation over the course of the first half of the century. As Eliot suggests, this common first-hand experience of the evils of hardship and deprivation opened up theological discourse

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[6] Ibid., p. 292.
[7] Ibid.
[8] John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. x; Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 2.
[9] James McCosh, *The Method of the Divine Government, Physical and Moral* (Edinburgh: Sutherland & Knox, 1852), p. 29.
[10] Marilyn McCord Adams, 'Introduction' in *The Problem of* Evil, ed. by Marilyn McCord Adams & Robert Merrihew Adams (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 1-24 (p. 1). Original emphasis.

concerning the problem of evil to widespread intervention and renegotiation. Her claim that theological speculation is only incited by direct contact with painful reality implies that the problem of evil is no longer the preserve of privileged 'appointed guides' in the Church of England. Modern conditions, she suggests, have instead granted theological agency to the even the half-educated Maggie Tulliver, plying her needle in the midst of poverty and discord. This introduction will trace the shifting shape of the problem of evil as it became a contested discourse, one embedded in the particular ills of Victorian society.

Eliot was not the only mid-century writer interested in the ways in which the social disorders of nineteenth-century existence had sparked a popular engagement with the problem of evil. F.D. Maurice's notorious *Theological Essays* (1853), with which she was familiar,[11] had made the argument that while metaphysicians and divines might feel free to throw up their hands at the problem of evil and feebly assert that 'there is some truth in each view of it', the problem continued to 'torment and exercise peasants in ten thousand ways'.[12] The needful solution, he wrote, is 'such as sick people want who sigh for the morning; as poor men want who toil in mines; as captives want who are chained together in loathsome prisons'.[13] Like *The Mill on the Floss*'s narrator, Maurice believed that the established Church, to which he belonged, had failed to provide an answer to the 'deep questions which exercised the populace'.[14] The masses, he argued, were in dire need of an explanation of the 'countless disorders' in the world around them.[15] Maurice had no doubt that, left alone to grapple with the 'deepest problem in metaphysics', they would, like Maggie, be driven to find their own potentially revolutionary solutions to it: they must 'have the knot untied for them,' he warned his readers, or they will 'find some intelligible

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[11] See *Letter from George Eliot to Charles Bray, November 15th, 1853* in *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. by Gordon S. Haight, 7 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), I, p. 125. She seems to have found his argumentation 'muddy rather than profound.'
[12] F. D. Maurice, *Theological Essays* (Cambridge: Macmillan & Co. 1853), p. 41.
[13] Ibid., p. 439.
[14] Ibid., p. 41.
[15] Ibid., pp. 14, 22-3.

superstition wherewith to cut it'.[16] For Maurice, there was only one way of untying the knotty problem of evil—by subscribing to the Church's doctrines of original sin and the Redeemer's atoning grace—and he invalidated all other solutions as tantamount to cutting the knot, an act both evasive and destructive.[17] He also knew, however, that this orthodox position was in danger of being drowned out by the other voices in the discussion, those of the 'coteries' and 'newspaper oracle[s]' who were replacing the Church as the guides of the people.[18]

The openness of the problem of evil to popular contention, Maurice indicated, was a consequence of its embeddedness in everyday life. Being beset with a constant sense of evil, 'we *must* consider the origin of Evil, whether we like it or not. We are debating it with ourselves, we are conversing about it with others, we are acting on some conclusions we have formed about it, every day of our lives'.[19] Even if we were to refuse to read a learned treatise on the subject, he asserts,

> if we supposed, when we closed the book, that we had done with the question which it raised and which it tried to settle; if we thought it would not meet us again in the law-court and the market-place, and mix itself, most inconveniently, in all the common business of the world, — a little experience will have shown us that we were mistaken.[20]

The demotic quality of the problem of evil in the nineteenth century is evident here as learned treatise is replaced by the market-place as the site upon which this thorny question is raised and settled. Solutions to the problem of evil, moreover, have consequences which reach far beyond the religious sphere, 'the whole of society in which they are found [being] coloured and shaped by them'[21] To support this latter point, Maurice instanced the growing

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[16] Ibid., p. 43.
[17] 'Confess that the infection you speak of is in us all, confess that we are members of a depraved race, and you can explain all the phenomena you take notice of; on any other hypothesis they are incomprehensible'. (Maurice, *Theological Essays*, p. 38).
[18] Ibid., p. xv.
[19] Ibid., p. 34.
[20] Ibid., p. 33.
[21] Ibid., p. 39.

influence in contemporary Britain of the belief that external circumstances alone, rather than inherited depravity, account for the behaviour of human beings. When people justify their own acts or those of others by pointing to outward conditions, he wrote, they are 'extending a doctrine concerning the origin of evil to men generally'.[22] The denial of original sin had real practical consequences because it encouraged the belief that evil could be eradicated via social and political mechanisms.

Maurice's belief that the problem of evil was implicated 'in all the common business of the world' anticipates recent critical claims about the interpenetration of theological and apparently secular discourses in Victorian culture. Analysis of the religious culture of the nineteenth century increasingly suggests that the theology of the era is best understood not as standing apart from non-theological spheres but as inevitably inflecting coexisting discourses and being shaped by them in turn. An early example of this approach is Catherine Gallagher's *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form 1832-1867* (1985), which shows how nineteenth-century theological controversies about free will informed contemporary debates about industrialisation.[23] Boyd Hilton's *Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795-1865* (1988) likewise pursues the ways in which the Evangelical ethos underwrote much political and social thought throughout the first half of the century, providing the impetus for legislation like the New Poor Law of 1834 and colouring responses to catastrophes like the Irish Famine.[24] What J. Russell Perkin has described as the 'turn towards religious topics' in cultural studies of the new millennium has intensified this interest in the range of cultural and ideological work performed by Victorian

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[22] Ibid., p. 34-6. The theological premise at the heart of this doctrine Maurice identifies as the denial of the reality of sin, which he especially associates with the Unitarians (but also transcendental Christians, like those influenced by Emerson and Hegel). In order to exonerate both the divine character and human nature, the modern tendency is to attribute evil to external 'accidents', which are to be remedied by 'Legislation, Ethics and Economy'.

[23] Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form 1832-1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1985), pp. 3-113.

[24] Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought 1795-1865* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 1-252.

theology.[25] In 2001, the historian Linda Woodhead edited a collection of essays entitled *Reinventing Christianity: Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, which considered the ways in which 'different varieties of Christianity provided key sites for contemporary social and cultural negotiation' during the Victorian period. [26] One essay by Robert M. Kachur, for example, examines how both sides of Victorian labour disputes drew upon alternative readings of the Book of Revelations in order to cast the other side as the anti-Christ.[27]

As Linda Woodhead comments, the 'spectrum of different and often antagonistic interpretations of Christianity' during this period is a reflection of how theology and religious thought was mediated and refracted by 'wider political, social and economic contexts'.[28] In their 2006 *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction* Mark Knight and Emma Mason also highlight the intermingling of religious and secular discourses in the period, arguing that '[t]heological debate was almost inseparable from philosophical, scientific, medical, historical and political thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries'.[29] They point, for instance, to the fact that Unitarian theology, with its valuation of this-worldly activity, underwrote the middle-class ideology of professionalization.[30] As Victoria Morgan and Clare Williams remark in the 'Introduction' to their 2008 collection, *Shaping Belief: Culture, Politics and Religion in Nineteenth-Century Writing*, the 'appropriation of religious discourse' allowed political and social arguments to be 'advanced with the resonant force of religion'.[31] Seeking the religious angle is likely to have been a genuine reflex, however, rather than simply an ideological ploy. The tremendous force of the Evangelical revival at the beginning of the century

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[25] J. Russell Perkin, *Theology and the Victorian Novel* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009), p. 7.
[26] Linda Woodhead, 'Introduction', in *Reinventing Christianity: Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, ed. by Linda Woodhead (London: Ashgate, 2001), p. 10.
[27] Robert M. Kachur, 'Elizabeth Gaskell, Gender and the Apocalypse' in *Reinventing Christianity*, pp. 211-26.
[28] Woodhead, 'Introduction', *Reinventing Christianity*, p. 1.
[29] Mark Knight and Emma Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 3.
[30] Ibid., p. 52.
[31] Victoria Morgan and Clare Williams, *Shaping Belief: Culture, Politics and Religion in Nineteenth-Century Writing* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), p. xvi.

meant that the mid-Victorian generation, especially, had been taught to see everyday life as infused with spiritual meaning.[32] Nevertheless, a hallmark of the period, as Maurice's arguments in his *Theological Essays* demonstrate, was an increasing consciousness among Victorians themselves of how theology was implicated in certain disputable social and political worldviews. As Gerald Parsons observes, Christianity was evidently 'contested territory' rather than the 'exclusive possession of any one social group'.[33]

The intermingling of theological and non-theological discourses was symptomatic of a culture in which religious authority was no longer the sole preserve of the Church. Of those who sought to claim theological territory during this period, the Victorian novelist stands foremost. By mid-century, it began to be widely remarked that the novelist, along with the periodical writer, had become the chief religious guides of the people. In his 1849 *Nemesis of Faith*, J.A. Froude claimed that the voice of 'our nominal teachers' had been silenced only to be sent 'along the press into every corner of the land': the minds of all of us, from highest Lords to enlightened operatives, are formed in reading-rooms, at the bar of public-houses, by all the shrewdest, and often the most worthless, novel writers or paper editors'.[34] The following year, a review article in *Fraser's Magazine* set out to 'rescue the novel from its perilous association with doctrinal designs', objecting to the tendency of recent novels to stray into philosophical, political and theological territory.[35] The writer accused the creators of these 'hybrid books' of 'writing political pamphlets, ethical treatises, and social dissertations in the disguise of novels'.[36] Not even theology was safe from the 'heterogeneous mixtures' of genres which characterised such novels; they had,

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[32] Elisabeth Jay, *The Religion of the Heart: Anglican Evangelicalism and the Nineteenth-Century Novel*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 6; Barry Qualls, *The Secular Pilgrims of Victorian Fiction: The Novel as Book of Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 12; Rebecca Styler, *Literary Theology by Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), p. 8.
[33] Gerald Parsons, 'Social Control to Social Gospel: Victorian Christian Social Attitudes' in *Religion in Victorian Britain: Vol. II: Controversies*, ed. by Gerald Parsons (Manchester: Manchester University Press in association with the Open University, 1988), pp. 40-62 (p. 42).
[34] J. A. Froude, *The Nemesis of Faith* (London: John Chapman, 1849), p. 43.
[35] Anon., 'A Triad of Novels', *Fraser's Magazine* (November 1850), pp. 574-90 (p. 575).
[36] Ibid.

according to the reviewer, 'usurp[ed] the province' of both 'blue-books and sermons'.[37] Another well-known contemporary review, however, took a much more welcoming approach to the novel form's theological and philosophical ambitions. 'Recent Works of Fiction', which appeared in the Unitarian *Prospective Review* in 1853, argued that fiction had a vital role in investing the 'results of speculative inquiry' in 'the living hues of experience, and thus bring[ing] them home to the conscience and apprehension of humanity'.[38] Consequently, fiction had become the 'chosen vehicle for the discussion of the vexed and difficult questions, moral, religious, social and political, which agitate the minds of men'.[39]

The claims of both these contemporary accounts of the mid-Victorian novel corroborate Elisabeth Jay's observation that the first half of the century witnessed the elevation of the novel form from 'idle plaything to *roman-à-thèse*'.[40] Both reviews indicate that, as well as providing guidance to a religiously confused age,[41] the novel had become a key site for the rehearsal of theological and philosophical debate. In this vein, J. Russell Perkin has argued that the 'Victorians employed the novel as a means of conducting religious controversy'.[42] The novel, Jude Nixon likewise writes, reflected 'the protean ways in which religion was negotiated in the nineteenth century'.[43] The novel form was well suited to staging the contested, fragmented shape of nineteenth-century theological discourse. Mikhail Bakhtin famously defined the novel as 'a diversity of social speech

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[37] Ibid., p. 575.
[38] Anon., 'Recent Works of Fiction', *Prospective Review* (April 1853), pp. 222-47, reproduced in *Victorian Criticism of the Novel*, ed by Edwin M. Eigner and George J. Worth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 84-92 (p. 86).
[39] Ibid.
[40] Jay, *Religion of the Heart*, p. 199.
[41] Thus Walter Houghton argued that the crisis of faith drove the Victorians to literature for guidance; see his *The Victorian Frame of Mind: 1830-1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), p. 101. Similarly, John Kucich notes that Victorian novelists attempted to offer consolation through their 'secularisation of traditional religious values': see his 'Intellectual Debate in the Victorian Novel' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. by Deirdre David (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 212-33 (p. 216).
[42] Perkin, *Theology and the Victorian Novel*, p. 9.
[43] Jude V. Nixon, 'Framing Victorian Religious Discourse: An Introduction', in *Victorian Religious Discourse: New Directions in Criticism*, ed. by Jude V. Nixon (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 1-24 (p. 14).

types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized'.[44] The novel shows language to be 'ideologically saturated,' stamped by the different 'socially-significant worldviews' that constitute it.[45] Consequently, the form cannot accede to any one unitary language reflecting reality straightforwardly but is instead marked by heteroglossia, a multitude of speech types representing the 'struggle among socio-linguistic points of view'.[46] For this reason, Jerome Meckier has described the Victorian novel as a 'forum for conflicting philosophical perspectives, each as partial, relative and partisan as the next'.[47]

I argue that the novel form's heteroglossia enabled it to stage and explore competing solutions to the mid-Victorian problem of evil. Given critical recognition of the participation of the Victorian novel in contemporary theological discourse, an examination of how Victorian novels engaged with this fundamental theological problem is overdue. A notable number of mid-Victorian novels grappled explicitly with the meaning of earthly ills. W.M. Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (published in serial form from 1847 to 1848) remains true to the spirit of its title on its final page, announcing, Ecclesiastes-like, the futility of attempts to find meaning on the earthly stage: 'Ah! *Vanitas Vanitatum!*'[48] The narrator insists throughout the text on the senselessness of suffering, describing life as a 'lottery', 'mysterious and often unaccountable', which 'gives to this man the purple and fine linen and sends to the other rags for garments and dogs for comforters.'[49] He disturbs the reader's self-soothing assumptions about the justness of prosperity and poverty by juxtaposing the success of the heartless schemer Becky Sharpe with the suffering of the virtuous Amelia Sedley. However, the narrator's refusal to see a moral meaning in suffering can be contrasted with Amelia's own Christian interpretation of her losses: 'her

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[44] M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), p. 262.
[45] Ibid., pp. 270-1, 273.
[46] Ibid., pp. 61, 273.
[47] Jerome Meckier, *Hidden Rivalries in Victorian Fiction: Dickens, Realism and Revaluation* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1987), p. 8.
[48] W.M. Thackeray, *Vanity Fair: A Novel without a Hero* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 878.
[49] Ibid., p. 724.

selfish, guilty love [...] had been rebuked and bitterly chastised. She strove to think it was right that she should be so punished. She was such a miserable wicked sinner.'[50] The dialogism of novel form enabled Thackeray to articulate this Evangelical view of evil without granting it authorial sanction. At such, the reader is permitted to question its plausibility in light of the novel's events.

Charlotte Bronte, who dedicated the second edition of *Jane Eyre* (1847) to Thackeray, shared that author's suspicion of received opinion; and there is a sharp undercurrent of scepticism in her depictions of suffering. The young Jane Eyre angrily demands to know why she is 'always suffering, always browbeaten, always accused, for ever condemned?'[51] Unlike *Vanity Fair*'s Amelia, she shows no sense of being a depraved sinner deserving of all manner of ill treatment. The narrator's censorious account of the fervently Evangelical Mr Brocklehurst, who is happy to starve the girls in his charge in order to preserve their souls, distances her tale from his particular religious interpretation of suffering.[52] Likewise, Jane remains unconvinced by the fatalistic creed of Helen Burns, who accepts her painful experiences as her due and as part and parcel of the earth's corrupt state, calmly awaiting the afterlife.[53]

Bronte's next novel, *Shirley* (1848), continued to probe the meaning of suffering. For a large portion of the text, the protagonist Caroline Helstone pines away in Job-like perplexity, 'a poor doomed mortal, who asks, in ignorance and hopelessness, wherefore she was born, to what end she lives'.[54] Caroline's private suffering has a public correlative in the plight of the unemployed workmen, superseded by new machinery, who are described by the narrator as being 'left to suffer on'; they 'ate the bread and drank the waters of affliction.'[55] Despite the religious tenor of the latter phrase, the narrator indicates

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[50] Ibid., p. 726.
[51] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 15.
[52] Ibid., p. 63.
[53] Ibid., pp., 58-59, 69-70.
[54] Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 197.
[55] Ibid., p. 27.

that is an economic, rather than a Christian, narrative—'it would not do to stop the progress of invention', she sarcastically comments—that is used to justify the labourers' suffering. The reader's attention is thereby drawn to both religious and secular interpretations of suffering, without either being endorsed.

Like *Shirley*, a number of Elizabeth Gaskell's mid-century novels examined the problem of evil that was raised by the troubled condition of contemporary England. *Mary Barton* (1848) details the losses and hardships experienced by the working classes, who are said to be in need of 'a Dante to record their sufferings.'[56] The novel's representative of these sufferers, John Barton, ruminates over 'the problems and mysteries of life', chief among them the question of why his class should suffer so much while rich factory owners, like the Carsons, continue in prosperity.[57] Gaskell's preface to the novel observed that the 'lottery-like' nature of industrial existence bewildered the poor and made it difficult for them to resign to God's will.[58] The narrator similarly comments that even the well-worn proverbs that had consoled the poor for generations were inadequate to the intensity and duration of the suffering then being experienced and began to seem like 'false and vain sayings'.[59] Barton's inability to make sense of his suffering is countered, however, by the narrative voice that views adversity as ameliorative. Thus, she comments that Mr Carson, whose son is murdered by Barton, is one of those who 'submit[s] to be taught by suffering', 'wrestling with God's message until a blessing is left behind, not for one alone, but for generations.'[60] In the case of Carson, the benefit diffused consists in the improved relations he fosters between masters and men once he recognises the suffering that incited his son's murder. The aptly named Job Legh likewise articulates a pious and progressive

[56] Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton* (London: Penguin Classics, 1996), p. 84.
[57] Ibid., p. 170.
[58] Ibid., p. 3.
[59] Ibid., p. 113.
[60] Ibid., pp. 387-88.

view of suffering, opining that the power-looms that threw the men of work were '"all part of His plan to send suffering to bring out a higher good."'[61]

Gaskell's later novel *North and South* (1854-55) took up this discussion of the meaning of suffering through the conversation between middle-class heroine Margaret Hale and the ailing workwoman Bessy Higgins. Margaret argues that 'God is just' and that therefore suffering is 'well portioned out by him.'[62] Bessy, however, can only cope with her experiences by holding to a god who has sent suffering for his own mysterious purposes, a god she has found in the bible's prophetic books like the *Book of Revelation*: '[o]ne can bear pain and sorrow better if one thinks it has been prophesied long before one: somehow, then, it seems as if my pain was needed for the fulfilment; otherways, it seems all sent for nothing.'[63] Margaret objects to the notion that God would 'willingly afflict' and exhorts Bessy to read the 'clearer parts of the Bible.'[64]

Another prominent Condition-of-England novel to raise the problem of evil was Charles Kingley's *Alton Locke* (1850). From its opening page, Kingsley's eponymous narrator, a self-taught tailor, brings into juxtaposition and collision different ways of making sense of suffering. He relates, for instance, that his mother ascribed his sickliness to 'God's will', while he blames it on the avarice and negligence of men who permitted children to grow up in unsanitary hovels.[65] The novel likewise contrasts the opinions of the Carlylean Sandy Mackaye, who takes the suffering around him to be a sign of an unholy departure from God's plan and the optimistic Emersonian Mr Windrush, who denies the reality of evil, arguing that 'pain' and 'sin' are natural parts of the 'all-embracing benevolence of the Deity.'[66] Neither of these conceptions of evil are satisfactory to the hero; and the failure of the Chartist plot as well as Locke's sudden death at sea after

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[61] Ibid., pp. 385.
[62] Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (London: Penguin Classics, 1970), p. 186.
[63] Ibid., p. 187.
[64] Ibid., p. 188.
[65] Charles Kingsley, *Alton Locke: Tailor and Poet* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1856), I, p. 3.
[66] Ibid., II, p. 4, 6, 11, 13.

converting to Christianity leaves open the question of an adequate explanatory framework for the extremes of suffering laid bare by the novel.

The trope of the working-class hero sorely perplexed by the suffering around him was taken up by Charles Dickens in his novel *Hard Times* (1854). Faced with the infernal disorder of Coketown and the unjust laws that oppress only the poor, Stephen Blackpool's famous despairing refrain is that life is '[f]ro first to last, a muddle!'[67] Puzzled almost to his dying moments, Blackpool finds a limited refuge from his confusion by fixing on the star he can see shining down on his 'pain and trouble' in the Old Hell Shaft. Stephen stares at the star, a clear symbol of Christ, 'the God of the poor', until 'the muddle has been cleared awa', above a bit.'[68] For Stephen, then, as for Alton Locke, the problem of earthly ills is never fully resolved; he is simply granted an escape-route via death: 'he had gone to his Redeemer's rest.'[69]

Five years after *Hard Times*, Dickens was deeply moved by another novel that placed the bewildering experience of suffering centre stage.[70] George Eliot's *Adam Bede* (1859) features a host of characters struggling to make sense of the tragedy that enters the bucolic world of Hayslope when Hetty Sorrel becomes pregnant out of wedlock before abandoning the child to its death. The narrator's sense of the abiding place of suffering in human existence leads her to observe that it is '[n]o wonder man's religion has so much sorrow in it. No wonder he needs a suffering God.'[71] Arthur Donnithorne's blinkered optimism, however, takes little heed of this element of human existence; and his belief in the 'beautiful arrangement of things' leads him to underestimate his own power to cause irreparable wrong.[72] By contrast, Adam Bede insists that there is '"a sort o' damage, sir,

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[67] Charles Dickens, *Hard Times, For these Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 362.
[68] Ibid., pp. 363, 365.
[69] Ibid., p. 365.
[70] See *Letter from Charles Dickens to George Eliot*, 10 July 1859, in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, ed. by Madeline House, Graham Storey & Kathleen Tillotson, 12 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992-2002), IX, ed. by Graham Storey, pp. 92-3.
[71] George Eliot, *Adam Bede* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), p. 345.
[72] Ibid., p. 297.

that can't be made up for"' and distrusts any 'self-soothing attempt to make evil bear the same fruits as good.'[73]

Silas Marner showed a similar interest in the ways in which people respond to and interpret adversity. Falsely convicted by the God he had faithfully served, Silas is driven to announce that 'there is no just God that governs the earth righteously, but a God of lies, that bears witness against the innocent.'[74] Bereft of all means of making symbolic sense of suffering, Silas retreats into a mechanical existence, numbing his pain. When he finally confesses to the pious Dolly Winthrop the reasons for his godless lifestyle, she too is at first 'sore puzzled' by the failure of God to uphold him in his innocence.[75] Soon, however, she comes to the consoling conclusion that: 'Them above has got a deal tenderer heart nor what I've got—for I can't be anyways better nor Them as made me; and if anything looks hard to me, it's because there's things I don't know on.'[76] The heavily idiomatic and idiosyncratic way Dolly's theodicy is expressed underlines the fact that it is not the viewpoint of the knowing narrator. Nevertheless, this perspective is gradually taken wholly to heart by Silas, who learns, like Dolly, to 'trusten' in the goodness of God despite adversity.

Written in the decade immediately after the social disorders of the late 1840s, the interest the above novels show in making sense of suffering reflects the renewed currency those years of mass hardship gave to the problem of evil. Their treatment of evil, however, remains relatively superficial. These texts explicitly invoke and discuss the meaning of suffering via dialogue and authorial commentary. The fact that the articulated viewpoints are expressed in imaginative works of literature is incidental; rather than being distilled from or shaped by the novel's broader structural pattern and presiding metaphors, they seem to be abstract dogmas pasted into the text. In the chapters that follow, I focus on three

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[73] Ibid., p. 436.
[74] George Eliot, *Silas Marner: The Weaver of Raveloe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 29
[75] Ibid., p. 163.
[76] Ibid., p. 215.

important novels in which, conversely, the interpretation of evil can be seen to resonate with the text's broader vision, to penetrate the text's idiom, and to be expressed in peculiarly "literary" ways, through plot and metaphor. Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* (1853), Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (which appeared in monthly instalments from March 1852 and September 1853) and George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) each exhibit that capacity to embody abstract speculation in concrete form with which mid-Victorian novelists were credited by their contemporaries. *Villette* and *The Mill on the Floss* both display an ontologically inquisitive dimension, concerned not only to relate a narrative of events but to make sense of what is described in the former as 'life and its chances, destiny and her decrees'[77] and in the latter as 'the painful riddle of this world'.[78] *Bleak House* too invokes a cosmic perspective by means of its persistent diluvian imagery, although as I shall show, the novel is actually wary of theological and philosophical speculation. At the same time, because none of these texts are narrowly doctrinal or dogmatic and because they are in fact so wide-ranging in their concerns, they enable us to perceive the interanimating relationship between the problem of evil and a variety of non-theological discourses at mid-century. The very complexity and creativity of their responses to evil require a certain level of familiarity with the ways in which the problem of evil was expressed at this time. Because their interventions in this question are not as explicitly signposted as in novels like *Mary Barton* or *Silas Marner*, they can remain invisible to those who bring an ahistorical conception of the problem of evil to their reading of the text. More vividly, then, than other novels published at this time, these three texts shed light on the historically contingent quality of responses to evil.

We have seen that the social and political implications of solutions to the problem of evil and the lack of consensus on any one solution were alarmingly evident to F. D. Maurice in 1853. I credit the novelists I consider with a similar awareness of the ways in

[77] Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, ed. by Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 231.
[78] Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 359.

which solutions to the problem of evil were used to mediate a range of political and social ideologies. To a contemporary commentator like Maurice, the problem of evil was the theological question most open to intervention and renegotiation by lay culture because it emerged from the common conditions of everyday life. It was, moreover, as Eliot's imagery from the *Mill on the Floss* indicates, a problem forced onto popular consciousness by the peculiar ills of nineteenth-century industrial capitalist existence. In spite of the support these contemporary views lend to critical claims for the interpenetration of Victorian theology and non-theological culture, there has been little scholarship done on the particular formulation of the problem of evil in nineteenth-century literature and culture. This thesis aims to address this gap in our understanding of Victorian religious culture, while also demonstrating that a knowledge of the unfamiliar ways in which the problem of evil was expressed can further illuminate the mid-century novels which grappled with it. Jude Nixon has pointed to the need for interpretations of the theological facets of Victorian novels that analyse that theology in the context of the rest of the text's meaning, rather than in isolation from it.[79] Such a contextual understanding of the problem of evil has guided my analysis of the individual novels this thesis considers.

One possible reason that those working in nineteenth-century studies have yet to fully engage with the problem of evil may be precisely that it does not seem congenial to such contextual interpretations. Instead of instigating discussion, the word "evil" seems, as Terry Eagleton observes, to be 'a way of bringing arguments to an end, like a fist in the solar plexus'.[80] The most influential modern philosopher on the subject, John Hick, summarised the theological challenge posed by the existence of evil this way:

> [t]he sheer crushing weight of the pains suffered by men, women and children and also by the lower animals, including that inflicted by human greed, cruelty

[79] Nixon, 'Framing Victorian Religious Discourse', p. 11.
[80] Terry Eagleton, *On Evil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), p. 8.

> and malevolence, undoubtedly constitutes the biggest obstacle that there is to belief in an all-powerful and loving Creator.[81]

Because these ills are universal ones, the form of the problem of evil might too seem to be universal and therefore incompatible with the largely Historicist and New Historicist methodologies of nineteenth-century studies. When David Hume suggested in the eighteenth century that 'Epicurus's old questions are yet unanswered' ('Is [God] willing to prevent evil but not able? then is he impotent. Is he able, but not willing? then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? whence then is evil?'), he implied that the 'old questions' were exactly the same ones which presented themselves to his readers.[82] John Hick's seminal study *Evil and the God of Love* (1966) largely supports this ahistorical outlook, taking it for granted that when writers from backgrounds as diverse as Aristotle and G.W. Leibniz discuss "evil", they mean more or less the same thing. He makes some allowance for the influence of context in his argument that evil becomes especially problematic within a monotheistic faith like Christianity which refuses to limit God's love or power and yet insists that evil be recognised as 'genuinely *evil* and as utterly inimical to God's will and purpose'.[83] Likewise, he regards the Christian approach to evil to be divided between two responses to evil, known as theodicies: the dominant Augustinian type, which holds that evil was created by the original sin and consequent fall of humankind; and the Irenaean "soul-making" type, which proposes that humankind is in a process of spiritual development, its moral lapses signs only of its immaturity and the ills it experiences simply a part of that environment of mingled good and evil that is most conducive to its growth.[84] Yet within these two traditions, individual writers on the subject are still ousted from their context to enter into an ahistorical approach; the "Irenaean" soul-

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[81] Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, p. x.
[82] David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (London: 1779), p.186.
[83] Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, p.16. Original emphasis.
[84] Ibid., pp. 59, 201, 211-5.

making theodicy proposed by the poet John Keats, is not considered, for instance, in terms of broader early nineteenth-century culture.[85]

Kenneth Surin, a scholar of both literature and religion, has addressed this want of historical sensibility among academic accounts of the problem of evil. Such scholars have inherited a narrow enlightenment version of the problem of evil, which Surin says is in fact 'the problem of the god of philosophical theism'.[86] Surin finds this 'ahistoricist approach to theodicy' unhelpful because he believes that engagements with the problem of evil encompass 'diverse and sometimes even incompatible undertakings'.[87] Surin's revaluation of the formative role historical context has in configurations of the problem of evil accords with twentieth-century sociological views of the embeddedness of theodicy in the historical social and political milieu. Writing in the early 1920s, Max Weber drew attention to the changing shape of theodicy depending on whether its purpose was to provide 'legitimation for the higher strata' of society or 'compensation for the lower' strata.[88] While the more privileged subscribe to a form of theodicy that legitimates their worldly position, the 'theodicy of the disprivileged' relies instead, he argued, on the prospect of future salvation, united with the promise of 'just compensation'.[89] These suggestions were taken up and expanded by the sociologist of religion Peter Berger in his book *The Sacred Canopy: The Social Reality of Religion* (1967). Suffering, according to Berger, is anomic, that is, it destabilises the prevailing *nomos*, or hegemonic worldview, of a given culture.[90] In order to maintain social and individual psychic stability, such suffering must be explained within the terms of that *nomos*. An important function of theodicy, therefore, is 'world-maintenance', especially by means of its explanation of worldly inequality.[91] When

[85] Ibid, n. 259.
[86] Kenneth Surin, *Theology and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 2, 4.
[87] Ibid., pp. 1-3.
[88] Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, 2 vols (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975; Originally published in German in 1921-22), II, p. 490.
[89] Ibid., pp. 492-4.
[90] Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 61.
[91] Ibid., p. 67.

the prevailing *nomos* changes, so too must the theodicy founded upon it or it will lose plausibility.[92]

The inescapable influence of the surrounding culture on the shape of the problem of evil and solutions to it underlines the shortcomings of academic approaches to it which focus on a handful of philosophers and theologians separated by centuries. As Kenneth Surin also argues, current accounts of the problem of evil often remain confined within 'theodicy's canonical tradition' and have not taken sufficient stock of the views of those who 'practically have to combat evil'.[93] In their book *Religion and Popular Culture: Rescripting the Sacred* (2008), Richard Santana and Gregory Erickson similarly point to the gap between 'academic and popular conceptions of evil'. [94] They observe, much as F. D. Maurice did in his *Essays*, that while contemporary academics have largely 'abandoned the attempt' to tackle the problem of evil, it 'remains a persistent concern' in popular culture.[95] The findings of this thesis support the view that the problem of evil arises in specific historical circumstances, which determine its articulation and the form proposed solutions to it will take. As the remainder of this introduction will show, moreover, we can best trace how the problem of evil was reconfigured under the pressure of specific mid-nineteenth-century evils in largely non-theological writings, which expressed the concerns of those who 'practically ha[d] to combat evils'.[96]

Few would dispute that the mid-century generation of Victorians were unusually preoccupied with the particular social, moral and physical evils of the time. The Evangelical revival at the century's opening instituted the habit and provided the vocabulary of a focus on the 'evils of the age',[97] while the proliferation of statistical surveys and investigative commissions on the condition of different portions of the

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[92] Ibid., p. 85.
[93] Surin, *Theology*, pp. 2, 21.
[94] Richard W. Santana and Gregory Erickson, *Religion and Popular Culture: Rescripting the Sacred* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2008), p. 175.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Surin, *Theology*, p. 21.
[97] Ford K. Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians: The Age of Wilberforce* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1961), p. 462.

population from the 1830s to the 1850s brought the specific ills of the British people sharply into focus.[98] These reports exposed the unprecedented suffering, degradation and sense of discontent produced by the Industrial Revolution.[99] The entrance into the industrial age produced a host of new evils in Britain, from the acute poverty caused by competition for labour, to the disease and overcrowding associated with urbanisation. As historian Dorothy Marshall observes, '[s]ociety adjusted to these new conditions with difficulty. The rich preached resignation and blamed a too-generous scale of poor relief. The workers preached revolution and with bitter resentment blamed the government for their misery'. [100] It was only in the 1840s, however, that these evils began to really capture the attention of the nation. An 1849 article in the *Edinburgh Review* observed that 'during the last few years [...] the public attention seemed to be fixing itself upon the miseries and maladies of our population with an almost morbid intensity'.[101] Likewise an 1848 article in the *Christian Remembrancer* declared that 'lamentations' over the 'wretchedness' of the labouring classes in particular' were 'in no country and in no time of the world so rife as at present'.[102] A later article in the same periodical observed that 'the evils of our social system' formed the basis of one of the 'popular outcries of our day'.[103]

On the one hand, this heightened preoccupation with evil reflected the actual experience of acute hardship throughout the so-called "hungry forties" as the country underwent starvation, cholera and popular unrest. The grievous sufferings undergone by the British and Irish during 'these grim years' and the 'Chartist nightmare' they engendered are well documented.[104] Thus, for Thomas Carlyle, writing in 1843, the

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[98] G. M. Young, *Victorian England: Portrait of an Age* (London: Phoenix, 2002 [1936]), p. 48-9; Kate Flint, *The Victorian Novelist: Social Problems and Social Change* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), p. 1.
[99] David Newsome, *The Victorian World-Picture: Perceptions and Introspections in an Age of Change* (London: Fontana, 1998), p. 40.
[100] Dorothy Marshall, *Industrial England 1776-1851* (London: Routledge, 1973), p. 24.
[101] Anon., 'Unsound Social Philosophy,' *Edinburgh Review* (October 1849), pp. 496-524 (p.497).
[102] Anon., 'Principles of Political Economy', *Christian Remembrancer* (October 1848), pp. 315-44, (p. 338).
[103] Anon., 'England as it is, political, social and industrial, in the middle of the nineteenth century, by William Johnston', *Christian Remembrancer* (April 1851), pp. 400-28 (pp. 407-12).
[104] Newsome, *The Victorian World-Picture*, pp. 27, 44, 74.

intensified interest in the evils afflicting the nation reflected the very real worsening condition of the nineteenth-century poor:

> In all times, the lot of the dumb millions born to toil was defaced with manifold sufferings, injustices, heavy burdens [...]And yet I will venture to believe that in no time, since the beginnings of Society, was the lot of those same dumb millions of toilers so entirely unbearable as it is even in the days now passing over us.[105]

Susan Zlotnick, however, has argued that it may not have been the case that the suffering of the population was aggravated in modern England but rather that the evil seemed 'more extreme to a generation that found itself systematically scrutinizing, perhaps for the first time in history, the primitive conditions under which a majority of the population lived'.[106] This increasing documentation of suffering partly accounts for the fact that it was not until mid-century that an outcry against the evils of the nation became widespread, as it was only then that reports of the distress of the masses began to percolate through a wider society. As an article in *Fraser's Magazine* noted in 1851, 'it is not the evils themselves, but our knowledge of them, that is new'.[107] One of the most influential conduits of a knowledge of the new evils of the age was the series of reports the *Morning Chronicle* newspaper commissioned on the condition of the metropolitan, manufacturing and agricultural labouring poor between 1849 and 1851. The best-known correspondent for this series, Henry Mayhew, commented at the time that the decision to publish these investigations in the columns of a morning newspaper was itself a sign of the 'lively interest' popular suffering excited in the public at that time.[108] It was Mayhew's articles, on the 'immense mass of vice and want' that existed among London's poor, which caused the

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[105] Thomas Carlyle, *Chartism; Past and Present* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1858), p. 234.
[106] Susan Zlotnick, *Women, Writing and the Industrial Revolution* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 14.
[107] Anon., 'The First Half of the Nineteenth Century', *Fraser's Magazine* (January 1851), pp. 1-15 (p. 14).
[108] Anon., 'Labour and the Poor', *The Morning Chronicle* (19 October 1849), p. 5.

most outrage among the newspaper's readers.[109] Mayhew was evidently shocked by what he witnessed, writing that he had encountered 'degrees of wretchedness [he] could not have imagined to exist'.[110] He not only exposed the brutal degree of competition for work in the city, which reduced thousands to daily starvation, but he also showed how the experience of the physical evil of want drove many, above all the needlewomen, into the moral evil of prostitution.[111]

If Mayhew was, as he said, 'unprepared for the amount of misery' he met with,[112] his readers were even more so, with some considering his letters to represent the moment that the nation woke up the existence of the evils around them. A *Westminster Review* article on Mayhew's exposition of the state of the 'distressed needlewomen' declared that '[h]uman misery has at last found tongues and pens to make itself heard'.[113] Letters to the *Morning Chronicle* welcomed the articles as a 'revelation', crediting them with 'open[ing] out to the public gaze a scene of want and misery among thousands'.[114] 'Such an abyss of suffering has, perhaps, never yet been disclosed,' one such letter read.[115] People were 'unfamiliar,' another claimed, with the 'extremity of human misery and wretchedness' before their publication.[116] The *Christian Remembrancer* similarly claimed that most people had been 'ignorant' of the 'social evils' afflicting the country before the disclosures made in the *Morning Chronicle*.[117] Along with the continental revolutions of 1848, Mayhew's articles heightened the focus on 'the question of human misery' which, according to the *Westminster Review* in 1849 was 'at the bottom of the movement which is now convulsing Europe, and which threatens to agitate it for some time to come'.[118]

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[109] Ibid.
[110] Anon., 'Labour and the Poor', *The Morning Chronicle* (30 October 1849), p. 5.
[111] Anon.,'Labour and the Poor', *The Morning Chronicle* (6 November 1849) pp. 4-5 (p. 5).
[112] Ibid., p. 4.
[113] Anon., 'The Distressed Needlewomen', *Westminster Review* (January 1849), pp. 371-94 (p. 371).
[114] Anon., 'Labour and the Poor', *The Morning Chronicle* (6 November 1849), p. 5.
[115] Anon., 'Labour and the Poor', *The Morning Chronicle* (8 November 1849), p. 5.
[116] Anon., 'Labour and the Poor', *The Morning Chronicle* (22 November 1849), p. 5.
[117] Anon., 'Christian Socialism', *Christian Remembrancer* (July 1851), pp. 182-208 (pp. 187-202).
[118] Anon., 'The Distressed Needlewomen', p. 371.

It would be strange if a society so agitated by both theological problems and the 'question of human misery' had nothing new to say about the problem of evil, and this thesis will show that this was in fact far from being the case. In its broadest sense, evil encompassed both moral iniquity and suffering, vice as well as misery. To quote James McCosh's *Divine Government* once again, '[t]wo evils exist in this world—the one physical and the other moral—the evil of pain and the evil of sin.'[119] It is true that nineteenth-century encounters with 'social evils' often confounded this clearcut distinction between natural and moral evil. Mayhew's account of the needlewomen showed that impoverishment—"misery"—could produce vice. There were also those who saw the conditions in which the poor lived as far from "natural" and instead as the manmade consequences of sinful neglect and avarice.[120] Nevertheless, the depiction of characters such as Bill Sikes and Heathcliff shows that the Victorians were undoubtedly exercised by the question of human sinfulness or wickedness, independent of adverse circumstances. Dickens, it is well known, raised the possibility that Sikes was 'utterly and irredeemably bad.'[121] This thesis, however, is most interested in those encounters with the problem of evil that focussed on the meaning of human suffering rather than sin. The existence of moral evil, after all, could easily be justified by pointing to human free will.[122] The theologically heterodox such as Southwood Smith and Charles Bray went so far as to deny the existence of moral evil altogether, arguing that an act was only evil insofar as it caused suffering, which meant that it really represented a form of physical or natural evil.[123] It was suffering, in the forms of hunger, disease, poverty and economic ruin, that most

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[119] McCosh, *Divine Government*, p. 269

[120] See Robert Southey's *Sir Thomas More; Or,Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society* (London: John Murray, 1829), I, p. 127 for an early statement of this position.

[121] Charles Dickens, 'Preface to the Third Edition', *Oliver Twist; Or, the Parish Boy's Progress* (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1846), p. xii

[122] McCosh, *Divine Government*, p. 254; William Paley, *Natural Theology; or, Evidence of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearance of Natures* (London: R. Faulder, 1802), p. 547.

[123] Southwood Smith, *Illustrations of the Divine Government* (London: Sherwood, Neely & Jones, 1822), p. 131; Charles Bray, *The Philosophy of Necessity; or, the Law of Consequences as Applicable to Mental, Moral and Social Science* (London: Longman, 1841), p. 194.

preoccupied and perplexed the mid-Victorian generation. It is accordingly this facet of the Victorian response to the problem of evil that will be highlighted throughout this thesis.

Critical accounts of the Victorian novel that consider how an awareness of suffering and injustice tallied with Victorian religiosity have tended to study the novel in isolation, neglecting the ways in which novelists were participating in a wider culture that was trying to resolve the problem of evil anew. Barry Qualls' work on *The Secular Pilgrims of Victorian Fiction* (1982) examines the endeavour by the Victorian novel, following Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1833-34), to fashion a teleology that would confer meaning on the shared contemporary experiences of a disenchanted, materialistic world.[124] Central to this project were attempts to make sense of the 'hurt inflicted on the moral self' by the injustice of the world.[125] Qualls considers the securely providential outlook of earlier ages to have been largely unavailable to the mechanised, spiritually dead culture of the Victorians. Consequently, he views the novelists he considers, Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens and George Eliot, as having been compelled to find meaning in a this-worldly ethos.[126]

By contrast, Thomas Vargish argues for the persistence of a 'providential aesthetic' in Victorian literature throughout the first half of the century.[127] What he means by this is that for the Victorians reality was itself replete with moral and spiritual meaning and God's will manifest in the ordinary events of everyday life.[128] The providential worldview was based on the conviction of 'the care of God for his creatures, His general supervision over them, and the ordering of the whole course of things for their good'.[129] Vargish's 'providential aesthetic' implies a form of theodicy at work in the Victorian novel insofar as

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[124] Qualls, *Secular Pilgrims*, pp. 1-7.
[125] Ibid., p. 43.
[126] Ibid., p. 4-7.
[127] Thomas Vargish, *The Providential Aesthetic in Victorian Fiction* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1985).
[128] Ibid., pp. 3, 13, 18.
[129] Ibid., p. 18.

it promises that '[i]t will all turn out cosmically right'.[130] Although Vargish claims in his preface that his book will provide a 'reconstruction of a varied providential ethos' at work in Victorian literature',[131] he actually takes for granted the existence of a largely fixed monolithic notion of Providence outside of the pages of the novels. This may be because he is self-confessedly interested in Providence precisely as it is depicted in the pages of those novels, rather than in any cultural reconstruction of Providence during this period in general.[132] This means that his book cannot take account of how Victorian novels engaged with innovative contemporary attempts to make theological sense of evil. Neither he nor Qualls, moreover, take account of the particular social, economic and political contexts of injustice and suffering that may have influenced novelistic interpretations of the religious topography they consider.

By contrast, Heather Glen, in her more recent work, *Charlotte Brontë: The Imagination in History* (2002), has provided a template for considering how contemporary particularly Victorian ills problematized ideas of God's benevolent providence. Glen relates the sense of privation and precariousness evident throughout Brontë's work to the author's 'vision of the devastating costs and conditions of life in early nineteenth-century England'.[133] More specifically, in a chapter on *Villette*, she identifies the pain and privation experienced by the novel's heroine, Lucy Snowe, with 'the trauma of advancing capitalism', which delivered human beings over to a seemingly ruthless and random economic order.[134] The sense these brutal conditions created of being captive to blind circumstances is a major factor, according to Glen, in the fact that Lucy Snowe is ultimately unable to believe in an overarching Providence.[135]

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[130] Ibid., p. 33.
[131] Ibid., 'Preface'.
[132] Ibid., p. 17.
[133] Heather Glen, *Charlotte Brontë: The Imagination in History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2002), p. 95.
[134] Ibid., pp. 255-6, 271.
[135] Ibid., pp. 263-6, 276-83.

As I shall discuss in my chapter on *Villette*, however, recourse to the idea of a potentially interventionist Providence outside of circumstances was not the only way of making theological sense of evil at the time Brontë was writing. Glen's argument, like that of Qualls and Vargish, usefully highlights the way in which suffering, privation and injustice are interrogated in Victorian novels and held up as problematic phenomena requiring interpretation within a meaningful *telos*. However, without considering the various and innovative ways in which the problem of evil was posed and addressed in Victorian culture, these studies are necessarily confined to a narrow version of Christian response to suffering. Consequently, the inventiveness, resourcefulness and discursive liveliness which have been found to characterise Victorian theology are not granted by these critics to apply to the fundamental theological question of the problem of evil.

Critical accounts of how Victorian novelists endeavoured to make religious sense of evil have been influenced by one familiar historical narrative about the fate of Christianity during the nineteenth century. This line of thought, which seeks to explain the progress of secularisation during the period, holds that Christian belief was eroded less by the challenges of science and more by an 'ethical revolt' against the perceived immorality of Christian doctrine.[136] Prominent among those factors which contributed to this revolt was a sense of repugnance towards a punitive deity, who had inflicted suffering not only on all the innocent descendants of Adam, but sacrificed his own guiltless son and was willing to condemn creatures of his own making to eternal misery: 'The moral critics of traditional Christian doctrine asked whether hell, substitutionary atonement, or many of the Old Testament stories were suggestive of a genuinely moral deity'.[137] As Howard R. Murphy and Frank M. Turner have argued, the refusal to acknowledge the goodness of such a Creator led to a loss of Christian belief in some, who turned to this-worldly social

[136] Howard R. Murphy, 'The Ethical Revolt against Christian Orthodoxy in Early Victorian England', *The American Historical Review*, 60 (1955), pp. 800-17.
[137] Gerald Parsons, 'Introduction: Victorian Religion, Paradox and Variety', *Religion in Victorian Britain: Vol 1: Traditions*, ed. by Gerald Parsons (Manchester: Manchester University Press in association with the Open University, 1988), pp. 1-13 (p. 8).

meliorism instead.[138] It is this biblical Creator, personal and intrusive, and increasingly incompatible with nineteenth-century values, that critics of the Victorian novel have long had in mind.

Recent scholarship on nineteenth-century Christianity, however, has tended to emphasise not its inevitable decline, but its resilience and adaptability to challenge. Emma Mason and Mark Knight trace the evidence during this period of 'the capacity of the Christian faith for renewal, reform, and even revolution'.[139] They argue that Christianity dealt robustly with the challenges of modernisation, adapting 'its form and message to engage with widespread cultural change'.[140] Likewise, Victoria Morgan and Clare Williams point to the flowering of religious diversity during this period, which existed alongside the more familiar processes of secularisation.[141] What was peculiar about the Victorian religious experience, they note, was its openness to 'the pervasive call in the period for the re-visioning of religious belief'.[142] Rebecca Styler has shown, for example, how nineteenth-century female writers set out to 're-conceive Christianity', reinterpreting it 'to meet deeply felt personal and political needs' and to mediate between it and a changing social milieu.[143] The fullest reflection of this altered critical framework is again Linda Woodhead's edited collection *Reinventing Christianity: Nineteenth-Century Contexts* (2001). The essays in this collection strive to expand the discussion of Victorian religion from a focus on now familiar themes such as "faith versus doubt", examining instead 'the reinvention and reconfiguration of Western Christianity' throughout the century.[144] As Woodhead notes in her 'Introduction', atheism was 'extremely rare' in

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[138] Murphy, 'Ethical Revolt', p. 801; Frank M. Turner, 'The Victorian Crisis of Faith and the Faith that was Lost', in *Victorian Faith in Crisis: Essays on Continuity and Change in Nineteenth-Century Religious Belief*, ed. by Richard J. Helmstadter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 9-38 (pp. 16, 19).
[139] Knight & Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature*, p. 9.
[140] Ibid., p.153.
[141] Morgan & Williams, *Shaping Belief*, p. xv.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Styler, *Literary Theology*, pp. 1, 8.
[144] Woodhead, 'Introduction', *Reinventing Christianity*, p. 2.

Victorian Britain.[145] Instead, challenges to faith from modern developments and social and political upheaval became impelling forces for religious diversification and transformation.

There has been little attention paid to how, in a culture so skilled at 'weaving new ideas and old dogmas into a fresh pattern of thought',[146] the Victorians may have innovated fresh solutions to the problem of evil. However, two recent studies have pointed the way to how a more historically sensitive understanding of Victorian theodicy can further our understanding of novelistic encounters with suffering. Catherine Gallagher's *The Body Economic: Life, Death and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* (2006) is interested in, among other things, the extent to which sensations of pain and discomfort were invested with economic and cultural value throughout the nineteenth century. The works of political economy she considers formulated what she calls a 'Pain theory of Value', which envisaged the suffering of toiling labourers and the perennial dissatisfaction of capitalist and consumer as producing and sustaining British prosperity.[147] In her chapter on George Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858), she argues that this political economical valuation of pain inflected contemporary theology via the adoption by the Evangelical Thomas Chalmers, and his peers, of ideas first suggested by Thomas 'Robert' Malthus's *Essay on Population* (1798). Malthus had envisioned suffering as an unavoidable component of the human procreative urge. Either people suffered the consequences of over-population or the privations and frustrations of moral restraint. The Chalmersian school, Gallagher writes, presented this unavoidable suffering as 'part of God's divine plan to bring about moral progress. Hence, it was a religion that used political economy to emphasise the relation between sexuality, suffering, and spiritual development'.[148] She considers this union of political economy and Christianity to have informed Eliot's construction of an equivalent 'secular theodicy', in which procreative suffering solicits

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[145] Ibid., p. 6
[146] Houghton, *Frame of Mind*, p. 20.
[147] Catherine Gallagher, *The Body Economic: Life, Death and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 23, 28, 31-5, 51-60.
[148] Ibid., p. 173.

social sympathy and, by demanding to be made sense of, sparks creative cultural activity, 'the art which mends nature'.[149]

Jan-Melissa Shramm's *Atonement and Self-Sacrifice in Nineteenth-Century Narrative* (2012) likewise suggests that Victorian novelists showed a sensitivity to contemporary discourses in their engagements with suffering. Unlike the rest of the studies surveyed above, her work is explicitly concerned with the Victorian response to both 'traditional and "new" forms of human suffering' and the period's sense of the 'potential insufficiency of Christian theodicy in an age of rapid social and industrial change'.[150] Schramm's focus is on the overlap between mid-century theological interest in substitutionary atonement and encounters with suffering in other types of Victorian prose. Such suffering raised sharply for writer and reader alike complicated questions about responsibility and empathetic identification. Schramm argues that the problem of constructing a meaningful mediation between the individual sufferer and the broader community was complicated by Victorian readings of the atonement, which interrogated how unmerited suffering and self-sacrifice secured the good of the whole community and led to moral renewal.[151] In this way, theology and literature took joint responsibility for making consoling sense of experiences of suffering.

This thesis follows the critical work of Gallagher and Schramm insofar as it takes the terms of its analysis of fictional encounters with the problem of evil from both contemporary theological and non-theological discourse. So overshadowing has been the idea of the punitive, supernaturalist Victorian God that we have been largely disabled from recognising religious expression that does not conform to this model. The most visible and vocal devotees of this transcendent God during this period were Evangelical Christians, towards whom, as Robin Gilmour notes, the major Victorian novelists were 'largely

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[149] Ibid., pp. 178-9.
[150] Jan-Melissa Shramm, *Atonement and Self-Sacrifice in Nineteenth-Century Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp.1-2.
[151] Ibid., pp. 4, 15, 24, 31, 36-7.

hostile'.[152] Consequently, we should be careful not to restrict any investigation of theology in the novel to looking for evidence of the type of religious expression associated with the Evangelicals. Gilmour argues that mid-century hostility towards Evangelicalism stemmed from the perception that Evangelical doctrine was incompatible with the growing 'cultural conviction that the world could be improved and individual human beings with it'.[153] The novels I consider all show signs of such meliorist thinking, whether in the form of *Villette*'s concern with 'getting on' in the world,[154] *Bleak House*'s commitment to social and institutional reform or the *Mill on the Floss*'s interest in the 'onward tendency of human things'.[155] As a result, the innovative and unorthodox solutions to the problem of evil we find in these novels are in alignment with these respective visions of progress. As I shall show below, moreover, this inscription of evil into a progressive narrative was part of a broader cultural movement in Victorian culture.

Nevertheless, in order to fully appreciate these new forms of theodicy it is necessary first to map the shape of orthodox Christian opinion on the problem of evil during the early to mid-Victorian period. Above all, no account of any aspect of Victorian theological culture can afford to ignore the crucial part played by the prevailing Evangelical ethos. As a number of scholars note, the Evangelical revival at the beginning of the nineteenth century was highly formative of the tone and values of this period.[156] Boyd Hilton has traced the enormous influence of the Evangelical outlook on attitudes towards poverty, inequality and other forms of public suffering during the first half of the century, particularly as a consequence of the conversion of the politically powerful. Consequently, Victorian responses to evil, both in and outside of literature, were often

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[152] Robin Gilmour, *The Victorian Period: The Intellectual and Cultural Context of English Literature 1830-1890* (London & New York: Longman, 1993), p. 71.
[153] Ibid., p. 88.
[154] Brontë, *Villette*, p. 82.
[155] Eliot, *Mill on the Floss*, pp. 272-3.
[156] Hilton, *Age of Atonement*, passim; Elisabeth Jay, *The Religion of the Heart,* p. 43; Elisabeth Jay, *Faith and Doubt in Victorian Britain* (London & Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986), p. 1.

constituted in relation to perceived or actual Evangelical attitudes.[157] While many of the views expressed by Evangelicals about the meaning of earthly ills were those shared by other orthodox Christians, their cultural hegemony over the first half of the century meant it was largely Evangelicals who shaped and propagated the most prominent interpretations of evil.

Evangelical views of evil, communicated through 'the plethora of religious periodicals, biographies and tracts which formed the staple diet of Sunday reading',[158] were largely determined by their preoccupation with human sinfulness. As Elisabeth Jay writes, '[t]he hub of Evangelical thinking was a conviction of total depravity. Sin was not, as those with an optimistic view of humanity were claiming, a matter of voluntary transgression, but since the Fall, endemic to man's nature, marring every part'.[159] Comprehended in this 'marring' was the degraded and finite human mind, the capacity of which to penetrate the divine mysteries Evangelicals tended to doubt. 'God's ways are not our ways,' one of Hannah More's tracts about the mysteriousness of God's providence concludes,[160] and throughout her work, More continually underlined the incomprehensibility of God's 'dark dispensations,' while also generally assuming that they indicated 'Almighty displeasure' at human sinfulness.[161] Evangelical theology collapsed all evil into moral evil, insofar as it held natural evil to be the deserved punishment for sin. Ford K. Brown summarises the Evangelical outlook thus: 'Sin is the great cause and source of every existing evil; we should always prefer suffering to sin; these are two basic

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[157] Although there is some scholarly discussion about what forms of nineteenth-century Christianity can accurately be denominated 'Evangelical', this thesis uses the term and its cognates to refer to Christians who positioned Original Sin, the Atonement, a personal relationship with God and a reliance on Scripture at the heart of their religious expression. See Elisabeth Jay, *Faith and Doubt*, p. 1; Elisabeth Jay, *Religion of the Heart*, pp. 16, 54-82; Hilton, *Age of Atonement*, pp. 7-8; David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: a History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 1-19.

[158] Elisabeth Jay, 'Introductory Essay', in *The Evangelical and Oxford Movements*, ed. by Elisabeth Jay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 16.

[159] Ibid.

[160] Hannah More, ''Tis all for the Best', in *The Works of Hannah More*, 6 vols (London: H. Fisher, R. Fisher and P. Jackson, 1834), I , pp. 147-165 (p. 165).

[161] Hannah More, 'Practical Uses of the Doctrine of Providence,' in *The Works of Hannah More*, 18 vols (London: T. Cadell & W. Davies, 1818), XV, pp. 60-81 (p. 61).

principles of every part of the Evangelical Reformation'.[162] God, wrote Hannah More, 'is never the author of moral evil; and the natural evil which he does authorize, is both the punishment and the corrective of the moral'.[163] Sin had entered the world by means of Adam and Eve's disobedience and consequently, as another Evangelical asserted, 'man is the sole and single author of evil'.[164] More's writings emphasise that no matter how much suffering a person experiences, it is always less than her due as a 'born and bred' sinner.[165]

For Evangelicals and other Christians who took seriously the doctrine of human depravity, natural evil was not theologically perplexing because suffering always bore direct relation to the moral evil of sin. The autobiography of one convert, George Pilkington, demonstrates the ingenuity with which suffering might be accounted for in every instance by some moral failing on his part. Each obstacle to his making a living, each loss of friendship, each time he and his family are on the verge of starvation, is interpreted as a reproof to some sinful pride on his part.[166] Pilkington overlooks entirely the practical reasons for his poverty, such the fact that he refused to accept payment for his religious lectures, while apparently seeking no other work.[167] For someone who habitually stresses the futility of all human devices, whose motto is 'Not my will but thine be done', this recognition of his own role in his suffering would be attributing an alarming amount of power to the depraved human will.[168] Such acknowledgement of a purely mundane cause for suffering would also render that suffering morally meaningless. As the American Presbyterian minister Albert Barnes commented in relation to the Book of Job, to refer suffering to earthly causes, even the physical laws of causation, was to deny the will of

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[162] Brown, *Fathers of the Victorians*, p. 152.
[163] Hannah More, 'Religion Necessary to the Well-being of States', in *The Works of Hannah More* (London: H. Fisher, R. Fisher & P. Jackson, 1834), IV, pp. 165-81 (p. 180).
[164] John Charles Ryle, *Home Truths, Being Miscellaneous Addresses and Tracts* (London: John Hunt & Co, 1850), p. 42; Revd. S. Robins, 'The Doctrine of Providence', *The British Pulpit; a Collection of Three Hundred and Fifty Original Sermons by the most Eminent Divines of the Present Day*, 6 vols (London: G. Wightman, 1839), I, pp. 242-52 (p. 247).
[165] More, ''Tis All for the Best', p. 149.
[166] George Pilkington, *The Doctrine of Particular Providence; Or, The Divine Guardianship over the most Minute Concerns of Man* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1836), pp. 65, 84, 92, 95.
[167] Ibid., p. 152.
[168] Ibid., pp. 84, 95.

God, and consequently to make suffering seem 'accidental' or 'haphazard'.[169] This claim may seem paradoxical, but what Barnes meant was that recourse to naturalistic causation eliminated the role of an 'intelligent being' presiding over suffering and consequently the possibility of a moral 'intention or plan' on his part.[170] Likewise, Evangelicals accepted punishment for sin because it was all part of the same divine redemptive plan in which God in his goodness 'repairs by grace the evils produced by sin'.[171]

A preoccupation with man's depravity and helplessness to overcome evil thus went hand-in-hand with a like fixation on Christ's atonement. Evangelical Christians accordingly not only held fast to 'the promises made in the Gospel',[172] but some even welcomed the suffering they saw as both punitive and redemptive. The hymns of John Wesley, who influenced the Evangelical revival, are full of thankfulness for the sufferings experienced in 'affliction's furnace,' which will refine mankind into a shape fit for Heaven.[173] The *Olney Hymns* by John Newton and William Cowper (1799) likewise welcomed God's 'chast'ning rod,' which preserved sinners from damnation.[174] Newton described afflictions as 'love-tokens,' the title of one of his hymns;[175] he elsewhere imagines that God afflicts those he especially loves in order to wean them from the world and increase their dependence on him.[176] If evil, however, was not to be referred to sin, was not a sign of God's personal relationship with his creation (suffering as a 'visitation'), then the whole Evangelical redemptive theodicy fell apart.

Christians who invested in this theodicy, with its vision of an interventionist God who punishes and preserves, were less likely to be perplexed by earthly evil. As the High Church *Christian Remembrancer* put it in 1849, the 'Christian doesn't think the question of

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[169] Albert Barnes, *Notes, Critical, Illustrative and Practical, on the Book of Job*, 8 vols (London: George Routledge, 1847), I, p. 151.
[170] Ibid.
[171] More, 'Practical Uses of the Doctrine of Providence', p. 66.
[172] Jay, 'Introductory Essay', *The Evangelical and Oxford Movements*, p. 3.
[173] John Wesley, *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People called Methodists* (London: J. Paramore, 1782), p. 313.
[174] William Cowper and John Newton, *Olney Hymns: In Three Books* (London: T. Wilkins, 1783), p. 53.
[175] Ibid., p.p. 154-5.
[176] Ibid., p. 63.

the justness of the present life an important one because he believes in a future life'.[177] While Evangelical Christians, in particular, are associated nowadays with early nineteenth-century reform activity, they were far from believing that the eradication of suffering was desirable or possible. Elisabeth Jay accordingly remarks that Evangelicals 'did not see the relief of suffering as their main objective. Though they attempted to relieve it, suffering chiefly moved them to intensify their battle against its cause, the evil rooted in men's souls'.[178] An insistence that the only truly worrying evil was 'the enemy within/The evil heart, the carnal mind'[179] inevitably had a political dimension at a time when the nation was preoccupied by the myriad evils accompanying industrialisation and population growth. In her *Tracts written during the Riots in the Year 1817*, Hannah More condemned those suffering under a scarcity of food and the fluctuations of trade for refusing to recognise these 'calamities over which no human power had any control' as 'the visitations of Providence' and blaming Government instead, which had led to 'anarchy, riot and treason'.[180]

However, as the *Christian Remembrancer* article cited above acknowledged, the early nineteenth century witnessed the growth of a competing view of evil, one that its writer traced back to the previous century, when ideals of perfectibility began to take hold. This new view, which he says originated with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, took 'the universal line of objecting to the existence altogether of pain and of evil'.[181] Instead of 'accept[ing] the fixity of disorder in the world,' those who shared Rousseau's outlook denied Original Sin and instead imputed evil to 'bad systems of education'.[182] This article is a testament to the fact that the orthodox, predominantly Evangelical interpretation of evil did not hold

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[177] Anon., 'The Book of Job', *Christian Remembrancer* (January 1849), pp. 157-229(p. 159).
[178] Jay, *Religion of the Heart*, p. 173. David Bebbington makes a similar point: '[b]ecause the target was outright evil, the [social] crusades cannot properly be labelled 'humanitarian,' the traditional term used by historians to describe Evangelical socio-political attitudes. It was true that the leaders often wished to eliminate suffering [...]. That, however, was not their *raison d'etre*.' (*History of Evangelicalism*, p. 133).
[179] Wesley, *Collection of Hymns*, p. 299.
[180] Hannah More, 'Tracts written during the Riots in the Year 1817', in *Works of Hannah More* (London: T. Cadell & W. Davies), VI , pp. 337-455 (p. 337).
[181] Anon., 'The Book of Job', p. 188
[182] Ibid., pp. 188, 216.

undisputed reign in the nineteenth century. Rather, it was contested by those who sought a solution to the problem of evil that was more compatible with post-Enlightenment ideals of progress and reform and was more responsive to life in nineteenth-century Britain. The remainder of this introduction will outline these competing theodicies, in order to more fully show the condition of the problem of evil when Victorian novelists came to address it at mid-century.

The greatest challenge to the orthodox supernaturalistic account of evil came from social reformers, who openly reviled the tradition of 'preach[ing] endurance from the tops of other's backs'.[183] This last phrase is taken from Leigh Hunt's 1833 article 'Answer to a Singular Argument of the Tories, about Human Happiness and Misery.' By mid-century, this second-generation Romantic poet and journalist, who had once been imprisoned on charges of libel against the Prince Regent, seemed far removed from his Radical past and was better known for his saccharine brand of optimism, which had earned him the title of 'Apostle of Cheerfulness'.[184] In fact, when Charles Dickens came in 1852 to parody Hunt in the figure of *Bleak House*'s Harold Skimpole, he conflated this optimism with a self-serving interest in retaining the status quo.[185] Writing in 1833, however, Leigh Hunt evidently saw optimism as an ideological weapon to be used on behalf of the people against entrenched conservative interests. 'Tory Philosophers,' he writes, have lately been arguing that 'reform is of no use' on the grounds that 'the amount of happiness and misery in the world is the same in all ages' and that 'Providence evidently designs it to remain

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[183] Leigh Hunt, 'Answer to a Singular Argument of the Tories, about Human Happiness and Misery', *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* (September 1833), pp. 417-21 (p. 417).

[184] 'Keats, John', *The Encyclopaedia Britannica, or Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and General Literature*, 8th Edn, 21 vols (Edinburgh: Adam & Charles Black, 1857), XIII, p. 55-7 (p. 56); See also, William Howie Wylie, *Thomas Carlyle, The Man and his Books* (London: Marshall Japp and Company, 1881), p. 223.

[185] Skimpole's speech is peppered with observations like the following: 'Some ill-conditioned growling fellow may say to me, 'What's the use of these legal and equitable abuses? How do you defend them?' I reply, 'My growling friend, I don't defend them, but they are very agreeable to me. There is a shepherd-youth, a friend of mine, who transmutes them into something highly fascinating to my simplicity. I don't say it is for this that they exist — for I am a child among you worldly grumblers, and not called upon to account to you or myself for anything — but it may be so'. (Charles Dickens, *Bleak* House, ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 549). My chapter on *Bleak House* discusses Skimpole's optimism in detail (pp. 175-178).

so'.[186] Hunt exposes the self-serving nature of this worldview. Even if the amount of misery and happiness were fated to remain constant, this would still accommodate a less unequal distribution of them; yet the 'resignation' preached by the Tories, he observes, is 'never on their side': '[w]hen Tories resort to philosophy, it is always to recommend some endurance on the part of others'.[187]

Hunt notes that what has ushered this long-existing piece of piety onto the political stage is the threat to vested interests represented by the discontented and politicized poor: 'The poor want bread. They are getting knowledge, and knowledge teaches how to get power: and they will have both bread and power.'[188] He welcomes these movements as part of the progress of mankind. While the rich soothe their consciences with the notion that every lot in life has its advantages and disadvantages and happiness is therefore more or less even, Hunt insists that a visit to any manufacturing town will dispel that notion by starkly showing the far greater evils to which the poor are prey.[189] To try to halt attempts to eliminate these evils, the Tories are fighting back with a 'frightful effort to represent their wretched transitory system of violence and injustice, as a beautiful and permanent manifestation of God's providence'. Hunt inserts a gap in between God's providence and the status quo, which enables him to take a Radical stance on Christian principles. That which the Tories try to pass off as natural evils, unalterable constituents of God's providence, he decries as moral evils, the violence and injustice of a Tory-authored system. The Tory version of Providence is discredited as a false representation, a set of 'fine gratuitous abstractions' inextricably tied to their selfish and unsympathetic mode of living. Their own consciousness of their falsity of their worldview is indicated by their insistence on it, for, Hunt argues, if the miseries and inequalities experienced by mankind truly be 'the will of Heaven, for its inscrutable purposes', the Tories have nothing to fear from

[186] Hunt, 'Answer to a singular argument of the Tories', p. 417.
[187] Ibid., pp. 417-8.
[188] Ibid.
[189] Ibid., p. 420.

inevitably doomed attempts at reform.[190] In such a case, there would be no need for them to write in favour of this view of Providence.[191] But mankind instinctively feels, Hunt continues, that the Tory account of Providence is not the 'just one', and in its labours to prove how Providence truly operates, 'governments [may be] altered, kings [...] overthrown, political ascendencies swept away'. Providence has yet to fully disclose its views for mankind, in his opinion, yet he rests all his hopes for mankind's improvement on the belief that mankind is being led to something better than has yet existed.[192]

Hunt's optimistic conviction that 'there is a great deal more good in the world than the world turns to account' is paradoxically grounded in a clear perception of the evils of the world.[193] The Tories' is a hopeless vision: they respond to the evils experienced by the poor with 'pretenses that they cannot be helped!'.[194] By attributing the wretchedness occasioned by their system to God's designs, they imply its permanence. By contrast, Hunt's focus is on the evidence of God's benevolent intentions towards mankind, which offers hope that such wretchedness must be 'transient' and authorizes action to further God's plans for the progress of humankind. While reducing Tory theodicy to its ideological rudiments, Hunt's article attempts to shore up its own account of Providence as the true one, independent of how much it suits Radical purposes. One theodicy is discredited only to accredit another as indisputably true; the Tories distort Christianity, while the belief that evils are eradicable does justice to the benevolence of God. Nevertheless, the general effect of the article is to reveal the political instrumentality of different accounts of Providence, which assign to human beings different degrees of responsibility for and power over evil. Hunt's answer to the problem is conceived and constituted by its opposition to Tory theology.

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[190] Ibid., p. 419.
[191] Ibid.
[192] Ibid., p. 418.
[193] Ibid.
[194] Ibid., p. 421.

Those who subscribed to a view of God as authorizing human progress tended to hold to a naturalistic conception of evil, one which the philosopher Susan Neiman traces back to Rousseau.[195] Rousseau's perspective on evil emerged in the course of his reconceptualization of human history in *A Discourse upon the Origin and Foundation of Inequality among Mankind* (1761). Against those who claimed that 'men are unequal at God's pleasure,' Rousseau proposed that humankind had experienced an original state of felicity and equality, from which they had lapsed by their entrance into civil society.[196] Rousseau held the advance of civilization, produced by man's faculty for improvement, to be the 'Source of all Man's Misfortunes'.[197] Without willing evil, human desire for security and property had 'in a Succession of Ages' brought about the 'Disorders' of inequality, tyranny, competition and wars.[198] Rousseau, consequently, provided a naturalistic account of how evil developed over time, without having recourse to any original evil in man or creation. His vision is of a gradually maturing people doing the best they can but inevitably prone to mistakes in their ignorance. Neiman notes that this conception of the origins of evil licensed a progressive view of mankind while simultaneously seeming to lament the pitfalls of progress. This dual perspective was possible because Rousseau saw the trajectory of mankind as an educational process. For every mistake and consequent debasement of the species, there was the opportunity to learn and improve. Thus Rousseau replaced 'grace with educational psychology'.[199] To apply John Hick's schema, Rousseau subscribed to an "Iranaean" rather than an "Augustinian" theodicy, one which managed to preserve the basic goodness both of Creator and creature.

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[195] Ibid., pp. 4, 47.
[196] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Origin and Foundation of Inequality* (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1761), p. 10.
[197] Ibid., p. 38.
[198] Ibid., pp. 38, 97-9, 132.
[199] Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 42.

In early nineteenth-century Britain, this naturalistic account of evil was most closely associated with Robert Owen's doctrine of circumstances. Looking back on the age of reform in 1851, F. D. Maurice was in no doubt that its impetus was the false belief that that 'all evil has its origin in circumstances; that when you make *them* good, you make men good'.[200] In his *New View of Society* (1813), Owen had outlined the growing ills of poverty and vice facing the nation and shared his conviction that it was possible to 'gradually remove the evils which now afflict mankind'.[201] Owen's defence of 'poor traduced and degraded human nature' was accompanied by a vindication of the beneficence of God, 'that Power which governs and pervades the Universe'.[202] God's purpose was the maximisation of human happiness, which is why he had made evil eradicable.[203] With this view of Providence, he implied that the current social arrangements had deviated far from God's plan, thus reclaiming the stamp of divine sanction from Christian defences of inequality and ineffaceable evil. This rhetorical move is more explicit in Owen's dedication of an 1849 work, pretty much re-treading the same ground, 'to those who comprehend the Divine Laws of Nature, Or of God, and Prefer them to the injurious Laws of Men'.[204]

Owen's vision of Providence operating by the general laws of nature was not itself necessarily heterodox, being accommodated in some form by multiple respectable eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Church of England theologians, from Bishop Butler to William Paley.[205] In his *Analogy of Religion* (1734), Joseph Butler had asserted that God's government was 'uniform' and the world ran according to 'fixed general laws

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[200] Maurice, *Theological Essays*, p. 37.
[201] Robert Owen, *A New View of Society* (London: Cadell & Davies, 1813), pp. 8, 11.
[202] Ibid., p. 13.
[203] Ibid., pp. 14, 19.
[204] Robert Owen, *The Revolution in the Mind and Practice of the Human Race; or, The Coming Change from Irrationality to Rationality* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1849).
[205] Joseph Butler, *The Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed, to the Constitution and Course of Nature* (Edinburgh: William and Robert Chambers, 1850), pp. 29, 36, 39, 46, 136; Paley, *Natural Theology*, pp. 43-44, 527-28.

of nature'.[206] This revised notion of Providence, he wrote, was in accordance with the enlarged views which 'late discoveries' had yielded 'with respect to the material world'.[207] The successes of science, then, animated the natural law vision, which in turn authorized a view of God as intending for human beings to progress as they used their reasoning powers to learn what actions will lead to pleasure and what to pain.[208] Only by the course of nature being fixed and comprehensible could human beings foresee those consequences and take the necessary steps.[209] The existence of general laws assigned to human beings a degree of agency over their own lives: 'he has made our happiness and misery, or our interest, to depend in part upon ourselves'.[210]

William Paley likewise believed that God's chief purpose was the happiness of his creation.[211] Faced, then, with the fact of innumerable evils in the world, he asserted that the solution that came closest to solving the problem of evil 'is that which arises from the consideration of *general rules*'.[212] These laws are undoubtedly 'directed to beneficial ends'; yet in their 'thwartings and crossings,' 'frequent particular inconveniences' will arise'.[213] His chief claim for God's benevolence, however, was based on the fact that evil was never God's direct 'object'; instead evil was something that stemmed unavoidably from laws whose object it was to maximise happiness.[214] For Butler, too, evil had a largely instrumental purpose in the world, teaching humankind what to avoid and how to improve. Both Butler and Paley thus resorted to general laws to advocate what might be called a utilitarian interpretation of evil, reading it as part of the divine happiness-optimising machinery. This came close to what John Hick observes is always a risk of theodicy, that of domesticating evil 'within the divine household', viewing it as a 'servant instead of a

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[206] Butler, *Analogy of Religion*, pp. 42-3.
[207] Ibid., p. 60.
[208] Ibid., p. 41.
[209] Ibid.
[210] Ibid., p. 65.
[211] Paley, *Natural Theology*, p. 517.
[212] Ibid., p. 527. Original emphasis.
[213] Ibid.
[214] Ibid, p. 501.

deadly enemy'.[215] By contrast, Victorian reformers were more inclined to view evil as a sign of alienation from God, a mark of how far human laws deviated from the divine ones.

The work which was most responsible for mid-Victorian knowledge of the relationship between evil and the fixed divine laws was George Combe's *Constitution of Man, Considered in Relation to External Objects* (1828). Upon Combe's death in 1858, the *Illustrated London News* wrote of this work that '[n]o book published within the memory of man, in the English or any other language, has effected so great a revolution in the previously received opinions of society'.[216] *The Constitution of Man*, according to the *Westminster Review* in 1857, had done much to 'popularize the conception of the divine government of the world, as of a rule sustained by order and uniformity of law, rather than by interferences to be hoped for, believed in, prayed for, but of which the events can be reduced to no certainty or calculation, and which cannot therefore be worked for'.[217] The book's tremendous popularity is also acknowledged by Boyd Hilton, who claims that it was the most popular book, after the Bible, the *Pilgrim's Progress*, and *Robinson Crusoe*, during the second quarter of the nineteenth century.[218] The persistent influence of the texts by John Bunyan and Daniel Defoe, with their respective motifs of pilgrimage and providential shipwreck, may be a sign of the cultural predominance of the notion, anathema to Combe, that suffering is spiritually redemptive. Nevertheless, an alternative naturalistic understanding of evil, which enabled practical measures of reform, was beginning to make its mark.

Combe juxtaposed two chief worldviews, one that holds 'the world contains the elements of improvement within itself, which time will evolve and bring to maturity; it having been constituted by the Creator on the principle of a progressive system', and the other which claims 'that the world was perfect at first, but fell into derangement, continues

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[215] Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, p. 16.
[216] Cited by John Van Wyhe in his 'Introduction' to *Combe's "Constitution of Man" and Nineteenth-Century Responses*, ed. by John Van Wyhe (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004), pp. v-xix
[217] Anon., 'Theology and Philosophy', *Westminster Review* (July 1857), pp. 235-53, (p. 237).
[218] Hilton, *Age of Atonement*, p. 198.

in disorder and does not contain within itself the elements of its own rectification'.[219] The former, Combe argues, does far greater justice to the 'Divine power, wisdom and goodness'.[220] Human progress is enabled by the constancy of the divinely instituted laws, which have annexed pain to their violation and pleasure to their obedience.[221] Combe's most notable innovation was his loud insistence on 'THE INDEPENDENT EXISTENCE AND OPERATION OF THE NATURAL LAWS OF CREATION'.[222] What he meant by this is that someone who violates an organic law, such as by failing to wear a jacket in cold weather, or a physical law, such as by sailing on an unsound ship, will suffer the adverse consequences of this, no matter how morally virtuous they are. The 'most pious and benevolent missionaries sailing to Christianize the heathen' will not be saved by their morality if they violate the physical laws; while the 'greatest monsters of iniquity' will not be doomed by their immorality if they obey them.[223]

Combe was hopeful that this argument would clear up some of the perplexity that still clung to the moral government of God at times when the innocent suffered natural evils:

> on such occasions the darkness and inscrutable perplexity of the ways of Providence are generally moralised upon; or a future life is called in as the scene in which these crooked paths are to be rendered straight. But if my views be correct, Divine wisdom and goodness are abundantly conspicuous in these events; for by this distinct operation of the organic and moral laws, order is preserved in creation, and [...]the means of discipline and improvement are afforded to all the human faculties.[224]

Combe's impatience with theological accounts of the mysteriousness of God's providence is evident here. He subsequently cites instances of catastrophes such as the Plague,

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[219] George Combe, *The Constitution of Man, Considered in Relation to External Objects* (Edinburgh: McLachlan et al., 1836), p. 12.
[220] Ibid.
[221] Ibid., pp. 8, 13, 19, 24, 30, 38, 44.
[222] Ibid., p. 19.
[223] Ibid.
[224] Ibid., p. 19.

epidemic disease and the fires in Edinburgh in 1824 where the common response was one of 'wonder, consternation and awe' at the 'inscrutable ways of Providence' or the interpretation of these events as a 'scourge' on the nation's 'moral iniquities'. Throughout his work, he paints the theological views he disagrees with as being nonsensical in a way that verges on insanity. He cites the case of the wife of the Reverend Ebenezer Erskine, who, instead of tracing her depression to the organic cause of her bad health, believed that 'the Arrows of the Almighty were within her, the poison whereof did drink up her spirits' and charged herself with 'the unpardonable sin'. 'Such feelings,' Combe commented, 'occurring in a woman of blameless life, clearly indicated diseased action of the organs of Cautiousness'.[225] He likewise notes the Revd Erskine's mistake in interpreting the deaths of four of his children as 'severe trials' and 'sore afflictions,' when in reality they were no other than the consequences of violating the natural laws by living in a physically 'unwholesome' situation.[226] Combe is also baffled by Hannah More's claim that she welcomed her illnesses because they invigorated her faith and brought her closer to God. Headaches and fevers, he observes, 'are the consequences of departures from the organic laws, and are intended to reclaim the sufferer to obedience that the pain may cease'.[227] 'Only disease or errors in education could have produced such perverted experience' in More that she would welcome pain, in 'contradiction to the divine institutes'.

It is to the ascendency of these distorted notions of suffering and the consequent neglect of the natural laws that Combe attributes mankind's stalled progress over the centuries. A theology based on the idea of God governing 'by special acts of supernatural power' is a throwback to a time when people could not make sense of the natural order; but now that science had revealed the constancy of natural law, it would be more effective to teach people how to control their conduct in accordance with those laws than to preaching sermons against vice and misery. When people assign evil to supernatural interpositions,

[225] Ibid., p. 140.
[226] Ibid.
[227] Ibid., p. 142.

evil simply multiplies because they neglect the ways God has put it in their power to prevent it. Believing that it is 'impossible to avert' they believe that it 'behoove[s] them meekly to endure' evil. Combe describes the drastic consequences of a view that had even led some religious sects to neglect to inoculate their children against disease:

> Individuals who entertain the belief that bad health, worldly ruin, and sinister accidents, befalling them, are not the Divinely pre-ordained consequences of infringement of the laws of nature, but particular manifestations of the love of the Creator towards themselves, make slight inquiry into the natural causes of their miseries, and bestow few efforts to remove them.[228]

It is evident, then, why Combe insisted upon his alternative theodicy that evil proceeds only from neglect of the natural laws, which are themselves 'calculated, when observed, to promote the happiness of man'.[229] Education in the natural laws would eliminate natural evil, at least as it affected man, by enabling him to use his foresight to predict events like storms and earthquakes and 'place himself in safety from their injurious effects'.[230] Moreover, it would also eventually eliminate moral evil as people learned what conduct maximises happiness and what tends to misery. Combe explicitly champions this view at the expense of the false notion that evils arise from a 'vicious' or 'defective' constitution of nature.[231] His system, moreover, dispenses entirely with the notion of the fall of man. Firstly, he uses phrenology to show that there is no inherently 'bad' faculty in man but all have their legitimate role in relation to the constitution of the world around him.[232] Secondly, he argues that death is not to be seen as a punishment but a benevolent original divine institute that permits the succession of generations, among other benefits.[233]

The understanding of evil advanced in *The Constitution of Man* must be understood in relation to its author's desire for social and political reform. If both the constitution of

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[228] Ibid., p. 271.
[229] Ibid., p. 100.
[230] Ibid., p. 7.
[231] Ibid., p. 100.
[232] Ibid., p. 91.
[233] Ibid., p. 181.

man and the divine laws were aimed at maximising happiness, then 'the present arrangements of society' which were so full of misery, 'in which millions of men are shut up in cotton and other manufactories for ten or twelve hours a-day; others labour under ground in mines; others plough the fields', was evidently a drastic violation of the Creator's will.[234] Combe claimed the priority of improving the physical living conditions of the poor over teaching them religious doctrines, which he held would be unavailing so long as the natural laws were being ignored.[235] He argued that the wealth of the nation produced by the manufacturing system came at the unacceptable cost of keeping its labourers in a brute-like state, in total contradiction of their Creator's intentions for their intellectual and moral progress. The adversity experienced by all who participated in this system, from the workers to the masters, who suffered the oscillations of fortune, was itself a sign that the nation had departed from the moral law—'and grievous, accordingly has been, and, I fear, will be the punishment'.[236] By 'punishment', Combe explained, he meant the naturalistic consequences already inscribed into God's system of natural laws. The theodicy of natural laws encouraged and authorized legislative reform of this system because it enabled people to distinguish 'natural [from] factitious evils, and become less tolerant of the latter'.[237] His wording here points to the common tendency to disguise eradicable evil as a natural and therefore ineffaceable part of God's economy of redemption, an inclination which he despises as an attempt by some 'to imagine themselves absolved from all obligations to study and obey the laws of Heaven, as announced in the general arrangements of the world'.[238]

Combe's challenge to orthodox theodicy did not go unnoticed. The editor of the *Christian Remembrancer*, William Scott, for instance, was deeply troubled by the book's success, especially by its wide dissemination 'among the labouring classes, and others of

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[234] Ibid., p. 9.
[235] Ibid., p. 13.
[236] Ibid., p. 229.
[237] Ibid., p. 239.
[238] Ibid., p. 145.

the less educated portion of society' and was encouraged by some in his circle to write a refutation.[239] Scott underlined all the ways in which Combe's attempt to 'vindicate the ways of God to man' had contradicted the most essential doctrines of the Christian churches.[240] Combe's were essentially 'doctrines of human responsibility,' which he was attempting to spread among the people in lieu of religious instruction.[241] His work's greatest offense to Scott was its denial of the 'Original Perfection of Man—the Fall—and the Consequent depravity of our nature'.[242] This Augustinian view of evil is the only one, Scott argues, which 'can be trodden with safety by the teachers and expounders of our holy religion'.[243] By dispensing with the notion of natural evil as a punishment for sin, Combe had had to reinterpret 'pain, disease, suffering, and death' as 'beneficial arrangements, intended by God for no other purpose, but to teach us the natural laws, or our duty. [...] God is thus made directly the author of evil...'.[244]

Apart from being appalled by this apparent blasphemy, Scott also recoiled from a view of evil that he believed licensed social and political alterations by suggesting that evil is external and conquerable rather than inherent to mankind's depraved spiritual condition. He rejected the notion that mankind was naturally progressive, pointing to the superior morality of some earlier civilizations.[245] Combe's views were the reverse of Christianity, he claimed, which had always given priority to mankind's moral and spiritual state, rather than their physical circumstances.[246] Before human beings look to natural laws to save them, they must learn to 'obey a higher law'; spiritual reformation must precede practical reformation: '[i]t is in vain to attempt to improve the plant by pruning its diseased branches, and removing gangrenous excrescences from its extremities, if it is all the time

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[239] William Scott, *The Harmony of Phrenology with Scripture: Shewn in A Refutation of the Philosophical Errors Contained in Mr.Combe's "Constitution of Man"* (Edinburgh: Fraser & Co., 1837), p. 263.
[240] Ibid., p. 3.
[241] Ibid., p. ix.
[242] Ibid., p. xii.
[243] Ibid., p. 55.
[244] Ibid., pp. 102, 107.
[245] Ibid., pp. 9, 19.
[246] Ibid., p. xii.

rotten at the root, and in the trunk from which the branches arise'.[247] Scott uses his version of Christianity to sap practical reform at its roots. Is not the true Christian meant to 'take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, nor for the body, what ye shall put on' but instead to seek only the Kingdom of God?[248] Such sentiments had a political application at a time when people often had little or nothing to eat and only rags to wear. Scott has only spiritual hope to offer such people, disagreeing as he does that 'man is capable of rectifying the disorders of the world by his own exertions'.[249] 'Physical and moral evil' are far too 'deeply rooted' to be redressed by the mere 'palliatives' attempted by men.[250] Scott was clearly alarmed by the practical implications of Combe's views. 'By their fruits shall ye know them,' he intoned, remarking on how congenial the French revolutionary philosophers had found the natural law theory.[251]

In fact, when Combe first wrote the *Constitution of Man* in 1828 he had to include an appendix showcasing the respectable philosophical and theological lineage of his natural law theory. This, because '[d]iscussions about the Laws of Nature' being common in France at the time of the French revolution, they had 'become associated in imagination with the crimes and horrors of that period'.[252] However, in 1853, the Home Secretary himself, Lord Palmerston, rejected a petition for holding a fast day to stave off the threatened return of the cholera epidemic on the very grounds that God had established that mankind's 'weal or woe' depended on the observance or neglect of natural laws. It was, therefore, futile to pray to him until men had rectified the physical conditions which, under these laws, 'will infallibly breed pestilence'.[253] As Pamela Gilbert notes, Palmerston's

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[247] Ibid., p. 110.
[248] Ibid., p.110.
[249] Ibid., p. 222.
[250] Ibid., pp. 236, 259.
[251] Ibid., p. 86.
[252] Combe, *The Constitution of Man,* p. 344.
[253] Cited in Frank M. Turner, *Contesting Cultural Authority: Essays in Victorian Intellectual Life* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 155.

letter met with a virulent reaction in some quarters.[254] Yet the expression of these views by the Home Secretary indicates the extent to which the catastrophes of the 1840s familiarised the British public with the lineaments of the problem of evil dispute.

My first chapter, on Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852-3), enters in detail into the problem of evil debate generated by the cholera epidemic. It is just worth noting here that the catastrophe revealed the fragmented state of the problem of evil question at mid-century. In 1849, for instance, a rural correspondent for the *Morning Chronicle*'s 'Labour and the Poor' series interviewed a woman who had witnessed the death of a whole family from cholera. While the woman insisted that their deaths were a 'visitation' and the 'work of Providence' because they were a 'wicked set,' her interviewer asks her '[b]ut were they not an underfed, and from the want of water, a filthy set?'.[255] His question reveals his commitment to the Combean view of the disease, which held it to have naturalistic causes. The proponents of this view, it is important to bear in mind, believed it to be just as rooted in religious belief as that of their opponents. Thus, an 1849 article in *Fraser's Magazine*, while asserting that cholera was caused by human neglect of the natural laws, also described it as a 'God-commissioned Health inspector, to discover and to punish' such human negligence.[256]

The cholera epidemic was not the only mid-century catastrophe to expose and multiply the tensions in the contested problem of evil question. When Charles Trevelyan wrote his notorious defence of British inaction during the Irish Famine, it was on the grounds that the partial evils of the Famine were part of the beneficent divine machinery for weaning the Irish off the dependence and stagnation enabled by their potato diet and agrarian customs and kick-starting the modernisation of the nation: 'Supreme Wisdom has

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[254] Pamela K. Gilbert, *Cholera and Nation: Doctoring the Social Body in Victorian England* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2008), p. 34.
[255] Anon., 'Labour and the Poor', *The Morning Chronicle* (24 October 1849), p. 5.
[256] Anon., 'Work and Wages', *Fraser's Magazine* (November 1849), pp. 522-30 (p. 530).

educed permanent good out of transient evil'.[257] Gordon Bigelow has observed that many within Britain, whose newspapers daily served up heart-rending accounts of Irish suffering, found Trevelyan's arguments ethically repulsive.[258] A national day of fast and humiliation was declared in response to the Famine on March 24th 1847, in hopes of 'the removal of those heavy judgements which our manifold sins and provocations have most justly deserved'.[259] Peter Gray has discussed the controversy surrounding this proclamation in Britain and Ireland, as various groups such as the Chartists and Liberal anti-Corn law activists were uncomfortable with a 'superstitious' interpretation that seemed to ignore human responsibility for the Famine. [260] J. S. Mill, in an article for the *Morning Chronicle*, denounced the government for

> giving the countenance of authority to the religious notions of a rude age[...]. We do not believe that there is one person in the Court or Cabinet, or fifty in the House of Commons, who in private would affect to believe that the potato failure is a miracle, or who does not look upon this so-called religious observance as a piece of empty mummery, and upon the notion of propitiating Heaven by ascetic practices on the occasion of a public calamity as belonging to an entirely gone-by order of religious ideas.[261]

Mill suggested that the belief in a miraculous, supernatural cause was far less common among the country's ruling classes than they pretended. He implies that such an interpretation of the famine reflects an obsolete, now discredited type of religious response, one inappropriate to the modern era. As Boyd Hilton has observed, the sheer extent and horrific nature of the suffering during the Irish Famine brought 'views about the Almighty' fiercely into question.[262] Within mainland Britain, the Corn Law debate was informed by the similar question of whether starvation was divinely mandated or whether it was the

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[257] Anon., 'The Irish Crisis', *Edinburgh Review* (January 1848), pp. 229-320 (p. 230).
[258] George Bigelow, *Fiction, Famine and the Rise of Economics in Victorian Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 121.
[259] Cited by Peter Gray, 'National Humiliation and the Great Hunger: Fast and Famine in 1847', *Irish Historical Studies*, 32 (2000), pp. 193-216 (p. 193).
[260] Peter Gray, 'National Humiliation and the Great Hunger', pp. 193-216.
[261] J. S. Mill, 'The General Fast', *Morning Chronicle* (23 March 1847), p. 4, reproduced in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill: Newspaper Writings*, ed. by Ann P. Robson and John M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986), pp. 1074.
[262] Hilton, *Age of Atonement*, p. 114.

result of pernicious human legislation. Sir Robert Peel, in his 1846 speech on the 'Second Reading of the Bill for the Repeal of the Corn Laws' addressed his fellow MPs thus:

> When you are again exhorting a suffering people to fortitude under their privations, when you are telling them, 'These are the chastenings of an all-wise and merciful Providence, sent for some inscrutable but just and beneficial purpose - it may be, to humble our pride, or to punish our unfaithfulness, or to impress us with the sense of our own nothingness and dependence on His mercy,' when you are thus addressing your suffering fellow subjects, and encouraging them to bear without repining the dispensations of Providence, may God grant that by your decision of this night you may have laid in store for yourselves the consolation of reflecting that such calamities are, in truth, the dispensations of Providence - that they have not been caused, that they have not been aggravated by laws of man restricting, in the hour of scarcity, the supply of food![263]

Peel's angry passion was directed at the discrepancy between the suffering of those starving and the glib theodicy to which his opponents had frequent recourse. The aspects of their rhetoric that he parrots indicate that he had in mind justifications of evil as a punishment or corrective for the moral condition of the people. He emphasises the vagueness and arbitrariness of their explanations: so inscrutable is their God that his wrath might be aimed at any number of moral lapses. That those he addressed held starvation to be 'sent' by God, moreover, implies that they saw it as a supernatural intervention.

As I indicated above, however, there was in the 1840s and 1850s a documented preoccupation with a host of social evils which went beyond the catastrophic extremes of cholera and famine. One Combean text from the 1840s that usefully shows how solutions to the problem of evil were configured in response both to the ills of modern industrial life and to competing solutions is Charles Bray's *The Philosophy of Necessity* (1841), which found converts in both Ralph Waldo Emerson and Florence Nightingale.[264] Bray, who was at the centre of a radical and intellectual circle which included Robert Owen, Herbert

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[263] 'Sir Robert Peel's speech on the Second Reading of the Bill for the Repeal of the Corn Laws', in *English Historical Documents 1833-1874*, ed. by David Charles Douglas, W.D. Handcock & George Malcolm Young (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1970), pp. 457-71 (p. 471).

[264] See *George Eliot: Interviews and Recollections*, ed. by K. K. Collins (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2010), p. 20; *Letter from George Eliot to Charles Bray, June 29th, 1852,* in *The George Eliot Letters*, II, p. 39, n. 129.

Spencer and the future George Eliot, Mary Anne Evans, was keen to share his discovery that there existed a view of human nature and the creation more 'consistent with the Divine perfections' than the 'degrading notions of the character of Deity that have been handed down to us from the dark ages of ignorance and superstition'.[265] Bray argued that the prevailing opinions propagated by 'popular Theology' encouraged people to look on this world as a 'vale of tears, a mere passage to a better' and therefore prevented them from tracing the causes of the 'numerous evils' of contemporary society and suggesting a remedy.[266] His theodicy is based on the familiar view that God has annexed pain to some actions and pleasure to others in so necessary, that, is constant and inevitable, a way that human beings are able to use their reason to benefit from their mistakes and improve themselves and their condition.[267] Bray overtly denies the existence of moral evil per se, arguing that there is 'no evil but pain,' and pain is avoidable if one obeys the natural laws of cause and effect: 'sin, vice and moral turpitude, are only evils from their tendency to produce physical evil'.[268] He propounds his theodicy at the expense of 'common superstitions concerning evil,' between which and his view 'there is considerable practical difference'.[269] While he exhorts his readers to seek out the natural laws which they have disobeyed, those who view evils as the 'arbitrary chastisements or trials by God' instruct the people to submit to them, 'looking to a hereafter for the reward of [their] patience or 'to pray for the removal of these evils without any effort of their own towards it'.[270]

Bray's need for the 'consolation' that '[w]hatever is, is right,' and therefore that suffering must have its use in the divine dispensation, came into collision with his horror at the evils and injustices of industrial Britain.[271] Bray's theodicy seeks to make sense of the 'Present Condition of Society,' to the 'many evils and abuses' of which he devotes a large

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[265] Bray, *The Philosophy of Necessity*, p. 297.
[266] Ibid., pp. v, 39.
[267] Ibid., pp. 168, 177, 191.
[268] Ibid., p. 194.
[269] Ibid., p. 217.
[270] Ibid., pp. 217, 250, 268.
[271] Ibid., pp. viii, 293.

section of his book.[272] The plight of the working classes, because they constitute the largest section of society, is his chief concern and he observes that the evils of their condition 'are now forcing themselves into general notice' with the result that 'all parties have their remedies, in Politics, in Emigration, in Education, in Religion, in Social Reform'.[273] He had clearly informed himself in detail with the 'great mass of information' that existed about the lives of the labouring population and he makes frequent reference to the reports of employment and sanitation commissions, statistical surveys and works of political economy, commenting that 'a great number of heart-rending descriptions [...] are daily presented to us of the state of the labouring population' in the cities as well as in agricultural districts.[274] Bray, himself a manufacturer, approved of competition and industrialisation as necessary stages in God's plan for mankind's progress.[275] Competition drew mankind's latent energies into play, while industrialisation would ultimately emancipate the workers, 'when the steam-engine shall take the place of the slaves, and do the drudgery of Society'.[276] In certain respects, a natural law theodicy mapped neatly onto capitalist ideology. Physical and moral well being were no longer mysteriously conferred upon or withheld from human beings but were now fully in their own control, and it was up to them to earn them through learning and obeying the natural laws, there being, Bray wrote, 'nothing in the constitution of human nature that should prevent the *whole* race from becoming what any *one* member of it has become'.[277]

The living conditions of the early Victorian poor, however, such as their excessive working hours, their unsanitary environment, their subsistence pay and the fact that their only escape was in alcohol, as was revealed in the numerous reports Bray cites, absolutely prohibited them from ever improving and tended to their moral and physical

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[272] Ibid., p. 300.
[273] Ibid., p. 340.
[274] Ibid., p. 322-3.
[275] Ibid., p. 223-4.
[276] Ibid., p. 301.
[277] Ibid., p. 299. Original emphasis.

debasement.[278] In such conditions, one report cited by Bray asks, 'is it possible to apply Physical and Mental Education? Its very elements are repelled from such a place'.[279] Bray may have advocated a benevolent happiness-maximising God, but industrialised Britain seemed to be condemning the masses to something closer to Calvinist helplessness and hopelessness. '[W]hen you consider,' another report from which Bray extracted observes,

> the unavoidable privations and neglect to which these human beings must be exposed as they grow up, the *awful* consideration presents itself that they are predoomed, from childhood—from birth—*before* birth—to ignorance and helplessness, or to crime; to the lowest toil—to want—to premature death, or to pauperism in age.[280]

It was the sheer extent of the degradation and poverty of the British population that indicated to Bray that the country had departed from God's laws. One enlightened doctor whom he quotes at length describes his shock at hearing 'the sacred writings quoted' in support of the necessity of the evils of poverty: 'for without denying [that there must ever be "hewers of wood and drawers of water"] I have never found any reason to believe that hewers of wood and drawers of water must, as a matter of course, be starved, and sickly, and vicious, and limited in this life to half of the allotted years of men'.[281] A distinction is being made here between poverty that may be an inevitable fact of God's creation and the artificially produced degradation of the poor, which is in fact a violation of the will of God, whom, Dr Connelly wrote, we 'dishonour' when we 'wrest the words of Scripture to some purposes which He is far from approving.' God's laws demanded that the causes of evil be traced and removed; they called for activity rather than passive acquiescence. Bray saw God's benevolence in operation, for instance, in the fact that evils such as crime and disease could not be restricted to the locations of their birth but spread out to affect the

[278] Ibid., pp. 320-30.
[279] Ibid., p. 329.
[280] Ibid., p. 330. Original emphasis.
[281] Ibid., p. 334.

entire society, so as to ensure that everyone had an interest in their amelioration.[282] Man-made neglect and squalor were leading to the debasement of the poor—'*you cannot engrain virtue on physical misery,*' wrote the same doctor Bray quotes from—and it was up to men to improve those conditions.[283] Bray strongly advocated, then, a role for human judgement and agency when faced with the evils of industrialisation, questioning the morality of leaving the spirit of trade 'untrammelled' and 'whether it is safe or desirable that England should become the workshop of the world on such conditions'.[284]

The Philosophy of Necessity repeatedly draws the reader's attention to the political convenience to the rich of the theodicies they preach. Bray described the tendency to usher in the prospect of the spiritual Kingdom of God as compensation to the poor 'for what the wretched system of society and its upholders have taken from them here'—a habit he likened to posting 'obit bills on Heaven'. [285] The promise of compensation to the poor of happiness in a future life is 'the never-failing plea' upon which the 'fortunate few' have 'excused themselves from sharing their many comforts and luxuries with their less privileged fellow-creatures'.[286] One theodicy which potentially presented a greater obstacle to Bray's reform plans, however, was that which he associates with political economists. Unlike reformers who look to regenerate the poor by practical means, or the Churches, which look to a spiritual reformation effected by God, political economists 'desire no change [...] The great inequalities of condition consequent upon the present arrangements for the production and distribution of wealth, they profess to believe to be necessary and established by the Deity'.[287] This school of political economy, to which Bray claims the press was 'in thrall', was firmly on the side of the rich.[288] Their insistence that the distribution of wealth be allowed to 'find its own level' had led to many of the inequalities

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[282] Ibid., p. 204.
[283] Ibid., p. 331. Original emphasis.
[284] Ibid., pp. 361-2.
[285] Ibid., p. 375.
[286] Ibid, pp. 487-8.
[287] Ibid., p. 382.
[288] Ibid., p. 365.

then apparent in society.[289] Bray was clearly conscious of what a number of modern scholars have also observed, the theological optimism that underwrote many political economical defences of capitalism in the 1830s and 40s.[290]

Elaine Freedgood has shown how the arguments of political economists like J. R. McCulloch 'served as reassuring cosmologies' as they set out to 'show the self-regulated beneficial arrangements of the industrial market society'.[291] Christian divines influenced by these views, such as Thomas Chalmers and the Archbishop of Dublin, Richard Whately, traced evidence for God's presiding wisdom and goodness in 'the framework of the social and economical systems to which men are conducted'.[292] Chalmers and Whately argued that God had implanted in man certain instincts, such as self-interest, acquisitiveness and an innate sense of property rights, which in interaction with the fixed laws of capital and the market, had produced a system which, though it produced some temporary evil, tended to good on the whole.[293] Like the social reformers Combe and Bray, the proponents of political economy believed that God's providence operated largely by fixed natural laws and that these worked to secure mankind's progress. The crucial difference was they allowed human agency no role in this process, claiming, in fact, that human 'meddling' only marred the 'mechanism' that had been received perfect from the Creator.[294] This was a view that undoubtedly tended to 'domesticate evil within the divine household', asserting as it did that the partial evils of contemporary British life led to greater benefits and even that human selfishness was one of the instruments of this process. It made God the sole author of the social and economic system, its ills as well as its good. Whatever their

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[289] Ibid., p. 338.
[290] Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 264; A.C. Waterman, *Revolution, Economics and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), passim; Elaine Freedgood, *Victorian Writing about Risk: Imagining a Safe England in a Dangerous World* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 15-54.
[291] Freedgood, *Writing about Risk*, p. 15.
[292] Thomas Chalmers, *On the Power, Wisdom and Goodness of God: as Manifested in the Adaptation of External Nature to Moral and Intellectual Constitution of Man*, 2 vols (London: William Pickering, 1833), I, p. 6.
[293] Chalmers, *On the Power, Wisdom and Goodness of God*, I, pp. 9, 195, 216, 262, 273; II, pp. 36, 39, 46; Richard Whately, *Introductory Lectures on Political Economy* (London: John Parker, 1847), pp. 90-2.
[294] Chalmers, *On the Power, Wisdom and Goodness of God*, I, pp. 46, 212, 216, 236-9.

conclusions, political economists insisted they were only revealing the 'facts in God's world'.[295] While Chalmers and Whately both made some allowance for the existence of evil that fell outside this remit and that there therefore remained in this life 'accounts between God and His creatures that are yet unfinished',[296] the popular perception was that political economy had knitted the evils of modern Britain so closely onto to God's providence, that, for better or worse, there were no loose ends.

Thanks to Robert Malthus, political economy had long been associated in England with a gloomy interpretation of the possibility of overcoming evil. Malthus's notorious *Essay on the Principles of Population, as it Affects the Future Improvement of Society*, first published in 1798, argued that that population growth always outstrips food production, meaning that 'no possible form of society could prevent the almost constant action of misery, upon a great part of mankind'.[297] As well as being almost constantly pressed by 'scarcity' and even famine, human beings were doomed to the recurrence of 'war' and 'pestilence,' the 'positive checks' by which 'nature represses a redundant population'.[298] Such suffering was ordained, moreover, by the 'fixed laws of our nature'.[299] As A. C. Waterman observes, the crux of Malthus's ideological position was his demonstration that human evils arise not from human institutions but from the laws of nature, which meant they would always represent an insurmountable obstacle to human improvement.[300] The evil occasioned by the principle of population, he wrote, is 'an evil so deeply seated, that no human ingenuity can reach it': '[t]o prevent the recurrence of misery is, alas! beyond the power of man'.[301]

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[295] Samuel Gosnell Green, *The Working Classes of Great Britain: Their Present Condition, and the Means of their Improvement and Elevation* (London: John Snow, 1850), p .30.
[296] Chalmers, *On the Power, Wisdom and Goodness of God*, II, p. 124; Whately, *Introductory Lectures*, pp. 967.
[297] Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population, as it Affects the Future Improvement of Society, with Remarks on the Speculations of Mr. Godwin, M. Condorcet and Other Writers* (London, Melbourne,Toronto, New York: Macmillan, 1960 [based on the first edition, London: J. Johnson 1798]), p. 36
[298] Ibid., pp. 34, 100, 113, 139-40.
[299] Ibid., p. 11.
[300] Waterman, *Revolution, Economics and Religion*, pp. 15, 45.
[301] Malthus, *Essay on Population*, pp., 95, 98.

Political economy seemed to have announced the doom of the majority of the human race, not only in its Malthusian insistence of the constant immiserating effect of population increase, but also in its claims that workers' wages were kept down by broader circumstances, the laws that regulated the production of wealth, which were outside of human control. The problem, as Charles Bray's book indicated, was that the suffering and degradation of the poor was only growing and becoming more visible by the mid-nineteenth century. There was clearly evil all around, but the arguments of political economists only tended to show the hopelessness of resisting what were now granted all the force of the divine sanction. The political economists closed that gap between human evil and God's will which had animated the problem of evil question and which had permitted hope of renovation in one form or another.

Thomas Carlyle was one important writer who was deeply alive to the dismal implications of the political economists' insistence that nineteenth-century British society was the best of all possible worlds. He repudiated the cold comfort of those of the 'Philosophic Politico-Economic' school, who, having plummeted 'the deep dark sea of troubles' by means of their statistical surveys, offer only this 'consolation, That nothing whatever can be done in it by man, who has simply to sit still, and look wistfully to "time and general laws": and thereupon, without so much as recommending suicide, coldly takes its leave of us'.[302] In his *Nemesis of Faith* (1849), J. A. Froude likewise pondered the bleak possibility that it was 'true what they say who profit by this modern system, [that] there is indeed no help for it, and an ever-increasing multitude of miserable beings must drag on their wretched years in toil and suffering that a few may be idle and enjoy' and this, by the 'irrevocable decree of Providence'.[303] The periodical writers too chimed in, with the *Westminster Review* noting the 'very prevalent belief in the public mind' that the purpose of political economy was to

[302] Carlyle, 'Chartism', p. 58.
[303] Froude, *The Nemesis of Faith*, p. 8.

'justify' the 'oppression and neglect of the poor'.[304] The *Christian Remembrancer* condemned the hopeless doctrines preached by those who claimed that 'misery was a necessary part of the order of things, and that partial suffering was an incident of the great law of competitive progress.[305]

Even the political economist J. S. Mill was troubled by the hopelessness of much of the science. Reflecting on the national crisis in 1848, he wondered if it was truly 'incapable of solution? Can political economy do nothing but only object to everything and demonstrate that nothing can be done? If this were so, political economy might have a needful but would have a melancholy and a thankless task'.[306] Mill was evidently dismayed by the lack of room for human ethical agency in the system of fixed laws outlined by political economy. According to Elaine Freedgood, it was this very resistance of economic laws to human interference that had constituted the reassuring force of the science in the 1830s.[307] However, by the late 1840s, when Mill was writing his *Principles of Political Economy*, Britain's social and economic system was in severe crisis and it must have seemed a cruel joke to many that they were expected to view the evils growing visibly around them as part of an allegedly divine and beneficent system which no amount of good behaviour or reforming activity on their part could influence. Mill devoted a chapter of his second volume to addressing those concerns about the moral and social state of the labouring people, which he said 'ha[d] lately been a subject of much more speculation and discussion than formerly'.[308]

It is surely significant that Mill was writing in 1848, a year of revolution in Europe and the intensification of the Chartist threat in England, when tens of thousands of workers, influenced by political fervour overseas, organised a mass meeting in London with the intention of presenting to Parliament a petition for their enfranchisement. The 1840s stoked

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[304] Anon., 'The Principles of Political Economy', *Westminster Review* (July 1848), pp. 289-314 (p. 290).
[305] Anon., 'Christian Socialism', *Christian Remembrancer*, p. 185.
[306] J. S. Mill, *Principles of Political Economy, With Some of their Applications to Social Philosophy*, 2 vols (London: John W. Parker, 1852), I, p. 446.
[307] Freedgood, *Victorian Writing about Risk*, p. 15.
[308] Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, II, p. 319.

long-simmering anxieties about the condition of the poor, as it was they who chiefly suffered from the mass starvation and epidemic disease that marked that decade in Britain; and it was they whose discontent seemed to many to threaten a violent overthrow of the entire system. The ascendency of the political economical view of evil was seen by some as eroding the roots of social stability by driving the poor to despair. As the *Christian Remembrancer* article cited just above went on, '[a] man may struggle against calamities through a long life [...] but when he is once assured that the evils of his lot are irremediable, he will either sink into vicious despondency, or angrily question the sincerity of his informant, for whose benefit his own misfortunes appear to be prolonged'.[309]

By the mid-nineteenth century, then, the problem of evil was a disputed field; and it had become clear to many that competing solutions to the problem of evil articulated competing political and social ideologies. This is not to suggest that theological justifications of evil were innocent of political intent before the nineteenth century. The sociologists I mentioned above, Max Weber and Peter Berger, point to the important legitimating function performed by theodicy at all times. A. C. Waterman, moreover, has shown how in Britain the theodicy of Original Sin and Pauline soteriology central to Trinitarian orthodoxy underwrote the conservative social theory of subordination from before 1662 to 'sometime after 1800'.[310] What distinguished nineteenth-century Britain, however, was a growing awareness of this alliance between theodicy and politics and the consequent proliferation of theodicies as writers vied to formulate responses to the problem of evil that would authorize their vision for mankind and society. As F. D. Maurice's *Theological Essays* shows, the public interest in the problem of evil was intensified by the question of how the poor and labouring classes, those who experienced first hand the rigours of economic competition, starvation and epidemic disease, would interpret and respond to these evils. Mayhew praised the poor people he

[309] Anon.,'Christian Socialism', *Christian Remembrancer*, p. 189.
[310] A. C. Waterman, *Political Economy and Christian Theology since the Enlightenment: Essays in Intellectual History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 31-42.

encountered who submitted to their lot in the faith that 'it is all for the best'.[311] Yet he also encountered others who angrily blamed the ruling classes for their sufferings.[312] Like Maurice, an article in the *Christian Remembrancer* expressed the view that such discontent was owing to a false conception of evil gaining ground among the poor:

> That which keeps men patient under the evils of the present state of things is the idea of their necessity; the notion, indistinct, but still real in their minds, that injustice and disorder are fundamental in this visible system. That idea removed, all evil, civil and economical, becomes so much gratuitous and superfluous wrong, and the apparent authors of it so many monsters of cruelty, and wanton tyrants, delighting in inflicting evil for its own sake.[313]

In fact, the same publication attributed the French revolution to just such a belief that 'social distress' was not part of the fixity of disorder in the world but had institutional causes.[314]

An article published in the *National Review* in 1859, 'The Religion of the Working Classes' similarly highlighted the interpretive quandary that confronted the poor as a result of their 'keen perception of political and social evils'.[315] Their very living conditions meant that spiritual problems pressed harder on members of the working class.[316] Faced with the 'profound sense of human evil and wrong', the worker has the choice of two solutions. He will either conclude that evil is really within human nature and look for spiritual healing, or he will conclude that human nature is essentially good and 'the corrupting evil [is] external'.[317] In the latter instance, the individual's hatred of the 'miseries and moral evil of life' will be mistakenly directed at the 'misarrangements of human institutions'. F. D. Maurice and his Christian socialist peers, among which numbered the novelists Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes, likewise believed that it was the interpretation that was

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[311] Anon., 'Labour and the Poor', *The Morning Chronicle* (20 November 1849), p. 5.
[312] Anon., 'Labour and the Poor', *The Morning Chronicle* (23 October 1849), p. 255.
[313] Anon., 'Book of Job', *Christian Remembrancer*, p. 220.
[314] Anon., 'Principles of Political Economy', *Christian Remembrancer*, p. 343.
[315] Anon., 'Religion of the Working Classes', *National Review* (January 1859), pp. 167-98 (p. 178).
[316] Ibid., pp. 175-6.
[317] Ibid., p. 177.

applied to contemporary evils that would determine whether the workers' grievances would issue in revolution. Following the Chartist demonstration in 1848, the Christian socialists established a periodical, *Politics for the People*, which attempted to persuade its readers of the importance of basing their programme for political reform on the theological premise that 'a Living and Righteous God is ruling in human society no less than in the natural world'.[318] Charles Kingsley, one of the periodical's founders, was as alert as Maurice to the political dimensions of different theodicies. Writing in the periodical in the guise of 'Parson Lot,' he acknowledged that the alienation between the working classes and the Established Church was partly owing to the latter's use of religion to justify the hardships of the poor: 'We have used the Bible as if it was a mere special constable's handbook—an opium-dose for keeping beasts of burden patient while they were being overloaded—a mere book to keep the poor in order'.[319]

These words were addressed to the Chartists, and Kingsley was echoing common Chartist claims about the political and social misuses of theodicy. As J. S. Mill wrote in his 1848 *Principles of Political Economy*, 'for the first time in history, the most suffering portions of the community have a voice'.[320] One of the chief conduits of that voice, the literature of the Chartists, was undoubtedly the source of Maurice's and Kingsley's conviction that the problem of evil was a dangerously live question amongst the workers. For instance, Thomas Cooper, a prominent Chartist writer, had given a specimen of what he held to be a typical theological discussion amongst the labourers in his 1845 story, 'Merrie England—No More!' The story describes a conversation among five or six 'destitute-looking men...struggling with poverty and want'.[321] The disaffected men ridicule the Christian God as a fantasy propagated by the 'parsons' in order to grind the poor down. To keep the poor quiet, the ruling classes resort to the idea of a 'Providence

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[318] Anon., 'Prospectus', *Politics for the People* (May 6th 1848), pp. 1-2 (p. 1).
[319] Parson Lot, 'Letters to the Chartists No. II', *Politics for the People* (May 27th 1848), pp. 58-9 (p. 58).
[320] Mill, *Principles of Political Economy*, II, p. 249.
[321] Thomas Cooper, 'Merrie England-No More', *Wise Saws and Modern Instances*, 2 vols (London: Jeremiah How, 1845), I, p. 201.

that disposes the lot of men differently here, "for His Own great mysterious purposes," as they phrase it'.[322] Yet, if such a God existed, one of the workers claims, 'he would never permit us to suffer as we do!' It is impious to believe in a Providence who would ordain such inequalities—'and since, it appears, it can't be proved that Providence is of any other character, if there be one at all, I think it less impious to believe in None'.[323] The expressions of the men, especially the last cited phrase, implies that it was the attribution of evil to Providence, whether as punishment for sin in Evangelical doctrine, or as part of the fixed general laws which political economists governed the social system, that had brought God into disrepute among some of the poor.

The three novels considered in the chapters that follow, *Villette*, *Bleak House* and *The Mill on the Floss*, all show an interest in how the poor, specifically, make sense of suffering. It is important to note here, however, that they are all novels written by middle-class authors. This is not to suggest that contemporary commentators were mistaken in their estimate of working-class interest in the problem of evil. That interest was evident not only in Thomas Cooper's writings, both his short stories and his influential long poem *The Purgatory of Suicides* (1845), but in polemical works like *Paley's Natural Theology Refuted in his Own Words* (1842) by the famous working-class atheist George Holyoake.[324] Experiencing the suffering of mid-century Britain first-hand, working-class writers clearly had an invaluable contribution to make to discussion about the meaning of that suffering. The question of working-class attutudes towards evil, indeed, merits a study in its own right. My subject, however, is the response to evil in specifically middle-class novels, to which the political and social context that I have sketched above is highly relevant. Indeed, alarm about how members of the working class might interpret their suffering may have furnished middle-class writers, as in F.D. Maurice's case, with the

[322] Ibid., p. 203.
[323] Ibid., pp. 204-5.
[324] G.J. Holyoake, *Paley's Natural Theology Refuted in his Own Words* (London: J. Watson, 1851), pp. 35-36.

motivation to tackle the question of the meaning of suffering for themselves. At any rate, it certainly served to make the problem of evil appear to be a vital topic worth exploring.

Only by being equipped with a knowledge of the particular configuration of the problem of evil in mid-nineteenth-century England can we appreciate the implications of what *Villette*, *Bleak House* and *The Mill on the Floss* have to say about evil. Each of these novels dramatizes the encounter between the heroine and a world of pain and injustice and each one displays a tension between naturalistic and "superstitious" ways of making sense of this encounter, putting the novel form's essential heteroglossia at the service of the contemporary dispute over responses to evil. My first chapter will delineate Lucy Snowe's conflict in *Villette* between the Evangelical scheme of salvation, which encourages her to endure suffering for the sake of a future supernaturally-effected reprieve, and a naturalistic post-enlightenment theodicy which values pain and struggle as a useful stimulus to cultural progress. I will show that the text's treatment of both solutions was shaped by broader contemporary discourses. Although Lucy is socially and economically marginal in almost every respect, her experience of extremes of deprivation forces her to become a vocal contributor to the problem of evil debate. The form of that debate, the next chapter on *Bleak House* will argue, was partly determined by the experience of the cholera epidemic in England in the late 1840s. I will argue that Dickens was familiar with the discussion about whether the epidemic was to be understood as a mysterious judgement imposed by an interventionist God or as the predictable consequence of human neglect of natural fixed laws. The novel's theology is refracted through its social vision, which favoured a version of evil susceptible to human effort. This chapter argues, moreover, for a new reading of 'Chancery' as symbolising the corrosive effects of a mystifying, supernaturalist interpretation of evil. A conception of evil which is similarly conceived as superstitious is scrutinised in *The Mill on the Floss*, which is the subject of my third and final chapter. I will argue that the novel juxtaposes two alternative ways of making sense of the evils

brought to rural life by the onset of industrialisation. To Mr Tulliver and the young Maggie, evil is personal and embodied, whether it takes the form of devil or lawyer. Such a "primitive" vision of evil, this chapter shows, was associated in the nineteenth century with the unenlightened poor who refused to see the overall beneficence of the industrial and economic changes which had displaced them. Against a view of evil that the narrator implies is regressive, Eliot draws upon the premises of natural theology to produce her own theodicy which legitimates the evils experienced by people like the Tullivers in the name of economic and social progress. All three texts, then, demonstrate the embeddedness of the problem of evil in contemporary discourses, both theological and non-theological.

By making a claim for the important role played by these novels in reconfiguring the problem of evil under peculiar historical pressures, I do not mean to suggest that their entire purpose is to dramatize or instantiate a particular philosophical or theological thesis. As fictional forms, rather than treatises, they cannot be reduced to rational solutions to the problem of evil. Indeed, working often through the slippery media of metaphor and analogy, and seeking to entertain and to provoke as well as to persuade, the logic of their responses to evil can sometimes unravel when subjected to detailed analysis. In my second chapter, for instance, I consider *Bleak House*'s use of spontaneous combustion as a model of a man-made and predictable evil.[325] Dickens wished to dispel a superstitious interpretation of evil as mysteriously imposed by an interventionist God and his narrator consequently emphasises that Krook's death is 'inborn, inbred, engendered in the corrupted humours of the body itself, and that only'.[326] The shortcoming of using spontanous combustion to forward a scientific, demystified view of evil is that the existence of the phenomenon was itself scientifically dubious, as G.H. Lewes' famous

[325] See pp. 160-163.
[326] Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 479.

attack on this episode of the novel indicates.[327] Although Dickens insistently defended the rational grounds for his treatment of the subject, we can conclude that other imperatives, above all the desire to entertain and tell a striking story, may have taken precedence over his desire to present a perfectly logical framework for understanding evil.

Narrative and metaphor, however, are sometimes more powerful persuaders than argument. Modern philosophical work on the problem of evil recognises that making sense of suffering often involves imaginative 'plot invention' as well as abstract theorizing.[328] Marilyn McCord Adams observes that '*reasons* why God permits suffering and *explanations* of how God can make good on it are as much the stuff of narrative as a premiss-conclusion argument.'[329] She points to the stories of the Bible, such as the Genesis account, as narratives people have used to make sense of adversity in their own lives.[330] John Hick likewise holds that biblical stories and types provide a 'pattern' for understanding evil.[331] The most resilient Christian views of suffering—such as that encapsulated in the phrase "O felix culpa"—Hick observes to be frequently paradoxical.[332] Likewise, the novels considered in the chapters that follow are not bound by a rationalist imperative, but articulate their responses to evil in creative and unstructured ways, through plot and metaphor rather than through constructing entirely cohesive theodicies. My analysis of these complex texts will necessarily leave out much that is peripheral to the study of the problem of evil. Nevertheless, I hope not only to reconstruct some of the ways in which this ancient problem has been treated from the perspective of those 'who are treading with bleeding feet on the stones', but to show also that an informed interpretation of a novel's vision of the meaning of evil can illuminate other aspects of the text. [333]

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[327] G.H. Lewes, 'Literature', *The Leader* (December 1852), p. 1189.
[328] McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils*, p. 185.
[329] Ibid., pp. 189-190. Original emphasis.
[330] Ibid., p. 190.
[331] Hick, *Evil and the God of Love,* p.354.
[332] Ibid., p. 364.
[333] Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 291.

CHAPTER ONE

'Dust, Kindling to Brief Suffering Life': Unredeemed Evil in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*

Charlotte Brontë had more reason than many to ponder the problem of evil. The daughter of a committed Evangelical clergyman, she was raised in a religious culture in which calamity of all kinds was habitually referred to the will of God. At 8 years old, for instance, she must have heard her father preach a sermon on the topic of a local bog-burst which he believed to have been caused by an earthquake: 'Sometimes', the Revd Patrick Brontë intoned, 'God produces earthquakes as awful monitors to turn sinners from the error of their ways, and as solemn forerunners of that last and greatest day, when the earth shall be burnt up'.[1] Such a worldview as Patrick's called for the close scrutinisation of experiences of affliction, in order to unwrap the message from God contained within, whether it be an expression of divine displeasure, an emblem of the future dispensation, or both. The grim events of Charlotte Brontë's life provided plenty of potential material to subject to such hyperinterpretive scrutiny. As her biographer Lyndall Gordon observes, 'it is well known that Charlotte endured a life of extraordinary suffering'.[2] In addition to the early loss of her mother and two older sisters, she was later bereaved of her remaining siblings in the course of one year, as Emily and Anne succumbed to consumption following Branwell's young death in disgrace. As well as these bereavements, Charlotte's economically and socially marginalised status, even, indeed, her physical and mental vulnerabilities, ensured that struggle, pain and privation were common experiences for her.

It is largely thanks to Brontë's first biographer, Elizabeth Gaskell, that some who have never read a word of her fiction are aware that Brontë's life was full of hardship.[3] Lucasta Miller has described the process by which Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), with its 'misleading notion that Charlotte's whole existence was one of unremitting

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[1] Cited in Simon Marsden, *Emily Brontë and the Religious Imagination* (London: Continuum, 2014), p.113.
[2] Lyndall Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), p.4.
[3] Lucasta Miller, *The Brontë Myth* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001), pp. 26-56.

martyrdom', shaped the public perception of the author as, first and foremost, a 'woman of suffering'.[4] By such means, Miller argues, attention was diverted from Brontë's artistic achievement and focussed instead on her 'private pain'.[5] In her 1994 literary biography of Brontë, Lyndall Gordon likewise suggested that our sense of Brontë's suffering has obscured the author's creative achievement: '[t]o say that she sorrowed, trembled, shrank is to say that she was like other women of the 1840s. But she was not like them. She shrank, sometimes, but she was also daring, articulate and full of purpose'.[6] Unlike many of her mute fellow sufferers, Brontë was able to bring that daring, articulacy and purposiveness to bear on her own pain. This chapter seeks to move beyond the dichotomy of creator and sufferer. In Brontë's final novel *Villette* (1853), I will show, private pain is the springboard for creativity, suffering the fertile site upon which contemporary public discourse on the problem of evil is interrogated and reformulated.

The basic constituents of the problem of evil — loss, injustice, inequality and deprivation — recur throughout Brontë's fiction. Biologically, socially and economically, her protagonists have drawn the short straw; and they are acutely aware of that fact. '[T]he hurt inflicted on the moral self' is her central theme, according to Barry Qualls, while Miriam Bailin observes that Brontë's protagonists are shown to be subject to an 'oppressive, even brutal weight of fatality in the disposition of events'.[7] 'Why was I always suffering, always browbeaten, always accused, for ever condemned?' is Jane Eyre's question in the Red Room and it could also plausibly be one asked by William Crimsworth, Caroline Helstone and Lucy Snowe.[8] Pain stands out starkly in Brontë's fiction because of the idiosyncratic and highly visceral way in which she invoked it, whether it be the description of Caroline Helstone's romantic disappointment as a scorpion gifted by fate,

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[4] Ibid., pp. 29, 32.
[5] Ibid., pp. 32, 34.
[6] Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë*, p. 4.
[7] Qualls, *The Secular Pilgrims of Victorian Fiction*, p. 112; Miriam Bailin, *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction: The Art of Being Ill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 49.
[8] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 15.

which must be squeezed tight until the arm has 'swelled and quivered long with torture',[9] or Lucy Snowe's likening of her own self-repression to driving a nail through her temples.[10] The 'brutally physical, painful, ugly' language Brontë used to describe suffering is a measure of the challenge it posed to her, the difficulty she had making aesthetically or intellectually harmonious sense of it.[11] One early reviewer even commended Brontë for describing the evils she catalogued 'in their native ruggedness', which he contrasted with the 'too silver a voice' with which Elizbeth Gaskell wove 'the mystery of sin and suffering and death' into her 'graceful fictions'.[12]

More usually, however, Brontë's first reviewers took a dim view of her novels' focus on suffering. From the publication of *Jane Eyre* onwards, 'Currer Bell' had been charged with an unsettling habit of dwelling on grievances and perceived injustices. In a now notorious article for the *Quarterly Review*, Elizabeth Rigby described Brontë's first published novel as 'an anti-Christian composition' which evinced 'that pervading tone of ungodly discontent which is at once the most prominent and the most subtle evil which the law and the pulpit, which all civilized society in fact has at the present day to contend with'.[13] When we consider that, as my introduction has indicated, there was in 1840s England a common anxiety about the possible social and political consequences of how members of the lower orders, such as Jane Eyre, might interpret and respond to the hardships of their lot, Rigby's alarm begins to make sense. For Rigby, the Brontëan protagonist's insistence on her personal pain had a very real public dimension, of which Brontë too must have been well aware when she had *Jane Eyre*'s narrator acknowledge

[9] Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley*, p. 90.
[10] Brontë, *Villette*, p. 110.
[11] These are terms Janis McLaren Caldwell applies to the scorpion passage in *Shirley* in her *Literature and Medicine in Nineteenth-Century Britain: From Mary Shelley to George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 103.
[12] W. C. Roscoe, Unsigned Review, *National Review* (June 1857), reproduced in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Miriam Allott (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 346-58 (p. 357).
[13] Elizabeth Rigby, Unsigned Review, *Quarterly Review* (December 1848), reproduced in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 105-112 (pp. 109-110).

that 'many' would 'blame' her for being 'discontented'.[14] Her consciousness of the public aspect of Jane's personal discontent is further revealed when she makes Jane the representative voice of those 'millions [who] are in silent revolt against their lot'.[15]

When *Villette* was published in 1853, however, reviewers began to look back fondly at Brontë's first novel, which had had at least, according to a review in the *Spectator* comparing the two books, some 'cheerful or consoling' qualities.[16] By contrast, *Villette* was, according to this same reviewer, wholly infused with the author's 'morbid feeling', 'that hunger of the heart which cannot obtain its daily bread, and will not make-believe that a stone is bread'.[17] His wording here suggests that he saw Lucy Snowe's tone of 'bitter complaint' as expressing two blended forms of discontent: that of the breadless starving masses and that of someone from whom the God's goodness has been withheld ('For everyone that asketh receiveth [...] what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone?').[18] *The Examiner* review likewise objected to *Villette*'s emphasis on suffering, complaining about the narrator's tendency 'to accuse fate, to account happiness an accident of life to some who are more fortunate than others, to lapse occasionally into a tone of irony a little harder than is just and now and then to give vent to a little morbid wail'.[19]

There is no doubt that *Villette*'s heroine and narrator is preoccupied with the meaning of earthly ills, often bitterly so. Lucy Snowe seeks to understand why she and many others 'hold their span of life on conditions of privation and denial'.[20] Much like her creator, Lucy is beset by trouble, from her mysterious early bereavements to her final heartbreak as Paul Emanuel's anticipated return is thwarted by shipwreck. She is also

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[14] Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 109.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Anon., Unsigned Review, *The Spectator* (February 1853), in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage,* pp. 181-183 (p. 181).
[17] Ibid.
[18] See Matt 7:9. This and all scriptural references throughout this thesis are to the King James Bible.
[19] Anon., Unsigned Review, *The Examiner* (February 1853), in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage,* pp. 175-177 (p. 176).
[20] Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, ed. by Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 361. For the remainder of this chapter, further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

socially and economically deprived, as 'poor as Job' [p. 55] and forced to struggle 'for existence' [p. 58]. She is pained by the disparity between her lot and that of those more fortunate, like the Brettons and Ginevra Fanshawe. However, while she seems in her own circle to be exceptionally unfortunate, she also aligns her predicament with that of 'maimed and mourning millions' [p. 179]. She is, moreover, eager to forestall any attempt on the reader's part to interpret suffering in simplistically moralistic terms. It is not 'their fault', Lucy insists, that life is 'full of pain to some' [p. 375]. While, she observes, the reader might expect the shallow coquette Ginevra Fanshawe, who elopes with an unprincipled gambler, to have 'large share of suffering ... in store for her future', Ginevra instead 'suffers as little as any human being I have ever known' [pp. 476-8]. More tellingly, the outrightly wicked Madame Beck and Madame Walravens are said to end in prosperity while the worthy Paul Emmanuel's life is cut short. Throughout the narrative, Lucy encounters a number of characters whose only function in the novel seems to be the enactment of competing solutions to the problem of evil. Seemingly extraneous characters like Lucy's first employer Miss Marchmont and the actress 'Vashti' take on a charge disproportionate to the pages they occupy in the novel because of their representative postures in relation to this most important question for Lucy. Miss Marchmont, 'struck by God's hand' in the form of the death of her fiancé, tells Lucy that her life has been embittered by her inability to understand 'for what crime I was condemned, after twelve months of bliss, to undergo thirty years of sorrow' [p. 40]. On her deathbed, however, she imagines she hears the in fact stubbornly silent Lucy telling her 'that she should acknowledge God merciful but not always for us comprehensible': 'Very right, my child' [p. 42]. In direct contrast to Miss Marchmont's belated submission is Vashti's furious rebellion: '[s]uffering had struck that stage empress and she stood before her audience neither yielding to, nor enduring, nor, in finite measure, resenting it: she stood locked in struggle' [p. 278]. While fascinated by both women's response to suffering, Lucy's attitude

towards her own plight is far more ambiguous.

Lucy struggles to fathom the precise relationship between her suffering and the God to whom she frequently appeals throughout the text. At times, she expresses the belief that her suffering has a religious meaning, that it is a 'trial God had appointed me' [p.160]; yet this confidence never lasts long as she lapses repeatedly into 'deep argument with myself on life and its chances, on destiny and her decrees [p. 231]. Lucy's confusion about the meaning of her suffering has lent itself to similarly divided critical interpretations of the novel. A number of critics have read the novel's interest in earthly suffering to be part of Brontë's 'intense, almost obsessive concern with temporal allotment and divine justice'.[21] Whether the paucity of Lucy's lot is ultimately held to be destructive of or sustaining of belief in divine justice, however, remains an open question. Marianne Thormählen offers an affirmative reading of Lucy Snowe's suffering. In her 'Introduction' to *The Brontës and Religion* (1999), Thormählen states her desire to read with rather than 'against the grain' of the Brontës' writing.[22] Accordingly, she takes at face value Lucy's direct claims of continuing belief in the compensations of the afterlife.[23] For Thormählen, that a character suffers even severely does not call into question belief in a 'merciful maker'; instead, she implies, suffering becomes an opportunity for finding refuge in God: 'All those Brontë characters who look to God for help in affliction receive the strength and courage they pray for, and this aid is instrumental in their progress'.[24] In a similar vein, Lisa Wang has argued that *Villette* actually makes suffering proof of the existence of God.[25] The contact with God Lucy so longs for she achieves through being 'disciplined' by him.[26] Wang finds in the novel an investment in eschatological thinking, which allows the very injustice and disorder observable in the novel to become evidence of the imminent return of the

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[21] Vargish, *The Providential Aesthetic in Victorian Fiction*, p. 92.
[22] Marianne Thormählen, *The Brontës and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 5.
[23] Ibid., p. 100.
[24] Ibid., p. 64.
[25] Lisa Wang, 'Unveiling the Hidden God of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*', *Literature and Theology*, 5.4 (2001), 342-57 (p. 354).
[26] Ibid., pp. 347-8.

Saviour.[27]

Other scholars, by contrast, have argued that *Villette*'s focus on 'injustice and unhappiness' problematizes belief in an overarching divine Providence, viewing the heroine as being instead subject to a fatalistic 'austere cosmic scheme'.[28] Although Carol Ohmann, for instance, considers Lucy Snowe to be open to the possibility of a compensating afterlife, she finds the immediate world of the novel to be a brutally 'naturalistic' one, 'dominated by fate'.[29] Heather Glen comes to a similar conclusion in her work *Charlotte Brontë: The Imagination in History* (2002). Lucy's narrative, she argues, is marked by a secular belief in the determining insurmountable force of circumstance rather than 'the belief in a divine Providence which [Lucy Snowe's] creator tried to espouse'.[30] This scepticism towards Providence, Glen suggests, is underlined in the novel by the bitter deflation of eschatological expectation enacted in in its closing pages.[31]

Unlike the other critics mentioned above, Glen offers a contextually sensitive interpretation of the novel's account of suffering, arguing that *Villette*'s persistent focus on the marginalised, precarious existence of Lucy Snowe subverts the 'public narrative of optimism' that dominated mid-nineteenth-century British culture.[32] More usually, the tendency has been to treat Brontë's treatment of Lucy's suffering as though, to quote Lucasta Miller, she wrote in a 'cultural vacuum'.[33] This chapter will show that Brontë was both more theologically sophisticated and more attuned to broader developments in nineteenth-century religious culture than she is often given credit for. I contend that *Villette*'s treatment of the problem of evil reflected the contemporary dispute between the supernaturalistic, scriptural Evangelical reading of evil ('Augustinian' in John Hick's terms) and the naturalistic, progressive view of evil associated with figures like George

[27] Ibid., pp. 353-5.
[28] Carol Ohmann, 'Historical Reality and Divine Appointment in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 2.4 (1977), 752-78 (p. 757).
[29] Ibid., p. 777.
[30] Ibid., p. 263.
[31] Ibid., p. 283.
[32] Glen, *Imagination in History*, p. 257.
[33] Miller, *Brontë Myth*, p. 42.

Combe. In this way, I will show Brontë to have made a theologically significant contribution to the problem of evil discussion. As Rebecca Styler has argued in her *Literary Theology by Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century* (2010), Victorian women writers, denied formal theological authority by their culture, 'used literature as a means to engage in theological discourse, through which they reinterpreted Christianity to meet deeply felt personal and political needs'.[34] Marianne Thormählen notes the 'courage and independence' with which the Brontës in particular explored religious issues.[35] While Charlotte Brontë's preoccupation with evil was undoubtedly fostered by the grim experiences of her own life, her treatment of evil in her novels shows her to be engaged in a much more public discussion, one which takes account of two of the most prominent theodicies of her time, Evangelical biblicist interpretation of evil and post-Enlightenment narratives of progress.

Heather Glen has argued persuasively that Brontë imbibed at a young age the habits of thought suited to the 'heteroglossic world' she grew up in, her immersion in early nineteenth-century magazine culture helping her to an awareness of competing cultural discourses.[36] Sally Shuttleworth has similarly struck a blow against the myth of Brontë's discursive isolation by tracing the ways in which the currents of contemporary ideology were mediated by Brontë's voracious reading as well as her attendence of lectures in Haworth.[37] Once her authorship had connected her with metropolitan literary culture, Brontë was kept up to date with contemporary opinion by means of the many books which were forwarded to her by her publishers as well as by friends like Harriet Martineau and Elizabeth Gaskell.[38] Between 1848 and the publication of *Villette* in 1853, Brontë read a

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[34] Styler, *Literary Theology*, p. 1.
[35] Thormählen, *The Brontës and Religion*, p. 8.
[36] Glen, *Imagination in History*, pp. 3-7.
[37] Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 219.
[38] See, for instance, *Letter from Charlotte Brontë to William Smith Williams, 16th April 1849*, in which she refers to the pleasure of receiving parcels of books from he and George Smith and suggests they send her some of William Godwin's fiction next time (*The Letters of Charlotte Brontë: With a Selection of Letters by Family and Friends*, ed. by Margaret Smith, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995, 2000, 2004), II, p. 202.

range of theologically topical books, such as J. A. Froude's *Nemesis of Faith* (1849), Francis Newman's *The Soul, Her Sorrows and Aspirations* (1849) and Harriet Martineau and Henry G. Atkinson's *Letters on the Nature and Development of Man* (1851), as well as hearing F. D. Maurice preach in London.[39] These thinkers were all exercised by questions about the relationship between God and human beings and about the validity of supernaturalist explanatory frameworks, questions which had important implications for how evil was to be understood. *Villette* can be read as an intervention in this discussion, one which plainly reveals the fragmentation of solutions to the problem of evil at this time.

The reading offered below broadly agrees with that of Heather Glen in holding *Villette*'s worldview to be inimical to belief in a particular Providence wisely and benevolently directing earthly affairs.[40] I will, however, offer a new account of how the novel subverts Biblical theodicy, showing that it is specifically the theodicy of the New Testament, centred on the promises of Christ, with which it is concerned. In this emphasis, *Villette* differs from most nineteenth-century criticism of the Bible on ethical grounds, which tended to focus on the 'vengeful and capricious' God of the Old Testament.[41] As early as 1794 William Paley had even suggested that it had become the 'fashion' to 'attack [...] Christianity through the sides of Judaism' (that is, the Hebrew Bible).[42] Brontë's novel, however, strikes at the core of Christianity, reducing the New Testament to the status of an unrealized promise and suggesting the worthlessness of a promise of future redemption when pitted against the experience of immediate evil. However, as my introduction has shown, a repudiation of the scriptural interventionist version of God on the grounds of the excessiveness of suffering did not necessarily lead in the nineteenth century to an outright loss of faith. A more common response was instead to seek to

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[39] See the following: *Letter from Charlotte Brontë to James Taylor, 19th December 1849*, in *Letters* (2000), II, p. 314; *Letter from Charlotte Brontë to Harriet Martineau, January 1851*, in *Letters* (2000), II, p. 549; and *Letter from Charlotte Brontë to William Smith Williams, 15th November 1851*, in *Letters* (2000), II, p. 718.

[40] Glen, *Imagination in History*, pp. 270, 284.

[41] Michael Bartholomew, 'The Moral Critique of Christian Orthodoxy', in *Religion in Victorian Britain: Vol II Controversies*, pp. 166-190 (p. 168).

[42] William Paley, *A View of the Evidences of Christianity in Three Parts* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1848), p. 328.

uncover the beneficial purposes for which a benevolent God might permit evil. The supernatural and scriptural conception of divine-human relations favoured by Evangelical Christians met resistance from those who sought instead to trace God's goodness in the general and constant laws that were claimed to govern the physical, social and moral worlds.[43] One prominent form of theodicy that emerged from this endeavour was to view painful conditions as necessary for individual and cultural progress. Having established the vexed relationship Lucy Snowe's narrative has with Evangelical theodicy, I will go on to show that the novel on the whole participates in a naturalistic justification of evil that was gaining ground in Victorian culture, one which was invested in the stimulating powers of what Lucy terms 'inexorable necessity'.[44] In this respect, my argument tackles the problem of Lucy's suffering from a different angle than that of those critics who view suffering in the novel as either wholly undermining or supporting belief in divine justice and goodness. Rather, I will show that the novel subscribes to an innovative way of legitimating earthly evil even as it devalues the supernatural scriptural theodicy common in Evangelical culture.

1.1 'All hope that we should be saved was taken away': The Failure of the Supernatural Paradigm

From its inception, *Villette* reflected its author's uneasy relationship with scriptural paradigms for making sense of suffering. According to a letter Brontë wrote to her publisher George Smith, she never intended to appoint its heroine Lucy Snowe's 'lines in

[43] A number of historians have described this turn towards rational naturalistic accounts of the divine government. See A. C. Waterman, *Revolution, Economics and Religion*, passim; Mary Poovey, *A History of the Modern Fact*, pp. 264-95; David F. Roberts, *The Social Conscience of the Early Victorians* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 113-39.
[44] Brontë, *Villette*, p. 230.

pleasant places'.[45] This is inversion of a passage from Psalm 16, where the grateful psalmist uses the metaphor to explain the reason for his 'trust' in God: 'The LORD is the portion of my inheritance and of my cup: thou maintainest my lot/ The lines are fallen for me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly inheritance'.[46] Her use of this allusion in her letter to her publisher suggests that Brontë intended to cast her heroine as someone whose promised inheritance has failed to materialise. In conversation with Gaskell, Brontë used the same piece of scripture to describe her own suffering: 'it did not fall to the lot of all – as Scripture told us—to have their lines fall in pleasant places'.[47] It is unclear if, in the conversation with Gaskell, she was pointing to a consonance or a dissonance between scripture and her own experiences. That is, her wording could mean either that scripture 'told us' that a goodly inheritance was not the lot of all or conversely, that scripture told us that such an inheritance was the lot of all, or at least all of God's chosen people, to whom his promises applied. If the latter, then Brontë was pointing to the disparity in her own adverse experiences and the promises of the bible, a disparity that is a persistent focus in her final novel. In any case, Brontë's ambiguous use of scripture is notable given her Evangelical background.

The 'biblicism' of Evangelicals, their veneration of the Word, is well-known and is indeed the source of their name.[48] Evangelicals made much of God's promises to his people, enshrined in the testimony of the Bible. In his widely read *Scripture Help* (1816), Edward Bickersteth interpreted the biblical narrative as a great promise from God to his creation, observing that '[t]he word translated *Testament*, may also be rendered *covenant*'.[49] It did not matter how much one suffered because the Word, with its promise of future redemption, was the one thing needful. This outlook is evident in an unpublished

[45] *Letter to George Smith, November 3rd 1852*, reproduced in Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. by Angus Easson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 414.
[46] Psalm 16.1; 16.5-6
[47] Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, p. 442.
[48] Bebbington, *History of Evangelicalism*, pp. 3, 12-14.
[49] Edward Bickersteth, *A Scripture Help, Designed to Assist in Reading the Bible Profitably* (London: L. B. Seeley & Son, 1825), p. 26.

essay by Brontë's mother Maria on 'The Advantages of Poverty in Religious Concerns'.[50] Maria writes that it is a poor Christian, who, in suffering 'repines his lot and thinks that the God who is declared to be *merciful to all*, and whose *tender mercies* are said to be *over all His works*, has forgotten to be gracious to him'.[51] Instead, her reader should remember that there is 'One above...who sees your necessities and has faithfully promised that all things shall work together for your good'. Such a reliance on what has been 'declared' and 'said' in scripture is a commonplace, too, of the poetry of Brontë's father, the Revd Patrick Brontë. Thus, the peasant speaker in his 'The Irish Cabin' (1811) asserts,

> Tis true, I must toil all the day
> And oft suffer cold through the night,
> Though silvered all over with grey,
> And dimly declining my sight:
> And sometimes our raiment and food
> Are scanty - ah! scanty indeed:
> But all work together for good,
> So in my blest Bible I read.[52]

The incongruence between the grim elements of the speaker's life and his assertion of the ultimate beneficence of things makes this stanza almost look like a deflating burlesque of Christian hopefulness. It certainly would not make sense if one were to read it through the lens of natural theological accounts of God's goodness, which sought empirical evidence in this world of God's care for his creatures. For Patrick, as for many other Evangelicals, however, the experience of evil neither negated God's goodness nor indicated his favour as in the logic of 'reverse election':[53] it simply paled into insignificance alongside the 'blest Bible"s promise of redemption. Such a dependence on the hope of redemption was part of

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[50] Reproduced in 'Appendix 1' in *The Brontës' Lives and Letters: Being an Attempt to Present a Full and Final Record of the Lives of the Three Sisters, Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë, from the Biographies of Mrs Gaskell and Others, and from Numerous Hitherto Unpublished Manuscripts and Letters*, ed. by Clement K. Shorter (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1908), pp. 407-9.

[51] 'Appendix 1', *The Brontës Lives and Letters*, p. 408.

[52] Patrick Brontë, 'The Irish Cabin', in *Brontëana*: *The Rev. Patrick Brontë, His Collected Works and Life, The Works; and the Brontës of Ireland*,ed. by J. Horsfall Turner (Bingley, Yorkshire: T. Harrison, 1897), p. 49

[53] This is Janis McLaren Caldwell's term for the experience of being especially singled out for suffering by God in her *Literature and Medicine*, p. 103.

Evangelicalism's eschatological approach to evil. The evils inherited by a fallen world could be borne when one kept in mind the absolute good of future reconciliation with God, secured through Christ's atoning grace. As another nineteenth-century Evangelical, Francis Goode wrote in 1833, '[M]an, as a sinner, is cast out from the favour of God, regarded as a rebel under the curse. But the convenant founded on mercy to unrighteousness has in it the promise of *restoration* to the divine favour, and that to the largest possible extent'.[54] In a world fraught with evil, Evangelicals longed for the promised restoration to be effected by Christ. In their Christocentric hope of deliverance, they evinced the same attitude towards evil as that shown by Paul in his New Testament letters. Looking in 'earnest expectation' to the future glorification of him and his fellow believers, Paul fortified them during their present difficulties by insisting that 'the sufferings of the present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us'. Though 'the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now,' they are 'saved by hope'.[55] To return to John Hick's categorisation of solutions to evil, Paul's eschatological one, which was given central place by the Evangelical focus on the Atonement and on Scripture, falls clearly into the 'Augustinian' camp, not seeking to wrest some this-worldly human betterment from experiences of evil but seeing it as part of a diseased creation, the cure for which is solely in the hands of the divine.

Charlotte Brontë, then, was raised in a culture which coupled experiences of evil with intensified hope in the promise of a divine saviour who would one day intervene in earthly time to deliver the captives to sin and death. Aged twenty-one, she wrote to her friend Ellen Nussey that she was 'in that state of horrid, gloomy uncertainty, that, at this moment I would submit to be old, grey-haired, to have passed all my youthful days of enjoyment and be tottering on the verge of the grave, if I could only thereby ensure the

[54] Francis Goode, *The Better Covenant Practically Considered* (London: J. Hatchard & Son, 1833), p. 31.
[55] Romans 8.

prospect of reconcilement to God and Redemption through His Son's merits'. [56] Far more precisely than in any of her novels, Brontë here articulates the focal point of Evangelical hope, which was Christ's atoning death and its promise of reconciling God to his estranged creation.[57] Her final novel, however, subverted this narrative by bringing into question the reliability of scripture, the personality of God (in the theological sense) and the adequacy of a deliverance so long delayed. *Villette*, that is, jettisons the supernaturalist elements of which Evangelical theodicy was composed. The 'maimed and mourning millions' alongside whom the narrator places her own suffering are accordingly shown to be cut off from the possibility of divine intercession.

Evil makes its first entrance into Lucy Snowe's life in the form of a mysterious affliction she experiences as an adolescent, which leaves her bereft of family and fortune. Lucy describes the impact of this event in terms of a shipwreck brought on by a 'storm, and that not of one hour nor one day' [p. 35]. She describes in detail the 'rush and saltiness of briny waves in [her] throat, and their icy pressure on [her] lungs' [p. 34]. Shipwreck narratives were commonly used throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to make sense of extreme affliction, given that, according to Carl Edward Thompson, 'shipwreck and maritime disaster often seem[ed] to function at this date as a signifier of the utmost in human suffering'.[58] Thompson notes that the usual emphasis in sich narratives was on delivery from shipwreck, with God intervening to preserve the favoured few.[59] These stories had their roots in biblical accounts of storm and shipwreck used to instil a patient attitude towards tribulation in light of a broader faith in God.[60] Lucy's language indicates that she is drawing upon a biblical account of a storm which is reported

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[56] *Letter from Charlotte Brontë to Ellen Nussey, early 1837*, in *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, (1995) I, p. 163.

[57] A number of scholars have observed this Evangelical emphasis on the Atonement. See Jay, 'Introductory Essay' in *The Evangelical and Oxford Movements*, p. 10; Hilton, *The Age of Atonement*, pp. 7-8; Bebbington, *History of Evangelicalism*, pp. 14-7.

[58] Carl Edward Thompson, *The Suffering Traveller and the Romantic Imagination* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), p. 70.

[59] Ibid., p. 74.

[60] See, for instance, Jonah 1; Matthew 8; Acts 27.

to have afflicted the ship on which St. Paul was travelling.[61] Although the crew were near despairing, Paul counseled them to keep hope, because it was vouchsafed to him by an angel of God that they would be spared, although the ship might be destroyed: 'Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer: for I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me'.[62] And so it is, they 'all escaped to land'.[63] Paul insisted on believing the word of God despite dire circumstances, and ultimately prophecy triumphs over tragedy. In *Villette*'s revision of the passage, however, 'all hope that we should be saved was taken away' [p. 35]. And this despair is not depicted as sinful but appropriate: 'In fine, the ship was lost, the crew perished' [p. 35]. Lucy's handling of the passage is subversive of belief in the promises of scripture because it implies that what Christians have been 'told' by God (to cite the scriptural source), that they *will* be delivered, has not been forthcoming in Lucy's experience.

As her narrative proceeds, moreover, Lucy lays increasing emphasis on the fact that her experience is that of many others. A crucial passage in the novel imagines a vast multitude of sufferers gathered around a stagnant pool, 'weeping and despairing, to see it, through slow years, stagnant' [p. 179]. This is a reference to the scriptural pool of Bethesda, around which the infirm, according to John 5, once gathered, awaiting the descent of an angel which was said to activate its healing capacity. In the Gospel account, Jesus is presented as supplanting the restorative power of the pool;[64] yet later allusions to the pool conflated the two sources of healing, so that the waters became a figure for Christ as redeemer. For instance, in the popular *Olney Hymns* (1779) by John Newton and William Cowper, a copy of which was owned by the Brontës, there are two hymns by Newton focussing on the pool and in both it is made the equivalent of Jesus's grace, the waters becoming a cure for sick souls. Newton's speakers have no doubt that their long

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[61] Acts 27.
[62] Acts 27:22-5.
[63] Acts 27:44.
[64] John 5:3-9.

wait will be rewarded; his emphasis is on the absolute efficacy of Christ's redemptive power, no matter how long in coming:

> Here then, from day to day,
> I'll wait, and hope, and try;
> Can Jesus hear a sinner pray,
> Yet suffer him to die?
> No: he is full of grace;
> He never will permit
> A soul, that fain would see his face,
> To perish at his feet.[65]

Lucy, however, envisages vast swathes of wretched humanity, waiting by this same figurative pool, who are left to 'perish out of memory again and yet again' [p. 178]. In Brontë's vision, the longer redemption is postponed, the more the irrevocable human losses mount, her use of the word 'perish' emphasising that sense of absolute extinction. It is this recognition of the human cost of delay that impels her narrator's urgent demand that the healing herald 'Come quickly!'

Lucy's insistence on holding the operations of redemption to the standard of human time differs markedly from the Biblical answer to those who complain of the long absence of Christ. The New Testament scriptural text 2 Peter 3 records that the early Christians were beset by 'scoffers' who asked, '[W]here is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation'.[66] The epistle writer responds that '[t]he Lord is not slack concerning his promise' but that they should remember 'that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day'.[67] Lucy seems to have something like this in mind when she laments the 'slow years' through which humanity has awaited deliverance and suggests that there is a fatal gap between Heaven and Earth where time is concerned: 'Long are the "times" of Heaven' she writes, 'the orbits of angel messengers seem wide to mortal vision; they may

[65] John Newton, 'The Pool of Bethesda', *Olney Hymns*, p. 129.
[66] 2 Peter 3:3-4.
[67] 2 Peter 3:8-9.

enring ages: the cycle of one departure and return may clasp unnumbered generations' [p. 179]. While for those 'Peter' addressed, this disparity was meant to be encouraging, insofar as it restored their belief in the promises of the departed Christ, for Lucy it is a source of anguish. It is also worth noting that where for 'Peter' the solution is for the sufferer to imaginatively enter into a broader perspective— the Lord's experience of time— Lucy's sympathies are firmly with the limited perspective of the finite human beings she invokes: the wait has indeed been '[l]ong'[p.179].

More radically, this same passage suggests that even if the expected deliverance finally occurred, it would not make amends for the evils of the intervening period. The narrator's conception of a future redemption is phrased ambiguously at best: 'Certainly, at some hour, though perhaps not *your* hour, the waiting waters will stir; in *some* shape, though perhaps not the shape you dreamed, which your heart loved, and for which it bled, the healing herald will descend' [p. 179]. Instead of a consoling vision of fulfillment, as we might expect, we have a stark disjunction between immediate individual human need— its particularity emphasized by those personal pronouns 'you' and 'your'— and the deferred global palliative offered by the Christian redemptive scheme. Palpable here is that sharp sense of 'absolute, primal need', which Heather Glen has noted to be a component of Brontë's vision.[68] The imagined healer in this case, a figure for Christ, is presented as being woefully inadequate to the extremity of need that has been experienced in his long absence.

Marianne Thormählen has noticed what little role the Brontës as a group give to the person of Christ in their writings.[69] She also observes that Charlotte overtly excepted the Athanasian creed, that which asserts the unity of God, Christ and the Holy Ghost, upon which the mechanism of orthodox Christian redemption depends, from those Church of

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[68] Glen, *The Imagination in History*, p. 143.
[69] Thormählen, *The Brontës and Religion*, p. 65. See *Letter from Charlotte Brontë to William Smith Williams, 23rd December 1847* in *Letters* (1995), I, p. 581.

England doctrines dear to her.[70] However, Christ as promised redeemer can actually be said to preoccupy Brontë's final novel, if only in a negative sense. While a number of critics have read messianic undertones in the novel's characterisation of M. Paul, for instance, he is also emphatically differentiated from Christ. Lucy says of Paul that he 'would give neither a stone, nor an excuse — neither a scorpion, nor a disappointment' [p. 494]. This imagery is taken from Luke 11, where it is used by Jesus to describe the promised gifts awaiting the children of God: 'If a son shall ask bread of any of you that is a father, will he give him a stone?'; 'Or if he shall ask an egg, will he offer him a scorpion?'[71] Jesus uses 'scorpion' and 'stone' to denote false or harmful gifts and 'egg' and 'bread' to denote the truly fulfilling gifts of God. In Lucy's construction, however, 'excuse' and 'disappointment' take the place of 'egg' and 'bread,' suggesting that Jesus's promise has proved to be empty. Paul she further praises for not leaving her to live 'wholly on a bequeathed hope or a parting promise [...] I was not tried with suspense' [p. 494]. Paul, she says, does not offer sham assurances or hollow excuses but instead represents 'full-handed, full-hearted plenitude'. Such negatively-phrased praise makes Lucy's commitment to Paul Emanuel simultaneously a repudiation of the painful suspense, unrealized promise and the deferral of fulfilment which is associated in Lucy's mind with the hope of Christ's return.

Indeed Lucy indicates that the eschatological expectation upon which Evangelicals tended to rely could become a source of torment rather than of sustenance:

> I think that on a certain day amongst those days which never dawned, and will not set, an angel entered Hades – stood, shone, smiled, delivered a prophecy of conditional pardon, kindled a doubtful hope of bliss to come, not now, but at a day and hour unlooked for, revealed in his own glory and grandeur the height and compass of his promise: spoke thus – then towering, became a star, and vanished into his own Heaven. His legacy was suspense – a worse boon than despair. [p. 445]

Here is one obvious image of that 'parting promise' in contrast with which the tangible

[70] Thormählen, *The Brontës and Religion*, p. 143.
[71] Luke 11:11-12.

immediacy and fullness of M. Paul's love is to be understood. This passage could easily serve as a bitter summary of Christ's intervention on earth and its results. The New Testament represents Jesus as similarly entering a world whose denizens lay captive to sin and under the curse of death.[72] Rather than releasing then immediately, however, he offered them through his atoning death the possibility of redemption through resurrection and blissful reconciliation with God, deferred until his return at the end of earthly time[73] and conditional upon their following Christ and abstaining from sin.[74] He then also ascended into Heaven in glory.[75] Indeed, the specific scriptural echo Lucy uses— 'a day and hour unlooked for'— recalls the condition of Christians awaiting the Second Coming, which was promised to occur when unexpected.[76] She suggests that all Christ has given, all he even embodies, is a promise not yet realized. Instead of being something sustaining, 'hope' in her vision is enabled by and therefore signifies only the present absence of redemption.[77] As Brontë would have read in Francis Newman's *The Soul* (1849), 'the expectation of Christ's speedy return in the clouds of Heaven to bring about the general judgement, is a manifest error which pervades the whole New Testament'.[78] Brontë's narrator suggests not that salvation will never come but that its long postponement makes it worse than if it had never been promised.

The narrator frequently invokes an experience of pain so thoroughly depleting that it excludes the prospect of future reparation. Over the long vacation, Lucy Snowe likens her suffering to that of lonely 'hermits' who have been forgotten by the outside world [p. 266]. For this painful experience of total emotional deprivation, Lucy uses the analogy of a dormouse being encased in ice for a season, writing 'perhaps, one day his snow-sepulchre

[72] See, for instance, Romans 5.12.
[73] Matt 24; Luke 14:14, Romans 8.21.
[74] Luke 14:27, Romans 8.13.
[75] Luke 24:51; Acts 1. 9-11.
[76] Matt 24:36, 2 Peter 2.10.
[77] This is implied in the New Testament: 'For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for?' (Romans 8.24).
[78] Francis Newman, *The Soul, Her Sorrows and Aspirations* (London: John Chapman, 1849), p. 200. See *Letters* (2000), II, p. 314.

will open' and spring will 'call him to kindly resurrection'. The imagery of resurrection and spring and even the magisterial, complacent tone of the paragraph are reminiscent of Evangelical writing, with Lucy apparently encouraging her readers to submit quietly to their present pains by keeping their future liberation in mind. Edward Bickersteth, for instance, noted that all creation furnished the Christian inclined to doubt the foretold general resurrection with 'emblems and illustrations', writing that '[e]very verdant spring, with all its freshness and life and luxuriance, is a resurrection from the frost, the torpor and the death of winter'.[79] More precisely, the analogy of hibernation, which Brontë makes use of here, was used to counter theological problems created by the long delay of Christ's return, which led to misgivings about how the generations who had died were to be included in the final restoration. Thus, for example, Edward Samuel, a Manchester Evangelical minister, insisted that 'not only the foundation of our faith, but of our comfort also' was the belief that '[a]ll mankind, from Adam to the second coming of Christ' shall rise at the general resurrection.[80] Although reason might baulk at this idea, he points to the fact of hibernation to support it: '[t]here are many creatures that are dead as it were in the winter, and revive in the spring'.[81] Lucy mimics such claims, conflating death and hibernation in the image of a 'snow-sepulchre' from which the frozen creature she takes as a figure for herself may one day be salvaged. Her use of this eschatological analogy, however, only makes her bitter rejection of such a basis for hope all the more powerful when she proceeds: '*Perhaps* this may be the case, perhaps not, the frost may get into his heart and never thaw more; when spring comes, a crow or pie may pick out of the wall only his dormouse bones' [p. 266]. That is, it may be too late for spring to restore what winter has taken away; too late for the returned Redeemer to revive the perished generations.

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[79] Edward Bickersteth, *The Chief Concerns of Man for Time and Eternity* (London: R.B. Seeley and W. Burnside, 1831), pp. 68-9.

[80] Edward Samuel, *The Triumph of Christ on the Cross, as God-Man, over Sin and the Sinner* (London: W. H. Collingridge, 1857), p. 199.

[81] Ibid., pp. 199-200.

The suggestion of a redemption coming too late strikes at the heart of not only Evangelical theodicy but also of a broader Christian response to evil. A section from Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1849), for instance, read by Brontë before she wrote *Villette*,[82] shows the common tendency to submit to pain in the hope that it will one day end:

> Oh, yet we trust that somehow good
> Will be the final goal of ill,
> To pangs of nature, sins of will,
> Defects of doubt, and taints of blood;
> [...] Behold, we know not anything;
> I can but trust that good shall fall
> At last — far off — at last, to all,
> And every winter change to spring.[83]

The declaration that we 'know not anything' clearly admits an element of doubt into the speaker's stance of hopeful resignation. Nonetheless, the implication is that he has no choice but to trust in a future 'far off' resolution. Similarly, in *Shirley*, published the same year as Tennyson's poem, the narrator enjoins sufferers like the pining heroine Caroline Helstone to patience on the grounds that the time of acutest pain is often 'that darkest point which precedes the rise of day; that turn of the year when the icy January wind carries over the waste at once the dirge of departing winter, and the prophecy of coming spring'.[84] Lucy Snowe's is a more radical vision than that of Brontë's earlier narrator, similarly anticipating the eventual entrance of spring but one deprived by its deferred nature of its power to revive. The heterodoxy of this passage can be gauged by its similarity to an argument made by an avowed disbeliever in the general resurrection in an 1814 issue of *The Reasoner*. This writer too draws an analogy between the torpid dormouse and the 'suspension of the being' held to be the condition of those awaiting the

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[82] *Letter from Charlotte Brontë to Elizabeth Gaskell, 27th August 1850*, in *Letters* (2000), II, p. 457.
[83] Alfred Tennyson, 'In Memoriam A.H.H.', in *Tennyson's Poetry*, ed. by Robert W. Hill Jr (New York: Norton Critical Edition), pp. 205-91 (pp. 236-7).
[84] Brontë, *Shirley*, p. 295.

'second coming of the Messiah'.[85] It is an analogy he rejects, however, given that the dormouse which emerges in spring is still evidently the self-same creature, whereas the known decomposition of the body after death makes it absurd to believe there will be anything to be resurrected. While sustaining the analogy he rejects, Lucy shares his sense of there being nothing left to restore after the ravages of time. What both visions have in common is an inability to invest in the concept of a miraculous redemption which can annul the naturalistic processes of secular time, the conquest of Christ's grace over Adam's curse.

Nevertheless, as Lisa Wang has argued, the language of the Second Coming pervades *Villette*, from the first words attributed to Lucy ('Of what are these things the signs and tokens?' she asks herself when she sees sees Polly Homes' furniture in her room) to the repetition of 'he is coming' in the novel's final pages.[86] Wang, however, does not consider how this eschological perspective becomes itself a direct object of consideration for the narrator, one to which she cannot ultimately commit. Lucy's eschatological phrasing draws our attention to the painful space between anticipation and fulfillment. In order to cope with her present pain it is necessary for her to keep in mind a promised future; she notes of her moment of deepest despair during the vacation period in the *pensionnat* that '[e]ven to look forward was not to hope: the dumb future spoke no comfort, offered no promise, gave no inducement to bear present evil in reliance on future good' [p. 156]. As such, when she is deprived of the last of her hopes in John Bretton, after his marriage to Paulina, she strongly asserts her faith in God's promise to sufferers like her: '(f)or staff we have His promise, whose "word is tried, whose way perfect"'[p. 438]. While this may seem a straightforward expression of faith, Lucy's words also forcibly remind the reader that, unlike Lucy with M. Paul, Christians have to subsist on a 'bequeathed hope'

[85] Anon., 'The Immortality of the Soul', *The Reasoner: Or Controversial Magazine*, No. 11 (1814), pp. 684-68 (p. 686).
[86] Wang, 'Unveiling the Hidden God', p. 342. See, also, Luke 21, in which Jesus tells the Apostles what will be the 'signs' of his return.

alone.

Lucy's problem is, to quote Paulina, that 'Hope [flies] before [her] fast, never alighting so near, or lingering so long, as to give [her] hand a chance of one realizing grasp' [p. 375]. Her repeated disappointments leave her with a suspicion of promise and a desire for firm proof. The chapter that ends with Lucy turning to the 'promise' of God's mercy is immediately followed by a chapter entitled 'M. Paul keeps his promise' [p. 378], which might initially suggest that Paul is used as means of indirectly vindicating God in the novel. Paul, however, understands that Lucy cannot survive on promise alone but requires clear 'proof' in order to 'trust [his] shoulder as a safe stay'; he is happy to provide it: 'Good. The proof is ready. I come to justify myself' [p. 378]. As McLaren Caldwell has noted, the emphasis in Lucy's relationship with Paul is less on her love for him and more on whether she can trust him.[87]

Lucy Snowe's need for proof rather than promise puts her at odds with the Evangelical reliance on scripture alone when addressing the problem of evil. 'The sinner,' Bickersteth wrote, meaning every Christian, 'believes the testimony of God concerning Christ, and trusts in Christ alone for pardon, righteousness, life, and full salvation, as offered in the Gospel'.[88] The sufficiency of the gospel as the basis of faith was increasingly emphasised by Evangelicals throughout the first half of the nineteenth century as, according to Bebbington, there was a reaction amongst some Evangelicals against the evidence-based faith of natural theology.[89] Bebbington cites the Scottish Evangelical Henry Drummond: 'nothing can be so opposed to the disposition of faith, as that which is only to be convinced by external evidences. It is, in fact, saying that he will not believe in God unless He can bring a voucher for the truth of what He says'.[90] Figures like Drummond, according to Bebbington, sought to simplify faith to the rudiment of a 'bare

[87] McLaren Caldwell, *Literature and Medicine in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, p. 113.
[88] Bickersteth, *Scripture Help*, p.188.
[89] Bebbington, *History of Evangelicalism*, p. 86.
[90] Ibid., p. 92.

trust in divine revelation'.[91] A similar point was made in the work, *Guesses at Truth* (1827), which Brontë read in 1849 and which condemned an 'evil and adulterous generation [that] seeketh after a sign'.[92]

Villette certainly presents a world in which the visible tokens of God's trustworthiness are either absent or are unstable signifiers. Leaving London for Belgium, Lucy sees from her boat a rainbow, 'a God-bent bow, an arch of hope' [p. 57]. The rainbow offers hope to the Christian because it is a reminder of God's promise to mankind. In Chapter 9 of Genesis, God promises Noah that he will never again send a flood to destroy life on earth and claims the 'bow in the cloud' to be a token of this covenant with mankind. It signifies the basis for trust in God. Thus the speaker in Patrick Brontë's poem 'The Rainbow' interprets the bow as 'say[ing] all this dread violence is o'er; /These colours that smilingly glow/Say we shall be deluged no more'.[93] With the common nineteenth-century habit of reading Old Testament events as types for New Testament ones, Patrick Brontë places this triumph of mercy over judgement in the context of Christ's 'victory' over 'hell, death and sin'. Patrick's reading of the rainbow is firmly grounded in a belief in Scripture as 'the word which Jehovah hath penned.' Marianne Thormählen takes Lucy's use of the rainbow to indicate a similar faith that she is a 'creature in God's hand'.[94] This overlooks the fact that Lucy follows her description of the rainbow as a symbol of hope with the words: 'Cancel the whole of that, if you please, reader — or rather let it stand and draw thence a moral — an alliterative, text-hand copy — 'Day-dreams are the delusions of the demon'' [p. 57]. Brontë would have read in Harriet Martineau and Henry Atkinson's positivistic *Letters on the Laws of Man's Nature and Development* (1851) an allusion to the earlier stage of superstition when 'the rainbow was thought to be a mystic sign in the

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[91] Ibid.
[92] A. W. Hare and J .C. Hare, *Guesses at Truth, by Two Brothers* (London: John Taylor, 1827), p. 332.
[93] Patrick Brontë, 'The Rainbow', *Brontëana*, p. 35.
[94] Thormählen, *The Brontës and Religion*, p. 61.

heavens'.[95] Their description of this belief as one of the 'dreams and delusions' which science has banished is very similar to Lucy's conclusion. Their obvious delight at this symptom of progress, however, is far removed from the reaction of Brontë's narrator, who registers only a bitter disappointment that hopeful interpretations of signs of God's promises are not to be trusted.

The cultural trajectory of the rainbow represents the process by which the channels of divine revelation were sealed as naturalistic explanation took the place of supernaturalistic prognostication. Lucy Snowe inhabits a world from which, as Thomas Vargish writes, 'the visible signs of divine mercy have been withdrawn'.[96] As her fluctuating interpretation of the rainbow implies, moreover, human testimony about divine revelation is suspect to the extent that it might simply be delusional. Later in the novel, Lucy says she deliberately suppressed her 'longing outlook for a far-off promised land whose rivers are, perhaps, never to be reached save in dying dreams, whose sweet pastures are to be viewed but from the desolate and sepulchral summit of a Nebo' [p. 231]. Here Lucy puts herself in the position of Moses, led by God through decades of hardship to the very borders of Canaan, only to be told that he should never enter it, that he was to die on Mt. Nebo.[97] In an essay she wrote while perfecting her French in Belgium, 'The Death of Moses', Brontë had focussed on the moment when Moses's hopes were taken from him. 'I have shown you but you shall not enter it', she records the voice of God telling his faithful servant.[98] As if to assuage the anxiety raised by this worrying version of God, Brontë then immediately places Moses' Old Testament disappointment in the redeeming context of New Testament hope. She shows him imagining the progress of his people, culminating in

[95] Henry George Atkinson and Harriet Martineau, *Letters on the Laws of Man's Nature and Development* (London: John Chapman, 1851), p. 20.
[96] Vargish, *Providential Aesthetic*, pp. 57-8.
[97] Deuteronomy 34:4-5.
[98] Charlotte Brontë, 'La Mort de Moise', 27th July 1843, in *The Belgian Essays: A Critical Edition*, ed. and transl. by Sue Lonoff (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), pp. 310-322 (p. 316).

the triumphant vision, his face lighting up in ecstasy, of the birth of Christ.[99] Even at this point, Brontë was plainly plagued by doubt about the veracity of scripture, pulling back from her exalted vision with reference to the doubts that had been thrown on the miraculous accounts in the bible: '[m]ust we regard the narratives contained in the history of the Jews as a kind of parable, showing truth through the veil of Fiction, or should we rather take them in their literal sense?'.[100] By the time she came to write *Villette*'s version of the Moses story, Brontë's doubts had gained the upper hand, as prophecy is reduced to the status of 'dying dreams', suggesting that any hopeful vision this Moses might indulge in is purely illusory.

Ruth Y. Jenkins has observed that nineteenth-century historicist treatment of the Bible had 'revealed the human subjectivity that affected biblical hermeneutics'.[101] This new consciousness of the fallible mediators of the divine Word provides one context for Lucy's doubts about where prophecy ends and delusion begins. Martineau and Atkinson went so far as to question the credibility of the Bible's prophets, holding that experiences of '[p]rophecy, *clairvoyance*, healing by touch, visions, dreams, revelations, and the delusion of believing themselves divinely inspired' were the products of an abnormal mental state in the individual.[102] They explicitly stated that 'Christ's case', like that of all prophets, was clearly that of those who 'fancy themselves inspired, are carried away by the delusion and delude the world with their wanderings'.[103] Their emphasis on the 'tricks' of a 'strong imagination' and their materialistic explanation of experiences of supernatural revelation are very similar to Lucy's encounters with the ghostly nun in *Villette*. Though the nun turns out to have a banally materialistic origin, Lucy's vivid imagination tempts her to lean at first to a supernatural version. She evinces that imaginative tendency

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[99] Ibid.
[100] Ibid., p. 314.
[101] Ruth Y. Jenkins, *Reclaiming Myths of Power: Women Writers and the Victorian Spiritual Crisis* (Lewisburg: Associated University Presses, 1995), p. 19.
[102] Atkinson & Martineau, *Letters on the Laws of Man's Nature and Development*, p. 175.
[103] Ibid., p. 216

described by Martineau and Atkinson, which 'creates horrors and spectres, and then startles at its own creations'.[104] We have already seen how Lucy's consciousness of her tendency towards delusion leads her to reject her initially hopeful interpretation of the rainbow. 'Man cannot prophecy' [p. 493], the opening words of the novel's final chapter, indicate the conclusion to which her distrust of promise and the subjective phenomena which taint it has led her. If, however, prophecy is not to be relied upon, the Evangelical eschatological solution to evil falls apart.

Villette's pessimism about the Christic, eschatological core of Evangelical theodicy is part of a general pattern of doubt in the novel about God's personal care for his creatures. Lucy Snowe actually suggests that there is a fundamental lack of sympathy between Heaven and earth. Over the long vacation in the *pensionnat*, her darkest point in the novel, she records a moment when, she says, '[i]t seemed to me at this hour that there was affection and sorrow in Heaven above for all the pain suffered on earth beneath' [p. 160]. The suggestion that this is only a fleeting impression indicates that Lucy is haunted by the belief that Heaven is actually indifferent to human suffering. The angel who comes to promise a future reprieve to those suffering in 'Hades', who I have suggested is a figure for Christ in the novel, is then depicted as vanishing into 'his own Heaven'. The phrase places him in a sort of splendid isolation, sequestered from human suffering and evil [p. 446]. Lucy believes the ascended Christ to be an impassive, unfeeling divinity: '*were* human sorrows *still* for the son of God, would he not mourn over [the Catholic Church's] cruelties and ambitions?' [p. 420, my emphasis]. Heather Glen has observed the novel's trope of the 'unresponsive God'.[105] Indeed, one of the earliest reviews, by Harriet Martineau, observed the irony that, despite her virulant critique of Catholicism, her Protestant faith gives Lucy no solace, 'yield[s] no comfort in return for every variety of

[104] Ibid., p. 141.
[105] Glen, *Imagination in History*, p. 250.

sorrowful invocation'.[106] Brontë, however, can hardly have been unaware that the God her novel presents is a peculiarly unheeding one. The implication that Christ and 'Heaven' in general are indifferent to human suffering is reinforced by the parallel established in the novel between the space which intervenes between the infatuated female lover and the aloof male beloved and that which intervenes between the votary and God. Again, Brontë's reading would have primed her to make such an analogy. Francis Newman had noted that necessarily 'our vocabulary is all one of transference' when speaking of our relation to God, subsequently commenting on the 'the strongly marked analogies between the Soul's love to God, and that borne by a woman to her husband'.[107] This was a parallel which Brontë had previously explored in her correspondence with Constantin Heger in 1844. As Kathryn Bond Stockton has observed, Brontë's letters to and poetry about Heger, to whom she had become deeply attached while studying and teaching at his wife's school in Belgium, transfigure him into a God— eventually a cold and unresponsive one.[108] Her letters to him, which imagine him as the giver of life and sustenance, place great importance on her suffering without him: she is pining away, unable to eat or sleep and even losing her vision.[109] She insists that while she has no other claim to his attention, her terrible pain is claim enough:

> Your last letter has sustained me—has nourished me for six months—now I need another and you will give it to me—not because you have any friendship for me—you cannot have much—but because you have a compassionate soul and because you would not condemn anyone to undergo long suffering in order to spare yourself a few minutes of tedium.[110]

The implication here that pain deserves a response explains why she was furiously

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[106] Harriet Martineau, Unsigned Review, *Daily News* (February 1853), in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, pp. 171-74 (p. 174).
[107] Newman, *The Soul*, pp. 90, 121.
[108] Kathryn Bond Stockton, *God Between their Lips: Desire Between Women in Iragaray, Brontë and Eliot* (Stanford University Press, 1994), pp. 111-2.
[109] See letters to Constantin Heger, dated 24th July 1844, 8th January 1845 and 18th November 1845, in *Letters* (1995), I, pp. 357-9, 370-1, 379-80, 435-37.
[110] *Letter from Charlotte Brontë to Constantin Heger 18th November 1845*, in *Letters* (1995), I, p. 68.

indignant as well as hurt when Heger continued to ignore her. A later poem which Brontë's biographer Lyndall Gordan as well as Linda S. Kaufman take to be written about Heger[111] renders him as monstrously insensate:

> He saw my heart's woe, discovered my soul's anguish,
> How in fever, in thirst, in atrophy it pined;
> Knew he could heal, yet looked and let it languish,
> To its moans spirit-deaf, to its pangs spirit-blind [...]
> I might have slashed my flesh and drawn my heart's best blood,
> The Granite God had felt no tenderness, no shock
> My Baal had not seen nor heard nor understood.[112]

The religious language suggests that Brontë had begun to cast the dynamic of their relationship as that between an indifferent God and a sufferer who petitions in vain.

Villette replicates this dynamic, using the figure of the unequal male-female relationship to express religious grievances. Polly in relation to her father and later Graham; Lucy in relation to John Bretton and later M. Paul: the sense in these unequal relationships is of an always potentially dangerous devotion to a withdrawing Deity. Thus the young Polly pines for her father as for an absent God (Lucy describes her howl at his departure as a sort of 'why has thou forsaken me?' [p.22]) while with Graham she goes to even further lengths of literal prostration, at one point lying on the floor at his feet, carressing the foot with which he has just absent-mindedly kicked her, a pose Brontë's first readers would surely have associated with the image of Mary Magdalene annointing and kissing Jesus's feet and wiping them with her hair.[113] That John Graham Bretton is used as a way of thinking about God is suggested by Lucy's fear that if she looks at him she dreads 'being turned stone blind', an allusion to Saul of Tarsus' moment of conversion when he is struck blind by a vision of the resurrected Christ [p. 425].[114] If Bretton becomes a God for

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[111] Linda S. Kaufman, *Discourses of Desire: Gender, Genre and Epistolary Fictions* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 196; Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë*, p. 120.
[112] Cited in Kauffman, *Discourses of Desire*, p. 196.
[113] See Luke 7:38; John 12:3.
[114] Acts 9.9.

Lucy, however, he is one who is barely conscious of her existence and brutally careless of her feelings.[115]

Early in the novel Lucy explains to the child Paulina the callous behaviour shown by the teenage John Bretton (Graham): "Paulina, you should not grieve that Graham does not care for you as much as you care for him. It must be so'. Her lifted and questioning eyes asked why. 'Because he is a boy and you are a girl; he is sixteen and you are only six; his nature is strong and gay, and yours is otherwise" [p. 33]. Lucy suggests that the radical asymmetry of their experience prohibits reciprocal sympathy. There is a bitter note in her suggestion that it would be naïve to expect anything but careless treatment in such circumstances. This is similar to her later advice to the hypothetical 'hermit' who has been 'cut off' suddenly by his friends:

> Always there are excellent reasons for these lapses, if the hermit but knew them. Though he is stagnant in his cell, his connections without are whirling in the very vortex of life. That void interval that passes for him so slowly...that same interval, perhaps, teems with events and pants with hurry for his friends. [p. 266]

This concept of incommensurate perspectives, preventing mutual sympathy, is presented in it most powerful form, however, in the passage already considered above in which the narrator emphasises the great gulf between the 'wide' orbits of angels and the 'brief' suffering lives of those who await them [p. 179]. The scope of 'Heaven"s perspective disables it from appreciating the continual loss and suffering experienced by humanity over 'ages' of time. Although the avowed purpose of this passage is to instil 'patience' in such sufferers, it actually assigns to 'Heaven' an inevitable but surely alarming carelessness of human need, a poignant reprisal of the size difference focussed on in the earlier chapters

[115] *Villette*, p. 314, where he fails to notice that it has been three months since they've last spoken, although Lucy's been counting down the days. Similarly, Lucy says of him that 'He did not at all guess what I felt: he did not read my eyes, or face, or gestures; though, I doubt not, all spoke' [p. 318]. He fails to consider if his constant discussion with Lucy of his feelings for Ginevra Fanshawe and Paulina Homes might be causing her pain.

between the sunny Graham who hurts in his very heedlessness [p. 32] and the tiny being whose intensity of feeling he is incapable of discerning.

The question of whether God could be considered to have sympathy with human beings was part of a broader one relating to the personality of God which had been considered both by Francis Newman and by Martineau and Atkinson in their *Letters*. The latter argued that those who still clung to the notion of supernatural intervention in nature did so because they 'desir[ed] sympathy [...] To some persons so situated it seems most sad and terrible to be left alone without a god upon this dreary earth'.[116] While Newman remained a theist, he insisted that because God operated through general laws, it was only metaphorically that we might speak about him caring for us: 'the only doubt is, whether he thinks of us *individually* at all'.[117] Newman commented that one possible indication that God does not pay attention to individual human need was the fact that 'no miracles are wrought for us'.[118] The question of miracles brought even the New Testament, upon which Evangelicals pinned their hopes, into doubt. Separate articles in *Blackwood's Magazine* and *Fraser's Magazine*, two journals Brontë is known to have consistently read, sought to defend the New Testament from the encroachments of naturalistic philosophy. In 1839, one of her favourite writers, Thomas De Quincey observed that the anti-supernaturalism of writers such as Hume threw into question 'whether God did, or did not, manifest himself to human experience in the miracles of the New Testament'.[119] Likewise, a *Fraser's* review of liberal Christian Henry Milman's *History of Christianity* (1840) cited long sections of the work in which he treated parts of the New Testament as historical rather than inspired. One such extract offers the scientific reasons for which the pool of Bethesda appeared to the uninformed early witnesses to be a site of miraculous healing.[120] While Milman tried to

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[116] Atkinson & Martineau, *Letters on the Laws of Man's Nature and Development*, p. 206.
[117] Newman, *The Soul*, pp. 39-40.
[118] Ibid., p. 40.
[119] Thomas De Quincy, 'On Hume's Argument Against Miracles', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (July 1839), pp. 91-99 (p. 98).
[120] Anon., 'Milman's *History of Christianity*', *Fraser's Magazine* (June 1840), pp. 633-47 (p. 638).

veil his arguments in orthodoxy, the reviewer argued, his treatment of the scriptures was in fact 'totally irreconcileable with belief that the Bible is a Divine Revelation'.[121] There was no middle ground for this writer: the Bible must be understood as wholly literally true or else there is 'no revelation from God to man, no way of escape from the ills of life, no hope with reference to the future judgement'.[122]

Charlotte Brontë, then, need not have been exposed to German Higher Criticism of the bible in order to be aware that doubts were being cast on the veracity of the New Testament, which brought that text's vision of miraculous revelation into question. Continuing the analogy between *Villette*'s John Bretton and an indifferent God, Lucy observes of the former that 'miracles of intuition' were not to be expected of him [p. 190]. In the novel's Bethesda passage, there is likewise an emphasis placed on the lack of miraculous communication between Heaven and Earth, figured in the long absence of 'angel messengers'. The novel indeed capitalises on the idea of angels as *messengers* of God, so that referring to the painful cessation of 'the letter, the message' [p. 266] from the outside world in general becomes a way to talk about the absence of communication from God. Hence, Lucy says of reading Dr Bretton's first letter to her, '[a] passing seraph seemed to have rested beside me, leaned towards my heart, and reposed on its throb a softening, cooling, healing, hallowing wing' [p. 223]. Once he turns his attention to Paulina, however, Lucy is tortured by the 'wingless hours' which pass in the absence of any communication from him [p. 266]. When a letter from Mrs Bretton finally arrives, Lucy, mistaking it for one from Dr Bretton, writes, 'Rosine had visited my cell, and, like some angel, had left behind her a bright token of her presence. That shining thing on the desk was indeed a letter, a real letter' [p. 277].

Although that phrase, 'a real letter', and her terrible suspense when waiting for Dr Bretton's letters suggests that to Lucy they represent the full realization of promise — she

[121] Ibid.
[122] Ibid., p. 696.

calls it a 'taste of fruition' [p. 144] — a letter, like an angel, is both representative of and token of what is longed for and the clearest sign that it is in fact absent, yet to come. The insufficiency of Dr Bretton's letters independent of Lucy's romantic hopes in him, is made evident by the fact that once he turns his attention to Paulina, Lucy comes to see his letters as similar to 'Barmecide's loaf' [p. 268]. Like the prince from *The Arabian Nights' Entertainments* who put before a begger a purported feast which turned out to consist of only empty dishes, they promise to fill but actual condemn to continued want.[123] The use of this metaphor suggests that even the imagined fruition of Lucy's hopes constitutes another deferral. Likewise, the only consummation the narrator can imagine for those sufferers waiting round the stagnant pool is for the 'healing herald' to come. Her use of this word 'herald' here highlights Brontë's interest in angels as tokening the simultaneous presence and absence of God. Even if the sufferers got what they most wanted, they would still be in want because the only fulfillment the narrator can imagine for them, the descent of a 'herald', is meaningful only as the harbinger of another delayed fulfillment [p. 179].

Lucy's exposition of the state of tortuous expectation to which such sufferers are condemned provides a useful gloss on the novel's general interest in moments of suspense. The young Polly scans the crowds outside the Bretton house in 'intense expectancy' [p. 13], looking for her father; Miss Marchmont eagerly awaits the arrival of her fiancé [p. 40], just as Mrs Bretton impatiently awaits the return of 'the Unpunctual' John Bretton every evening [pp. 173-4]. Those in isolation are said to 'ache with the strain of long expectancy' [p. 276], just as Lucy awaits her letters from Graham Bretton as starved animals kept 'upon the verge of famine, await their food' [p. 268]. Suspense, of course, is also *Villette*'s final dubious bequest to its readers, as the narrator purportedly leaves 'sunny imaginations hope' that M. Paul has survived the closing shipwreck [p. 496].

It is largely on this closing image of shipwreck, which, despite the narrator's

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[123] 'The Story of the Barber's Sixth Brother', in *Arabian Nights' Entertainments*, ed. by Robert L. Mack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 298-302.

evasions, most have read as ruining Lucy's hopes for union with Paul, that critical considerations of the meaning of suffering in the novel have focussed. This is because the novel makes notable parallels between M. Paul's anticipated return and that of Christ. This is evident, for instance, in Paul's surname 'Emanuel', 'Emmanuel' (which means 'God with us') being the name given to the messiah foretold by Old Testament prophecy.[124] The closing chapters of the novel also, as Lisa Wang has commented, describe M. Paul in terms resonant of the New Testament figuring of the Second Coming, where Christ becomes the promised bridegroom of the awaiting church.[125] As such, the novel's depiction of 'an Emanuel who does not come'[126] can be read, Heather Glen argues, as a despairing comment on contemporary speculation about the Second Coming.

It is a mistake, however, to see Christ as entirely absent from the novel's closing pages. Lucy describes herself as one of 'a thousand weepers, praying in agony of waiting shores', who, she says, beseech a 'voice' to still the storm which is imperiling the lives of their loved ones [p. 495]. Once again, then, she imagines herself as part of an enormous mass of sufferers hanging on the promise of divine deliverance. The words they long to hear, specifically, are 'Peace, be still!' taken from the Gospel account (Mark 4) of a storm that threatened a boat on which Jesus and the apostles were aboard. As the waters almost capsized the boat, the terrified apostles turned to Jesus, but he was 'asleep on a pillow' at the back of the ship: 'and they awoke him and said unto him, Master, carest thou not that we perish? /And he arose, and rebuked the wind, and said unto the sea, Peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. /And he said unto them, Why are ye so fearful? how is it that ye have no faith?'.[127] The effect of this passage then is to impress on

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[124] Isaiah 7:14: 'Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.' According to Matthew 1:23, this Emmanuel is identical with Jesus Christ.

[125] Wang, 'Unveiling the Hidden God', p. 348.

[126] Glen, *The Imagination in History,* p. 283. Glen places the novel's ending in the specific context of mid-century hopes for the imminent return of Christ.

[127] Mark 4:37-41. Barry Qualls too has also noticed the allusion to this scriptural passage: 'even Lucy's cry 'Peace, be still!' — from Mark 4:39— is not heeded: man's words do not order nature as Christ's words did', *Secular Pilgrims*, p. 75. Qualls overlooks the fact that Lucy is not uttering these words but awaiting them, as

Christians that no matter how great the present peril, they should rely on Christ to intervene in time to ensure their deliverance. However, Brontë's watchers, whom her novel here places in the position of the pleading apostles, are not heeded until it is too late for many of those in danger, including Paul. Lucy draws our attention to the deferral of Christ's intervention, her emphasis falling repeatedly on the word significant word 'till': the storm, she says, 'did not cease till the Atlantic was strewn with wrecks … the voice was not uttered- not uttered till, when the hush came, some could not feel it: till, when the sun returned, his light was night to some!' [p. 495]. Christ, then, is imagined as finally interceding to still the storm in *Villette*'s closing pages, but he comes too late. The novel concludes with the image not of a redeemer who delivers, nor, of an absent one, but instead, of a saviour who comes too late to save. The double meaning of Lucy's phrase, 'when the sun returned, his light was night to some!', casts further doubt on the messiah's salvific capacity. It is significant, too, that while the near shipwreck recorded in Mark 4 was also recounted by Matthew (Matthew 8), Brontë alludes only to the version that explicitly asks if Jesus *cares* if his followers 'perish'. The Apostles' question implies that only an uncaring Jesus would fail to deliver them, which makes Brontë's use of the passage all the more unsettling of belief in the ultimate triumph of Christ over evil.

1.2 'The Pang of Waking': Evil as a Stimulus to Progress

Villette, then, is ultimately unable to invest in the concept of a personal God, capable of intervening in the natural order to redeem creation. This is not to say, however, that the novel is able to find no meaning in evil. As my introduction has shown, the scriptural

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is evident from her subsequent comment that the voice *is* uttered and that it does stop the storm, albeit when it's too late.

response to evil, while a prominent one in nineteenth-century culture, was challenged by thinkers who sought instead to find the good of evil in its beneficial effects on human beings in this world. It is likely that Brontë was familiar with the arguments advanced by one of those thinkers, George Combe, given her fascination with phrenology and the fact that her early work, *The Professor* (published posthumously in 1857), replicates the same phrenological sketches of famous historical personages presented by Combe in his *Constitution of Man*.[128] That Combe's work was an entry point into contemporary theological debates is evident from the fact that, as John Van Wyhe observes, 'receptions' of the *Constitution of Man* 'centred around the value or power attributed to God, scripture and the natural laws'.[129] In Combe's work, the scriptural supernatural account of evil is superseded by a naturalistic one, which he claimed did more honour to God. As the leading article in an 1840 issue of *Fraser's Magazine* noted, Combe's work was that of a deist, someone who believed in 'the existence of a Supreme Being, or the Great First Cause of all things, but who does *not* believe in any revelation whatever of his will unto mankind'.[130] Combe's view, this writer commented, therefore renounced 'the very principles of the New Testament'.[131] The attraction of the view of evil presented by Combe lay in the very fact that it did not rely on a supernatural revelation to justify evil; instead, it traced the ways in which evil enabled humankind's improvement and progress.

Given the consonance between such a theodicy and nineteenth-century ideals of progress, it is not surprising that even those who would have heartily disclaimed the deist label— those, like Brontë, who considered themselves attached members of the Established Church— found themselves resorting to Combean defences of evil. In 1816, for instance, the future Archbishop of Canterbury and Evangelical John Bird Sumner

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[128] As noted by Nicholas Dames in his ''The Withering of the Individual': Psychology in the Victorian Novel', in *A Concise Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. by Francis O'Gorman (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 91-112 (p. 98).
[129] Van Wyhe, 'Introduction', *Combe's "Constitution"*, p. xviii.
[130] Anon., 'Mr. George Combe and the Philosophy of Phrenology', *Fraser's Magazine* (November 1840), pp. 509-20 (p. 510). Original Emphasis.
[131] Ibid.

advanced such a defence in his widely read *Treatise on the Records of Creation and the Moral Attributes of the Creator* (1818). Sumner argues in this work that God's purpose for human beings is that '[they] might exercise [their] Faculties and Virtues' and 'exert and improve their powers'.[132] He then asks what is 'the situation the most favourable'[133] to this end, before coming to the conclusion that the condition of widespread suffering that happens to be the actual state of the world is the ideal condition for this.[134] Sumner's literal belief in the Bible meant, of course, that he must take into account the Old Testament view of suffering as being entailed on Adam and Eve's descendants as a result of their disobedience. He accommodates the Fall within God's 'general scheme', arguing that '[t]he infinite wisdom of God supposes an infallible prescience of all future events; and must have clearly seen that a being, liable to vice and temptation, would inevitably fall into it'.[135] If, as Sumner's general argument goes, God's ultimate purpose is for human beings to 'work out the powers, exercise the powers, and display the character of man'[136] and if suffering and struggle are the necessarys spurs of that process, the Fall could actually be seen as a good thing. Sumner's theodicy, then, took the staple ingredient of Augustianian theodicy and recast it as part of an Iraenian one, converting God from punisher to educator.

In Sumner's case, it is not difficult to find one reason that Augustian theodicy alone was no longer sufficient for him. His work was partly a response to his reading of Robert Malthus's *Principle of Population* (1789), with whose arguments he engages throughout. Sumner's remarks in one footnote suggest how disturbing he found Malthus's claims:

> [T]he vices and the natural evils to which mankind are liable, wear a tremendous appearance when collected into a small space to prove a particular point. That there was much poverty, much vice, much misery in the world, was

[132] John Bird Sumner, *A Treatise on the Records of Creation and on the Moral Attributes of the Creator; With Particular Reference to the Jewish History and to the Consistency of the Principle of Population with the Wisdom and Goodness of the Deity*, 2 vols (London: J. Hatchard, 1818), II, pp. v, 157.
[133] Ibid., p. 41.
[134] Ibid., pp.41, 46, 91.
[135] Ibid., p. 231.
[136] Ibid., p. 39.

> well known before [Malthus's work]; but it was lost in the more evident appearance of industry, plenty, and content.[137]

As G. M. Young notes, the first decades of the nineteenth century witnessed an explosion in stastistical accounts and governmental surveys of the suffering of poverty, of urban crowding, of starvation and disease.[138] It may be that the explanation of suffering as an entailed punishment for sin remained unquestioned before this because people had grossly underestimated, like Sumner, the extent and nature of that suffering. Once it was made 'evident' by works like *Principles of Population* that most people suffered severely most of the time, this was no longer morally acceptable.

My introduction has shown that this popular awareness of suffering had become particularly pronounced by mid-century as a result of the social, economic and natural disasters of the 1840s. It is no coincidence that it was during this decade too that the well-known crises of faith experienced by the likes of George Eliot, J. A. Froude and Francis Newman all came to head, given what we know of the important role played in their crises by their inability to accept that a good God would doom future generations of people to suffering because of a sin they themselves never actually committed.[139] Some of those seeking to defend Providence, therefore, including even some Evangelicals like Sumner, turned from the Bible to arguing that circumstances of suffering are actually required for the good of mankind. Dissatisfaction with Biblical Christian accounts of evil led to a reformulation of God's goodness as discernible not in any personal interactions with his creatures but in his having provided them with the conditions most favourable to their progress.

In its imagery of 'maimed and mourning millions' [p. 179], 'thousands [lying] round the pool, weeping and despairing' [Ibid.], 'a thousand weepers, praying in agony' [p. 495], *Villette* registers the awareness of mass suffering that was a particular phenomenon

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[137] Ibid., p. 121-23, n.4.
[138] G. M. Young, *Victorian England: Portrait of an Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936) pp. 48-9.
[139] See Murphy, 'The Ethical Revolt', pp. 800-17; Bartholomew, 'The Moral Critique', pp. 166-91.

of Brontë's time. There is too much suffering in the world, the novel seems to suggest; and no one is coming to save us. While, however, the text repudiates a personal God, Jesus Christ, for failing to effect the long promised deliverance of suffering humankind, it is able, like Sumner, to invest in another, naturalistic, solution to evil, one that attributes progress to the very dire circumstances that are forced upon Lucy. As Terry Eagleton has observed, the reader's sense that Lucy Snowe is subject to a 'harsh fate' is compromised by the high value placed on the 'worldly progress' that being 'forced into the wider world' achieves.[140] Undoubtedly, Charlotte Brontë's heart was as much set on the prospect of progress in this world as on the promise of the next. As Rick Rylance has noted, Brontë showed herself in her letters to be supremely concerned with 'getting on' in life.[141] Sally Shuttleworth likewise traced the influence on Brontë of the 'self-help culture'of the mid-nineteenth century.[142] Shuttleworth argues that for Victorian women like Brontë, denied the more tangible goals of self-improvement open to men, pain gained a positive value as a sign of the self-control necessary to progress.[143] In a similar manner, as I will show below, Lucy Snowe's plight in *Villette* takes on new meaning when one considers how the novel converts the force of necessity that presses upon the most deprived members of society, like Lucy, into a moblising force that operates for their own good.

Lucy is explicit about the extremity of her circumstances in the opening chapters, with her waking each day to find 'the necessity for exertion more urgent, the peril (of destitution) nearer, the conflict (for existence) more severe' [p. 58]. Reflecting on her poverty, unemployment and homelessness after the death of her employer Miss Marchmont, Lucy remarks 'I know not that I was of a self-reliant or active nature; but self-reliance and exertion were forced upon me by circumstances, as they are upon thousands

[140] Eagleton, *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontes* (London: Macmillan 1975), p. 64.
[141] Rick Rylance, 'Getting On': Ideology, Personality and the Brontë Characters', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, ed. by Heather Glen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 148-70 (p. 148).
[142] Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, p. 25.
[143] Ibid., pp. 23-4.

besides' [p. 36]. Heather Glen has noted Lucy's self-construction as a being wholly subject to circumstance and interprets this as evidence of the novel's pessimistic view of the limited control most people had over their lives in mid-Victorian England.[144] She reads the novel's discourse of circumstance as being opposed to a belief in Providence.[145] Lucy, however, often welcomes the force of necessity as the condition of her progress. Far from being of an active nature, she insists on her own 'indolence' and passivity: she is marked by 'moral paralysis and a total default of self-assertion' [p. 444]; '[l]eft alone, I was passive' [p. 410]. By belabouring Lucy's natural inertia, the novel is able to give a beneficial function to the deprived circumstances which force her to struggle onwards.

The course of Lucy's career is beset by crucial moments when only exacting necessity or painful urgency counter her tendency to stagnate and propel her forward. As a young girl in her Godmother's house, she is so attached to 'peace' and the uniformity of life in Bretton that she feels any 'excitement' or 'stimulus' to be a 'disturbance' [p. 6]. Having been cut off from the Brettons by 'impediments, raised by others,' and left alone by her family, she is forced to work for Miss Marchmont, where again she becomes 'narrowed to [her] lot', abiding 'tame and still' in the half-paralysed woman's rooms' [p. 37]. Lucy notes that she would have 'crawled on with [Miss Marchmont] for twenty years...But another decree was written. It seems I must be stimulated into action. I must be goaded, driven, stung, forced to energy' [p. 38]. Driven, then, by her employer's death into working as a lowly *bonne d'enfants* for Madame Beck's children, Lucy again lapses into stasis: 'Inadventurous, unstirred by impulses of practical ambition, I was capable of sitting twenty years teaching infants the hornbook, turning silk dresses and making children's frocks' [p. 77]. This time it is Madame Beck who intervenes, offering Lucy an opportunity to teach. Tempted at first to 'shr[i]nk into [her] sloth, like a snail into its shell' and to take refuge in 'incapacity and impractibility as a pretext to escape action', Lucy decides to take up the

[144] Glen, *The Imagination in History*, pp. 264-8.
[145] Ibid., pp. 264, 268.

position when Madame Beck shifts from persuading her to confronting her with a 'challenge' [p. 78]. The significance of this moment for Lucy's development is dramatized by her employer's question, 'Will you go backward or forward?' [p. 78].

That progress is always beset in the novel with the prospect of stasis may account for what some readers have seen as *Villette*'s uneasy relationship with progress and development. Beth Torgerson comments that Lucy's growth is 'not linear, nor is it immediate';[146] while Kate E. Brown notes that the plot 'is strangely both developmental and regressive'.[147] Lucy, however, is clearly happy in the midst of the ordeal of teaching to feel that she is 'getting on; not lying the stagnant prey of mould and rust, but polishing my faculties and whetting them to a keen edge with constant use' [p. 82]. Arriving in London, she had similarly reflected, '[w]ho but a coward would pass his whole life in hamlets, and for ever abandon his faculties to the eating rust of obscurity?' [p. 47]. Her imagery here recalls that of the century's most notable celebration of progress (as pitted against repose), Tennyson's 1842 *Ulysses*: 'How dull it is to pause, to make an end, / To rust unburnish'd/ not to shine in use!'.[148] Because the action and exertion necessary to advancement are always painful to Lucy,[149] pain becomes proportionally valuable as the condition of progress. This is implied by her description of the agonising difficulty she experiences mastering the work M. Paul sets her, once he realizes that she is, to quote Paul, 'as yet in a state of wretchedly imperfect mental development' [p. 351]. Reflecting on 'the sharp pain' her first efforts cause her, Lucy notes that '[a] depressing and difficult passage has prefaced every new page I have turned in life' [p. 351]. Her life, then, she considers in

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[146] Beth Torgerson, *Reading the Brontë Body: Disease, Desire and the Constraints of Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 62.
[147] John Hughes, 'The Affective World of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*', *Studies in English Literature 1500-1800*, 40.4 (2000), pp. 711-25 (p. 712); Kate. E. Brown, 'Catastrophe and the City: Charlotte Brontë as Urban Novelist', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 57. 3 (2002), pp. 350-80 (p. 355).
[148] Alfred Tennyson, 'Ulysses', *Tennyson's Poetry,* pp. 82-4 (p. 83).
[149] '[E]xertion of strength and use of action I always yield with pain,' she later notes [p. 387].

terms of a developing story, but one in which every advance requires her to grapple with difficulty.[150] Struggle, however, soon gives away to 'energy and fulfilment' [p. 351].

A number of critics have noticed the especial emphasis placed on Lucy's passivity. Carol Ohmann observes that '[i]t is difficult for her to act; again and again, she remarks that she is attracted to seclusion, to non-exertion'.[151] Penny Boulhelma describes Lucy as that 'heroine of the passive verb', and notes that Lucy 'tells us often that action and event are always forced upon her, rather than initiated by her'.[152] While they see the emphasis laid on her passivity as symptomatic of actual powerlessness, Terry Eagleton is more interested in what Brontë's heroine has to gain by insisting on her lack of agency, arguing that it allows her to disavow her own unsettling ambition.[153] It also serves, however, to justify the 'stringent' and deprived circumstances without which the narrator would not feel the 'necessity for exertion' [p. 57-8]. The conditions of Lucy's progress reflect a cultural narrative, prominent in Britain from the late eighteenth century onwards, which converted evil into a beneficial force, intended by God to secure mankind's improvement. Far from the discourse of circumstance being necessarily opposed to a belief in Providence, this narrative actually inscribed Providence into circumstance, especially painful circumstance. God's goodness was defended on the grounds that He had provided inert indolent human beings with the circumstances of struggle most suited to their development. Before we can appreciate *Villette*'s use of this response to evil, however, it is necessary to outline how it first emerged as well as the form it took in non-fictional works. Settled in at Miss Marchmont's, it is 'Providence', Lucy notes, which opposes her 'shrinking sloth and cowardly indolence' and provides her with galvanising pain [p. 38]. The premise that Providence is the champion and safeguard of progress is very much a post-Enlightenment one. It is not self-evident that Providence wills worldly advancement;

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[150] Brontë applied this pattern to herself in a letter to William Smith Williams on 31st July 1848: 'I have never that I remember, gained any important good without incurring proportionate suffering' (*Letters*, II, p. 95).
[151] Ohmann, Historical Reality', p. 771.
[152] Penny Boulhelma, *Charlotte Brontë* (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf 1990), p. 105.
[153] Terry Eagleton, *Myths of Power*, p. 62.

and in fact, for those bound to an eschatological supernatural view like many Evangelicals, their emphasis on the 'emptiness of all worldly good' suggested the opposite.[154] However, as David F. Roberts has observed, 'Whigs and Liberals adopted a different view of Providence, one that emphasized those immutable and self-regulating natural laws by which the all-wise and all powerful Creator governed the physical and social worlds'.[155] Proponents of progress like George Combe sought to prove that God was in fact on their side, usually arguing that the constancy of natural law, the same cause always producing same effect, meant that God intended human beings to improve by learning to avoid what led to pain and pursue what led to pleasure.[156] They argued that God's general laws acted in the best interests of human beings, promoting their progress via the monitorial sensations of pain and pleasure. As such, rather than viewing the human mind as a mysterious space beyond the reach of natural law, such accounts tended to consider human beings to be wholly motivated by sensation.[157] Without the mobilizing force of external stimuli, painful or pleasurable, they suggest, human beings are essentially inert. We can see that this narrative might favour a form of theodicy that justifies evil by arguing that man is advanced in his efforts to avoid it.

An early text that makes use of this form of theodicy is Lord Kames's *Sketches of the History of Man* (1774).[158] Kames seeks an account of the world that tallies with a benevolent God yet which also allows for an optimistic view of human nature and

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[154] Bickersteth, *The Chief Concerns of Man*, p. 13.
[155] Ibid., p. 138.
[156] See my introduction pp. 34-40.
[157] Charles Bray wrote in his *Philosophy of Necessity* (1841) that God's natural laws 'cannot be resisted by any supposed freedom of will' and this is the inevitable implication of seeing human being as being entirely motivated by pain or pleasure [p. 297]. Charles Lyell, the author of *Vestiges of The Natural History of Creation* (1844), complained about the tendency of those who admitted the importance of natural laws to still 'cut off particular provinces of nature as exceptions from the plan of constant order. Whatever part is dubious or obscure, to mankind generally or to themselves in particular, there they rear the torn standard of the arbitrary system of divine rule. Human volitions form such a region to many who know not that Quetelet has reduced these to mathematical formula and that one of own most popular divines has written a Bridgewater Treatise to show the predominance of natural law over mind, as proof of the existence and wisdom of God' cited by Bray [p. 255].
[158] Henry Home Kames, *Sketches of the History of Man*, 4 vols (Edinburgh: W. Creech, 1788).

capacity.[159] These twin priorities are both necessary because the fact of evil can be reconciled with the existence of a benevolent God in combination with depraved human beings, still being punished for their original sin. This latter view, however, the enlightened Kames cannot accept, being invested in a view of human beings as reasoning and improvable. His solution to this quandary is to assume the absolute power of circumstance over the human mind. He writes, for instance, that

> [t]he wants of those who inhabit the torrid zone are easily supplied: they need no clothing, scarce any habitation; and fruits which ripen there to perfection, give them food without labouring for it. Need we any other cause for their inferiority of understanding, compared with the inhabitants of other climates, where the mind, as well as body, are constantly at work for preparing necessaries?[160]

Where, as Kames notes, others might mistakenly 'arraign Providence' for failing to provide us with an unvarying Golden Age,[161] his point is that circumstances of ease and plenty actually disfavour human development.[162] Being subject to the sensations of cold and hunger has ensured the progress of those inhabitants of countries like Britain with a less pleasant climate and less abundant food supply than the Tropics.

The need to justify the pressing threat of hunger and cold that make up the necessity for exertion became more urgent once Malthus's *Essay* on population (1798) had shown that these made up the inevitable and constant experience of the majority of people.[163] Clearly aware of the worrying implications this might have for belief in Divine

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[159] Kames states explicitly his belief that 'human understanding is in a progress toward maturity, however slow' (II, p. 273) and that 'the peculiar excellence of man above all otherr animals, is the capacity he has of improving by education and example' (I, 324). His whole work is based on the assumption that mankind has improved over time in all areas.

[160] Kames, *Sketches*, II, p. 214.

[161] Ibid., p. 207.

[162] Ibid., pp. 217, 220-1.

[163] Because his text argued that human population would always outstrip food resources, Malthus indicated that the threat of starvation would always press on a significant portion of society. Population could only be kept in check by misery: the misery of famine or war or the misery of sexual abstinence. Malthus even postulated a golden age of plenty and equality, which he then shows would inevitably slide back into hunger and competition, because its ease and prosperity would be just such as would favour an increase in population (Robert Malthus, *Essay on Population,* pp. 14-5, 95, 181-91).

Providence, Malthus devoted the last two chapters of his first edition to reconciling his claims with a benevolent God. His endeavour to '"[v]indicate the ways of God to man"' was based on the argument that human beings are born entrapped in stagnant matter (this is their condition of 'original sin')[164] and it is only the 'stimulus' and 'excitement' provided by 'want' which animates them into a superior existence of mind and soul (which are allowed to stand for each other in his formulation).[165] If this is the cosmic version of Malthus's theodicy, he describes the same effects in operation on a local level: '[t]he first great awakeners of the mind seem to be the wants of the body. They are the first stimulants that rouse the brain of infant man into sentient activity'.[166] As this suggests, and as Malthus acknowledges, this argument depends on a specific 'theory of mind'. This is, that man 'as he really is' (that is, essentially, independent of outward sensation) is 'inert, sluggish, and averse from labour, unless compelled by necessity'.[167] His use of the peculiar construction 'infant man', allows his argument to apply both to the individual and to the human race more generally and reveals the influence on his thought of those development-of-civilization narratives favoured by the Enlightenment thinkers he encountered throughout his education in dissenting academies.[168] Although his self-identification as an 'advocate for the present order of things'[169] might seem to align him with stasis, Malthus clearly believes that what he understands to be the present order of things – the constant pressure of hunger and the competition for survival – is most conducive of progress:

> The savage would slumber forever under his tree unless he were roused from his torpor by the cravings of hunger or the pinchings of cold, and the exertions that he makes to avoid these evils, by procuring food, and building himself a covering, are the exercises which form and keep his motion his faculties, which otherwise would sink into listless inactivity. From all that experience has

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[164] Ibid., 354.
[165] Ibid., p. 353-4, 356-7.
[166] Ibid., p. 375.
[167] Ibid., p. 363.
[168] Donald Winch, *Riches and Poverty: An Intellectual History of Political Economy in Britain 1750-1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 254.
[169] Malthus, *Essay on Population*, p. 3.

> taught us concerning the structure of the human mind, if those stimulants to exertion, which arise from the wants of the body, were removed from the mass of mankind, we have much more reason to think that they would be sunk to the level of brutes, from a deficiency of excitements, than that they would be raised to the rank of philosophers by the possession of leisure[...]Necessity has been with great truth called the mother of invention...[I]t can scarcely be doubted that these stimulants could not be withdrawn from the mass of mankind without producing a general and fatal torpor, destructive of all the germs of future improvement.[170]

The evils of hunger and cold are in this formula converted into the motors and safeguards of civilisation and progress; while their absence is associated with an animalistic regression and death-like stasis. The Christian genesis story is reconfigured here, as Malthus welcomes the entrance of evil into the lassitude of paradise. Malthus emphasises the fact that every child is born in a state of 'torpor'[171] and as such there is a constant need for 'those roughnesses and inequalities in life which querulous man too frequently makes the subject of his complaint against God'.[172] His theodicy reprises Kames's technique of defending suffering indirectly through conjuring up the appalling alternative. To support his association of ease and the absence of want with cultural and psychological stasis ('the savage would slumber *forever* under his tree') he points out that the inhabitants of 'those countries where nature is most redundant in spontaneous produce' are as intellectually behind countries like England as spoiled English first sons are behind their more active because less privileged younger brothers.[173] The influence of Malthus's assumptions and imagery is evident in nineteenth-century defences of the goodness of God, such as John Bird Sumner's *Records of Creation* (1816) and Charles Bray's *The Philosophy of Necessity; or, The Law of Consequences; as Applicable to Mental, Moral, and Social* Science (1841). These are in some respects very different works, which shows the broad appeal of the evil-as-stimulus theodicy. I have already noted that Sumner was an Evangelical Christian, while Bray was a thorough religious radical, a necessitarian who

[170] Ibid., pp. 357-9.
[171] Malthus, *Essay on Population*, p. 354.
[172] Ibid., p. 356.
[173] Ibid., pp. 367, 370-1

eschewed Free Will and whose work insists that we dispense with speculating about a 'Supernatural Revelation' and instead focus on 'the numberless bounties that Providence has bestowed on us here'.[174] Bray's is the more consistent text. As an avowed Benthamite, concerned with 'the adaptation of means to ends',[175] it is no surprise that Bray's theodicy is focused on the visible beneficial *effects* of pain. As with Kames and Malthus, the main function he ascribes to pain is as a 'Motive and Stimulus to Action' (one of his chapter headings). 'A large part of that which is called "evil" in the world consists of nothing more than the wants, the desires, that furnish the motives to action, and without which we could not maintain our existence for a day'.[176] Again Bray's theodicy depends on the threat of stasis, which is the alternative to evil, 'wants' becoming the 'impelling forces which irresistibly set him [man in general] in motion'.[177] Again, too, he fortifies his argument by pointing to an alternative space of ease and plenty:

> It is found that in those countries, where, from advantages of climate or other causes, the necessaries of life are easily attainable, lodging and clothing of the slightest kind being sufficient, and simple vegetable food being produced without much labour, that the people advance but very slowly in civilization, and rise but little above the mere animal state.[178]

Natural advantage, then, becomes disadvantage when the goal is to 'advance' and 'rise'. Bray pits the threat of this 'animal state' against the distinguishing reasoning powers of humankind. 'Reason' was a key part of defences of suffering based on a natural law rather than an interventionist Biblical view of God. If Cholera, for instance, was taken to be a visitation of God, then that meant God could suspend natural law to punish or teach a lesson. In that case, however, people could never reason ahead, linking constant cause with constant effect, with the result that their reasoning faculties would exist in 'comparative

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[174] Bray, *The Philosophy of Necessity*, pp. 2, 38-9, 172, 277. See my introduction pp. 44-48.
[175] Ibid., p. 258.
[176] Ibid., p. 213.
[177] Ibid., p. 214.
[178] Ibid., p. 451.

stagnation'.[179] A benevolent God, however, would keep the physical world stable so that reason could come into effect and people could learn and progress in happiness.[180]

For Bray, then, suffering is a pedagogical tool that always has mankind's improvement as its ultimate aim. Because his Necessitarian worldview is incompatible with free will, which he openly eschews, he naturally rejects the notion of suffering as punishment for original sin.[181] Bray was clearly a religious free-thinker. However, even the Church of England clergyman Thomas Malthus had made little allowance for either free will or original sin in his work. As mentioned above, he rewrote 'original sin' as a condition of native sluggish matter from which it was a part of God's design to awaken mankind. This bypasses the question of mankind's collective responsibility. Similarly, Malthus's theodicy is openly indebted to John Locke's mechanistic account of human action, quoting the latter's opinion that 'the endeavour to avoid pain, rather than than the pursuit of pleasure, is the great stimulus to action in life'.[182] This too leaves little room for Free Will, as is made clear by Malthus's insistence that people are essentially 'inert' and in need of being mobilised by the press of circumstances.

While Malthus recognised that this was hardly theologically orthodox and removed his theodicy from future editions of the text, John Bird Sumner, writing two decades later, moved even further away from free will in a very well-received work which went into multiple editions. The second volume of his *Records of Creation* repeats and elaborates the theodicy I am considering, that the suffering of scarcity and struggle are necessary to stimulate human beings into bodily and mental activity. He argues that 'improvable reason' is mankind's distinguishing talent but it 'is bestowed upon man to no effectual purpose, as long as he continues in circumstances which do not bring it into exertion'.[183] As such, he says of the state of equality, in which there would be no struggle for survival,

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[179] Ibid., p. 222.
[180] Ibid., pp. 267-69, 298-9.
[181] Ibid., p. 485.
[182] Malthus, *Essay on Population*, p. 359.
[183] Sumner, *Records*, II, pp. 33-4.

that 'the nearer you approach towards it, the more stagnant and inactive is the human mind; the farther you recede from it, the energies are excited in proportion'.[184] Likewise: 'any ordinance which might establish universal plenty, would establish also universal indolence, and not only arrest civilization in its progress, but force it to retrograde, if it had once advanced'.[185] Sumner's text, as much as Malthus's, is haunted by the prospect of the human mind 'sink[ing] into languid indolence, as soon as it ceases to be stimulated by the immediate view of reward or the sensible pressure of necessity'.[186]

Evil was reinscribed in the above texts as a rousing force which prevented personal and cultural stasis. This theodicy, even when it was advanced by orthodox Christians like Sumner, sidelined the supernatural elements of the divine government and posited a mechanistic understanding of human nature, imagining human beings as liable to lapse into dormancy or stagnation in the absence of struggle. All of these elements are evident in *Villette.* I have already indicated that the novel implies that Lucy is essentially inert in order to show her need for the galvanic impetus of pain and necessity. Miriam Bailin describes her progress through the novel as 'scarcely voluntary'.[187] When Lucy says that, at Miss Marchmont's, all within her 'became narrowed to [her] lot', she takes a materialist view of her personality, holding it to be determined by outward circumstances. This attenuation of free will is accompanied in the novel by a rhetoric of dormancy and waking and a use of alternative spaces exempt from want that also have clear parallels with the texts considered above.

Although it may be tempting to assume that Lucy Snowe desires the easy and prosperous life from which she is excluded,[188] *Villette* actually reveals a general suspicion of ease. Madame Beck's *pensionnat* in Villette is in many ways idyllic. Lucy notes that, unlike in austere English schools, the pupils here are never pressed by work, have plenty of

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[184] Ibid., p. 51.
[185] Ibid., pp. 170-1
[186] Ibid., pp. 76.
[187] Bailin, *Sickroom in Victorian Fiction*, p. 49.
[188] See, for instance, Eagleton, *Myths of Power*, p. 71.

holidays and leisure hours and are provided with 'abundant and good' food [p. 73]. The 'serene' Madame Beck [p. 398], as well as her indolent pupils, she associates with a smooth manner and an existence 'without bustle, fatigue, fever, or any symptom of undue excitement' [p. 72]. Lucy, however, becomes frustrated with the pupils' refusal to take pains, noting with disdainful irony that they 'gain knowledge by a marvellously easy method, without painful exertion or useless waste of spirits; not, perhaps making rapid progress in anything' [p. 72]. The aura of ease among the directress and pupils is in direct contrast to the painful effort it costs Lucy to achieve anything [p. 351]. Where she struggles to articulate herself, often stammering over her words, which makes conversation a form of 'good discipline' for her [p. 229], the Belgian pupils bring out even the lies they tell in Confession 'with a careless ease' [p. 82]. Lucy contrasts an English pupil's willingness to 'bend herself to the task of comprehension and mastery' with these pupils' rejection of '[s]evere or continuous mental application' [p. 83]. The 'incapacity, ignorance, and sloth' of her pupils means she must 'smooth every difficulty' [p. 83]. It is under this regime that Ginevra Fanshawe, British-born but raised in foreign schools, has become 'indolent' and incapable of '[w]ork or suffering' [pp. 42, 87].

That Lucy prefers even intense discomfort to the comforts of the *pensionnat* is evident in the fact that she vehemently resists the offer of sedative made to her by Madame Beck when she is in anguish after M. Paul's unexplained disappearance. She turns on Madame Beck, staking a claim to her own suffering: 'Make your own bed warm and soft; take sedatives and meats and drinks spiced and sweet, as much as you will…Leave me, however' [p. 447]. Even after she is drugged the next evening against her will, such is Lucy's overwrought nervous condition that the effect of the 'opiate' has an effect the opposite of what Madame Beck intends, and '[i]nstead of stupor, came excitement' [p. 449]. Lucy's description here of the rousing effects of the drug similarly evince a contempt

for sedation, with 'Imagination' scornfully exhorting 'Matter, her mate' to 'Rise! Sluggard!' [p. 450].

This contest between dormancy and waking is part of a general pattern in the novel. Figurative and literal images of sleep are recurrent. The *pensionnat* is frequently represented by its 'Great Dormitory,' where Lucy is often the only one who cannot sleep [pp. 449, 152]. Both Mrs Bretton and Graham fall asleep on this sofa during the day and it is suggested that this is possibly compromising. Lucy describes Mrs Bretton as 'actually lost in a nap'. When she wakes up she is 'astonished and indignant at herself for the indulgence to which she succumbed, and fully prepared to deny that she had slept at all' [p. 186]. Later, Mrs Bretton gloats in a letter to Lucy that her son has also succumbed to the comforts of the sofa: 'To my great delight, he dropped asleep (You know how he teases me about being drowsy; I, who never, by any chance, close an eye by daylight)' [pp. 272-3]. Lucy often describes parts of her self as being in states of 'trance' and 'catalepsy' [p. 109], coma [p. 110] and hibernation [p. 266]. Theodicies that accorded to pain the power of stimulus were also heavily invested in images of dormancy in need of being awakened by the force of exigency. The savage would *slumber* forever beneath his tree without the stimulus of suffering, Malthus had written, and to remove that stimulus would again plunge mankind into a 'fatal *torpor*'. Instead, a state of suffering is 'necessary to *awaken* inert, chaotic matter into spirit'.[189] In a state of perfection, Lord Kames and John Bird Sumner both argued, our mental faculties would forever lie '*dormant*'. [190] This figuring of the absence of evil as a state of sleep was taken up by Alfred Tennyson in his poem *The Lotos-Eaters* (1832). Weary of a life of strife, for which they can find no meaning, the mariners of the poem take refuge in the oblivion of the lotos-leaf, opting to spend their days in the 'land where all things always seemed the same!'.[191] The mariners ask'why' they, the first of God's creation, should ordinarily suffer so much, a question which the

[189] Malthus, *Essay on Population*, pp. 253, 359. My emphasis.
[190] Kames, *Sketches*, II, p. 214; *A Treatise on the Records of the Creation*, II, pp. 30, 168. My emphasis.
[191] Alfred Tennyson, 'The Lotos-Eaters', *Tennyson's Poetry*, pp. 76-80 (p. 77).

poem never directly answers.[192] Indirectly, however, it gives suffering a value by implying that the life of stasis and deadened senses chosen by the mariners (they have 'had enough of action and of motion', they say)[193] is tantamount to death: 'Give us long rest or death, dark death or dreamful ease!'.[194]

Like the Lotos-land, the 'peaceful' Bretton household where Lucy stays as a child is a space exempt from toil, a place where, Lucy notes, 'Sundays and holidays always seemed to abide' [p. 5]. It is a place, too, of stasis, lacking 'the charm of variety' and the 'excitement of incident' [p. 6]. Time flows 'smoothly' there 'not with tumultuous swiftness, but blandly, like the gliding of a full river through a plain' [p. 6]. This latter simile draws on the fact that for a river to achieve momentum, there must be a restricted channel and unequal terrain, implying that smoothness and expanse disables progress. When she finds herself again in the Bretton household ten years later, Lucy is immediately deprived of her 'power to move' by the sedative drug administered by their nurse [p. 168]. Where she is later able to resist Madame Beck's attempts to sedate her, this time she falls asleep,[195] her loss of sensation figured in the familiar imagery of gently lapping water 'carressing my brain.' Even the next day, once the drug has worn off, the house has a lulling effect on Lucy:

> the silent descent of afternoon hushed housemaid steps on the stairs and in the chambers...I then passed into a dreamy mood, not unpleasant. My calm little room seemed somehow like a cave in the sea...When I closed my eyes, I heard a gale, subsiding at last, bearing upon the house-front like a settling swell upon a rock-base. I heard it drawn and withdrawn far, far off like a tide retiring from a shore of the upper world - a world so high above that the rush of its largest

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[192] The mariners ask, 'why are we weigh'd upon with heaviness
And utterly consumed with sharp distress
While all things else have rest from weariness?
All things have rest: why should we toil alone,
We only toil, who are the first of things,
And make perpetual moan,
Still from one sorrow to another thrown ('Lotos-Easters', ibid., p. 57).

[193] Ibid., p. 57.

[194] Ibid., p. 58.

[195] She actually uses the strange phrase, 'I fell on sleep', from the Bible (Acts 13:36), where it is used as a euphemism for death.

> waves, the dash of its fiercest breakers, could sound down in this submarine home, only like murmurs and a lullaby. [p. 181]

The imagery in this passage recalls Tennyson's poem, which says that whoever tastes the lotos-leaf, 'to him the gushing of the wave/ Far far away did seem to mourn and rave/ On alien shores'.[196] Lucy's reverie of retreating to a watery cave with its lullaby sounds suggests a fantasy of regression much in keeping with the general threat to progress posed by the Bretton home. Chapter XVI, which records Lucy's reinstallation in the Bretton home, is fittingly called 'Auld Lang Syne'. The house resurges in Villette with everything in it like 'Ten years ago.' As a result, Lucy asks herself, 'Where was I? Not only in what spot of the world, but in what year of our Lord?' [p. 167]. There is even the suggestion of Paulina and John Bretton reverting to childhood within its confines. Mr Homes's 'daughterling', Mrs Bretton observes, 'cannot be more the child than this great boy of mine' [p. 280].

It is in the company of John Bretton that Lucy sees both the painting of 'Cleopatra' and the actress she calls 'Vashti'. These very different types of women pit passive indolence against active suffering. Lucy describes the pictured Cleopatra with disdain:

> She lay half-reclined on a couch: why, it would be difficult to say; broad daylight blazed...[S]he ought to have been standing, or at least sitting bold upright. She had no business to lounge away the noon on a sofa. [p. 200]

This depiction of the 'indolent gypsy-giantess' [p. 202] clearly draws upon stereotypes of Eastern sloth.[197] However, Lucy's strong response may reflect her anxiety that she is not essentially any different from 'Cleopatra' in her tendency toward stasis. Two chapters

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[196] Tennyson, 'The Lotos-Eaters', p. 57. It is highly likely that Brontë was familiar with the poem, given her documented familiarity with others of Tennyson's works. She send him a copy of her and her sisters' *Poems* in 1848, acknowledging 'the pleasure and profit we have often and long derived from' his works (noted by Margaret Smith in *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, II, p. 782, n. 676).

[197] Lord Kames uses Egypt as one of his examples of countries whose favourable weather and abundant food supplies have made the inhabitants 'soft and effeminate, and consequently an easy prey to every invader' (*Sketches*, II, p. 500).

conflated. The 'crétin' had no actual counterpart in Brontë's experiences in Brussels, on which she often based her narrative. Her wording suggests she drew instead upon contemporary sources on crétins. An article in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1803 and the *Encylopedia Britannica* of 1854 both draw upon and extensively reproduce the same source on crétinism, Philippe Pinel's *Traité Médico-Philosophique sur l'Aliénation Mentale; ou la Manie* (1801). According to their extracts of this work, the crétin possesses a 'dull, sleepy look', with 'limited locomotion', liking to 'bask by the fireside or in the rays of the sun'.[204] The article attributed the crétin's lack of intellectual development to a deficient nervous system, which limited the crétin's 'sensibility' to external stimulus. They are deaf and dumb, and have dulled senses of taste and touch.[205] They can be identified as infants because they 'evince insensibility to atmospheric impressions'.[206] Lacking the senses through which outward circumstances act upon a person, the crétin allows a vision of human nature free from the press of circumstances.

This insensitivity to atmospheric pressure is far removed from Lucy's subjection to every change in the weather, it influencing her mood and energy levels [pp. 109, 359]. If Lucy's is, like the crétin's, an affliction of the nervous system— as Dr. Bretton believes [p. 183] — it has its origins in a hypersensitive constitution, which registers all 'impressions' [p. 162]. Although this makes her suffer, Lucy is scornful of those less sensitive. John Bretton, for instance, she describes as '*unimpressible*', which makes him 'callous' towards and therefore incapable of truly appreciating a passionate nature like that of Vashti (and, it is strongly implied, Lucy) [pp. 259-60. Original emphasis]. This means that he is cut off from half of life— 'whatever belonged to storm, what was wild and intense, dangerous, sudden and flaming' [p. 259]. The crétin is only an extreme version of the insensibility evinced by the other characters in the novel. Madame Beck is described as 'insensate' [p.

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[204] Anon., 'Traité Médico-Philosophique sur l'Aliénation Mentale, ou la Manie', *The Edinburgh Review* (April 1803), pp. 160-172 (p. 170); 'Crétins', *The Encyclopaedia Britannica, or Dictionary of Arts, Sciences, and General Literature*, 21 vols (Edinburgh: Adam & Charles Black, 1854), VII, p. 496.
[205] 'Traité Médico-Philosophique', *Edinburgh Review*, p. 170.
[206] Ibid.

74] in possession of no 'heart' [p. 95] and perfectly calm even when her child is injured [p. 95]. Belgian women in general are unfeeling, characterised by an 'expressionless calm' and 'passionless peace' [p. 210]. Lucy's use of the term 'phlegm' [pp. 82, 442] when describing her pupils gives an organic explanation for this insensibility, 'phlegmatic' denoting a type of organism difficult to incite into feeling.[207] It is likely that Brontë was familiar with Robert Macnish's *The Philosophy of Sleep* (1834),[208] in which the author associates the phlegmatic temperament with excessive sleepiness. The person who falls asleep easily, as Lucy's pupils do,[209] is usually:

> void of fire, energy, and passion. He is of a phlegmatic temperament, generally a great eater, and very destitute of imagination. Such are the general characteristics of those who are predisposed to drowsiness: the cases where such a state coexists with intellectual energy are few in number.[210]

Sleeplessness being caused by anything that 'stimulates the external senses, however slightly',[211] the sleepiness of the phlegmatic temperament is only a continuation of the generally dulled state of their senses. By suggesting that the sleepy phlegmatic temperament and 'intellectual energy' may be incompatible, Macnish clearly subscribes to the view that makes the development of the mind conditional on susceptibility to external impressions.[212] Lucy, too, links Belgian sluggishness to intellectual and cultural backwardness. 'Lebassecoeur,' the name Brontë gives to the region in which Villette is located, is a French colloquialism for 'the farmyard'; the port her ship docks in is called

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[207] See a letter Charlotte Brontë wrote to her brother Patrick Branwell Brontë on 1st May 1843 about her own experience in a Belgian school: '[I]f I spoke warmly, as warmly as I sometimes used to do at Roe-Head, they would think me mad—nobody ever gets into a passion here—such a thing is not known—the phlegm that thickens their blood is too gluey to boil[…].The black Swan Mr Heger is the sole exception to this rule' (*Letters*, II, p. 316).

[208] Robert Macnish, *The Philosophy of Sleep* (Glasgow: W.R. M'Phun, 1845). It was, according to Sally Shuttleworth, owned by the Brontë family (*Victorian Psychology*, pp. 28, 240).

[209] For instance:'The household came to bed…Sleep soon reigned: over those pillows, sleep won an easy supremacy; contented sovereign over heads and hearts which did not ache—he passed by the unquiet' [p. 449].

[210] Macnish, *The Philosophy of Sleep*, p. 238.

[211] Ibid., p. 225.

[212] Charles Bray had also made the nervous system the site of inetellectual and more general progression (*Philosophy of Necessity,* pp. 17-8).

Boue-Marine, or 'watery-mud'. Her first impression of Belgium is also telling: '[s]omewhat bare, flat, and treeless was the route along which our journey lay; and slimy canals *crept,* like *half-torpid* green snakes, beside the road' [p. 60]. Lucy's pupils are largely unintelligent. She describes two of the ones she most despises as 'pupils, who, during their last year at school, ought to have been in the first class, but whose brains had never got them beyond the second division' [p. 215]. It is telling that those who do begin to make progress under her instruction must first be made to feel, painfully: 'If I could but once make their (usually large) ears burn under their thick, glossy hair, all was comparatively well' [p. 84].

Lucy's comment that her pupils must experience the '*quickening* of honest shame' [p. 84. My emphasis] before they can advance suggests the extent to which *Villette* collapses the distinction between insensibility and death.[213] Even at her most hopeless, after John Bretton turns his attention from her to Paulina, she remarks, 'Life is still life, whatever its pangs: our eyes and ears and their use remain to us, though the prospect of what pleases be wholly withdrawn' [p. 271]. According to this construction, the crétin and the other insensate inhabitants of the *pensionnat* are to different degrees dead. But Lucy also fears the possibility of this living death for herself. Left for seven weeks without any contact from the outside world, she imagines herself entering into a state of hibernation like a 'dormouse' [p. 266]. This 'torpor,' as hibernation was often described at the time, was understood to be a condition between life and death in which the senses were suspended.[214] Lucy prefers the pain of outward necessity to the absence of stimulus she associates with such deathly stasis and senselessness. Images of peace in the novel usually contain an undertone of death. Lucy comes to be repulsed by the 'mortal serenity' [p. 452]

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[213] In a similar vein, Lucy says that Madame Beck's unfeeling nature makes her 'impotent and dead' in her heart and of Ginevra's insensibility to Bretton that she comments she could not imagine such 'deadness' [pp. 74,159].

[214] 'In the case of animals termed hibernating, sensation becomes suspended, the fluids of the body circulate more slowly, and respiration and all the vital actions become less active. The torpor of the creature is like death rather than sleep…', (David Low, *On the Domesticated Animals of the British Isles* (London: Longman 1845), p. xx).

of the *pensionnat* and begins to see the roof of the dormitory as a 'tomb' and the beds as being each ornamented with a 'death's head' [p. 160]. Consider her earlier ironic portrait of the tranquil lives imagined to be the lot of women:

> I will permit the reader to picture me, for the next eight years, as a bark slumbering through halcyon weather, in a harbour still as glass – the steersman stretched on the little deck, his face up to heaven, his eyes closed: buried, if you will, in a long prayer. [p. 35]

If Lucy is the bark in this image, then the steersman is presumably her mind. Bodily ease and a stationary existence are imagined to lull the mind to a sleep that is also a form of death ('buried'). This accords with the general argument made by defences of painful circumstances that if the body was allowed to sleep, the mind would too. Because writers who made such claims posited the tendency of the faculties to 'rust' without constant exercise, stasis for them means a form of living death, torpor or what George Combe described as an 'existence reduced to mere vegetation, without consciousness'.[215] The activity of the mind being dependent on bodily want, pain is actually implied to be the optimum state for human beings. Brontë herself was clearly influenced by the idea that a life of ease would lead to the death of her faculties. Her letters show that she feared the effect on her mind of her 'easiful, stagnant, silent life',[216] first left to do as she wished in Brussells and then shut up in the parsonage. She wrote to M. Heger that she 'fear[ed] nothing so much as idleness-lack of employment-lethargy of the faculties'.[217]

It is from the possibility of such lethargy that Lucy Snowe, who holds the 'quick' of her being in a 'dead trance' [p. 107] relies on painful stimulus to preserve her. This is how she explains her attraction to storms. Although she partly dreads storms as she dreads 'whatever [can] excite, 'she nonetheless crawls onto the *pensionnat* roof into the midst of one because she is attracted to its enlivening force [p. 107]. While the other teachers and

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[215] Combe, *Constitution of Man*, p. 77.
[216] *Letter from Charlotte Brontë to Patrick Branwell Brontë, 1st May 1843*, *Letters* (1995), I, p. 316.
[217] *Letter Charlotte Brontë to Constantin Heger, 21st July 1844*, *Letters* (1995), I, p. 357.

pupils are inside praying for it to end, by it Lucy is 'roughly roused and obliged to live'. That 'roughly' suggests her association of storm with pain, as indeed her use of storm imagery at the beginning of Chapter IV to describe her early bereavements makes plain [p. 35]. This storm is described as breaking in on the state of slumberous calm described in my previous paragraph. Given Lucy's suggestion that this tranquility would be a form of living death, her suffering must be seen as in some way reviving. To be brought to life is painful but then the reverse also obtains: pain brings to life.

In my first section, I indicated that the novel rejects the Biblical conception of storm and shipwreck, used to signify affliction in general, as something that must be patiently undergone in the hope of one day being delivered from it. That Lucy claims to finds an enlivening influence in storm, and by implication in pain more generally, reflects the general transition in her narrative from a theodicy based on the Christian promise of a future reprieve from pain to one which ascribes to pain itself a beneficial function. This valuation of pain gives us a clue to Lucy's attraction to M. Paul, who is frequently associated with the force of 'storm' [p. 128] or 'hurricane' [p. 154], breaking in on Lucy and the pupils 'like a clap of thunder' [p. 238]. In the oppressive quiet of the *pensionat*, Paul is at first known to Lucy as something she can hear, as he rages at the pupils [p. 129]. He wakes Lucy the first time he meets her. Just as the soporific influences around her, she says, were beginning to 'lure [me] along the track of reverie, down into some deep dell of dream-land — just then the sharpest ring...snatched me back to consciousness' [p. 132]. Lucy seems to emphasise Paul's opposition to the serenity represented by Madame Beck in one scene towards the end of the novel where he is depicted as interrupting 'the peace of the first classe—safely established, as it seemed, under the serene sway of Madame Beck ... this peace, I say, suffered a sudden fracture by the wild inburst of a *paletôt*. Nobody was at that moment quieter than myself. Eased of responsibility by Madame Beck's presence,

soothed by her uniform tones ...', Lucy is suddenly seized by M. Paul and 'borne' away' [p. 398].

Here, when Paul carries Lucy off to prove herself to his colleagues, and when they first meet, he is given the same mobilising force as 'Vashti'. He is 'a whirlwind' [p. 135], carrying her on their first meeting through the rooms of the *pensionnat* to the attic. Paul's rousing property can be contrasted with the suspect John Bretton, who is described as having a voice 'calculated rather to soothe than startle slumber' [p. 182]. This opposition between a sharp, rousing voice and a soft soporific one is later presented in tableau when Lucy is reluctantly caught between her two very different love interests. Dr Bretton is trying to persuade her to act as a mediator between him and Paulina 'when, following his soft, eager murmur, meeting almost his pleading, mellow— "Do content me, Lucy!' a sharp hiss pierced my ear on the other side' [p. 318]. Where Dr John approaches Lucy's ear 'coaxingly', Paul represents pure exigency, the irresistible nature of 'must', a word he repeats several times in his first exchange with her when she notes that the response he can least tolerate is the 'unyielding' [p. 133]. He is 'an impetus' [p. 378] to those around him, goading and stimulating where the Brettons soothe. Paul is represented as even hostile to sleep in Lucy's figurative description of his method of 'fostering' talent:

> And when at last he allowed a rest, before slumber might close the eyelids, he opened those same lids wide, with pitiless finger and thumb, and gazed deep through the pupil and the iris into the brain, into the heart...If, at last, he let the neophyte sleep, it was but a moment; he woke him suddenly up to apply new tests [p. 350].

Lucy refers to these tactics as 'evils' [p. 350] and recognises, even lays especial emphasis on, the 'danger and discomfort that he flashed to all round him' [p. 348] yet she thrives under his influence. His 'injustice', she comments, 'stirred in me ambitious wishes—it imparted a strong stimulus—it gave wings to aspiration' [p. 351]. It is through Paul, then, whom Eagleton has described as the 'focal point for tensions in the novel', that *Villette*'s

vindication of painful circumstances is completed.[218] As McLaren Caldwell notes, in Paul the 'apparent arbitrariness of fate' is literalized.[219] Paul's 'rule' over Lucy, however, is only apparently arbitrary [p. 350]; Lucy reveals it to be in fact highly systematic. Like the God who provides adverse circumstances only to facilitate human development, it is part of Paul's method to strew 'thorns' 'briars' and 'flints' in the path of those 'pain-pressed pilgrim[s]' he is trying to educate [p. 350]. Carol Ohmann observes that 'encounters with him throughout the novel ironically seem to reinforce Lucy's original predicament of deprivation'.[220] Paul, however, embodies this predicament in its most attractive form, as providing a needful though painful stimulus to growth.

Described by Lucy as an 'amateur gardener' [p. 411], Paul likes to violently 'prune' not only the plants he is often pictured amongst but also his students and books, which latter Lucy notes are usually the better for the process [p. 328]. He thus evokes the husbandman God described in John 15: '[e]very branch in me that beareth not fruit he taketh away: and every branch that beareth fruit, he purgeth it, that it may bring forth more fruit'.[221] It is not, then, that the pain-as-stimulus narrative associated with Paul in the novel is a non-theistic theodicy, any more than it was in the hands of Robert Malthus or John Bird Sumner. Rather, it capitalises on a different version of God's relationship to human suffering than that premised in the eschatological theodicy the novel rejects. Instead of a focus on God as a deliverer who will one day effect a 'wondrous reprieve' [p. 496] from evil, the characterisation of Paul epitomizes the concept of a God who inflicts suffering on human beings for their own benefit, so that they will be more fruitful. In this way, *Villette* participates in the contemporary dispute between a form of theodicy based on the supernaturalist conception of an interventionist God and one that defended God's goodness on the grounds of his constitution of the human mind and the conditions external to it in a

[218] Eagleton, *Myths of Power*, p. 66.
[219] McLaren Caldwell, *Literature and Medicine*, p. 113.
[220] Ohmann, 'Historical Reality', p. 771.
[221] John 15.2.

way most conducive to human progress.

Like many post-enlightenment texts, *Villette* seeks a theodicy that will give current meaning to immediate evil. This is partly achieved by formulating a theodicy that vindicates God's benevolence by suggesting that the painful circumstances that make up Lucy Snowe's apportioned lot (which is, she observes, the lot of most people, [p. 361]) are actually for her own good. The evil, however, remains an evil, albeit an instrumental one. The lamentful tone of the novel, however, differs from contemporary triumphalist narratives about the supersession of a supernaturalist by a naturalist religious paradigm. The narrator grieves for the loss of her belief in 'the rapture of rescue' by a divine deliverer whom it is now possible for only 'sunny imaginations' to await. Her closing image of the messiah who comes too late to save the sea-tossed and mourning can be read as an elegy for the evaporated fantasy of God's saving grace. One can assume that this mournful outlook was not ameliorated by Brontë's reading of Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, with its opening imagery of a world in decay, while she was still writing *Villette*.[222] In Dickens's novel, however, she would have encountered a very different approach to the problem of evil. Far from grieving the loss of the supernaturalist, scriptural framework for understanding evil, *Bleak House* implied that its demise could not come soon enough.

[222] See *Letter from Charlotte Brontë* to George Smith, 11th March 1852 in *Letters* (2000), II, p. 200.

CHAPTER TWO

'Letting Bad Things Alone': Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, the Cholera Epidemic and *Laissez-Faire* Theodicy

Giving his wards Richard and Ada his blessing upon their engagement, *Bleak House*'s Mr Jarndyce advises Richard to '[t]rust in nothing but Providence and your own efforts. Never separate the two, like the heathen waggoner'.[1] This is a reference to an Aesop's fable which featured a wagoner whose wagon had become 'stuck fast' in a 'deep miry lane':[2]

> Upon this he fell a bawling and praying to Hercules to come and help him. Hercules, looking down from a cloud, bid him not lie there, like an idle rascal as he was, but get up and whip his horses stoutly and clap his shoulder to the wheel, adding that this was the only way for him to obtain his assistance.

The wagoner in this passage wishes to defer to a supernatural interventionist God rather than taking action himself to overcome the evil. Hercules, however, a model for the God who helps those who help themselves, bids him take responsibility for his own plight. Richard Carstone obviously fails to apply the parable to his own situation, ultimately resting all his hopes, like the wagoner, in a remote "Cause" independent of his own agency. On a broader note, Jarndyce's allusion to Aesop's fable serves to summarise succinctly *Bleak House*'s extended diagnosis of a country which has itself become stuck, floundering in the mire of social and natural disorder. The fable indicts a mistaken response to the problem of evil, one that prostrates itself before evil, awaiting and imploring divine assistance. For Dickens, it offered an analogy for the relationship between human agency and theological conceptions of evil, an analogy which his novel suggests was a peculiarly apt one for mid-nineteenth-century English society.

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[1] Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 196. For the remainder of this chapter, further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

[2] Aesop, 'Hercules and the Carter', in *Aesop's Fables: For the Instruction and Improvement of Youth*, 2 vols (London: J. Clements, 1834), I, pp. 131-3 (p. 131).

Certainly, Charles Dickens's writing has never been credited with that familiarity with theological dispute evident in the novels of writers like Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot. Gary Colledge, for example, notes the author's 'disinterest in theological doctrine', observing that for 'Dickens, the issues and dogma of the Church were quite subordinate to the practical ramifications of Christianity in the moral and social realms'.[3] Nevertheless, Colledge also implies that the author was not necessarily ignorant of what was exercising the religious thinkers of his time, given the fact that his library at Gadshill was stocked with works like the *Bridgewater Treatises* (1830s) Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830-3) and *Essays and Reviews* (1860).[4] Dennis Walder, too, offers a qualified view of Dickens's relation to contemporary theological debate, pointing to the author's position at the centre of a circle of prominent unorthodox and Unitarian Christians, such as Thomas Carlyle and Leigh Hunt.[5] Walder sees Dickens, however, as being more interested in popular concerns about religion than in theological subtleties.[6] 'Dickens' religion is always oriented towards society and social action', he argues.[7]

Such prioritization of the social implications of theological claims did not, however, mean that Dickens was debarred from contributing to the problem of evil question. On the contrary, my introduction has shown how contemporaries like F. D. Maurice and George Combe brought similar social imperatives to their own interventions in the problem of evil. Maurice sought a solution that would quell the discontent of the masses; while Combe favoured one which would license human progress and reform. Likewise, Dickens's interventions in the problem of evil were made on grounds both demotic and reformist. His preoccupation with 'the helpless victims of untoward

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[3] Gary Colledge, *Dickens, Christianity and the Life of Our Lord: Humble Veneration, Profound Conviction* (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 137,141.
[4] Ibid., p. 17.
[5] Dennis Walder, *Dickens and Religion* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), p. 2.
[6] Ibid., p. 3
[7] Ibid., p. 141.

circumstances, or a vicious system' was accompanied, I will show, by an interest in the ways in which their plight was legitimated by contemporary discourses.[8]

Dickens possessed a keen sense of the way in which the privileged rhetoric of religion could be used to justify the man-made evils afflicting the British people. An 1855 article he wrote for *Household Words* objected to the refusal of those in power to take responsibility for the ruin they had brought on the country, 'with an audacious piety address[ing the people] thus: "Lo, ye miserable sinners! the hand of Providence is heavy on you! Attire yourselves in sackcloth, throw ashes on your heads, fast, and hear us condescend to make discourses to you on the wrong you have done!"'. [9] He proceeds to offer his own 'parable' for this political evasion. He imagines a 'fine gentleman' who takes a poor man under his charge, causes him all manner of suffering and then attributes that suffering to Providence. The gentleman, for instance, makes the poor man wear a pair of tight boots and when they begin to cripple him, tells him that it's a 'Rebuke'.[10] He handcuffs the poor man so he cannot reach the fruit growing by the wayside and when the man begins to starve, repeats that it's a 'Rebuke'. He sends away the key to the house in which the poor man's brother is locked and the brother is consequently unable to escape a fire which breaks out. At this, the gentleman explains to a fellow member of the ruling class that here 'was a hardened creature with whom Providence was very much incensed; in proof of which, here he was, rebuked, crippled, handcuffed, starved, with his brother burnt to death in a locked-up house'. 'Are *you* Providence?' the poor man finally asks. This story shows Dickens's indignation at the way those responsible for the crises afflicting Britain at mid-century disavowed responsibility and instead took refuge in the idea that God was punishing the people. In like manner, *The Westminster Review* had in 1849 condemned 'British statesmen' for refusing to accept the role of their own negligence in causing cholera and deaths from starvation; the article accuses such politicians of

[8] Anon., 'Sketches by Boz', *Edinburgh Review* (October 1838), pp. 75-97 (p. 77).
[9] Charles Dickens, 'Fast and Loose', *Household Words* (24 March 1855), pp. 169-70 (p. 169).
[10] Ibid., p. 170.

'attempt[ing] to set up what they ought to hold most perfect and most holy [Providence], as a screen for their own ignorance'.[11] Dickens's story likewise attributes evil to human misgovernment and exposes the rhetoric of sin and divine retribution as a hypocritical diversionary tactic.

One of Dickens's nineteenth-century critics, Walter Bagehot, likewise placed the author's treatment of evil in the context of his opposition to political and social 'abuses'.[12] According to Bagehot, men like Dickens reacted against the 'unfeeling obtuseness of the early part of this century' with an 'extreme, perhaps an excessive, sensibility to human suffering', taking on the task of 'ameliorating harsh customs and repealing dreadful penalties'.[13] The chief component of Dickens's work, in Bagehot's view, is the attention it draws to various 'evils'. While he welcomed the spotlight shone on abuses in the author's early novels, however, he charged Dickens with having, in his later works, failed to distinguish between 'the natural evils and inevitable pains of the present state of being' and really remediable evils. When he specifies that by such inevitable evils, he means the 'necessary constitution of society', Bagehot can be seen to perform the very act Dickens's 1855 *Household Words* article objected to, that of disclaiming human responsibility for man-made evils.

Bagehot's perception that Dickens's treatment of evil was shaped by his reformist impulses has been taken up by a more recent critic, Daniel Born, who argues in his 1995 study, *The Birth of Liberal Guilt in the English Novel: Charles Dickens to H.G. Wells*, that Dickens's later novels, from *Dombey and Son* (1846-48) onwards, conceive of evil in 'a new way: not in terms of moralistic Victorian theology, wherein evil could be readily identified with the sinning individual, but rather in terms of the social organism'.[14] Born regards this as part of a broader cultural shift towards understanding evil in systematic and

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[11] Anon., 'The State of the Nation', *Westminster Review* (October 1849), pp. 81-111 (p. 94).
[12] Walter Bagehot, 'Charles Dickens', *Literary Studies by the Late Walter Bagehot*, ed. by Richard Holt Hutton, 2 vols (London: Longmans & Green, 1879), II, p. 213.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Daniel Born, *The Birth of Liberal Guilt* (North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), p. 5.

secular rather than theological terms.[15] This reconfiguration of evil, he writes, was part of the Liberal endeavour to clear away the 'metaphysical baggage impeding the task' of political and social reform.[16] For such Liberals, only expunging God's will from the world would grant human beings the ethical agency to improve it.[17] Bagehot and Born align, then, in holding Dickens's work to be a focal point for the changing conception of evil taking place in early to mid-Victorian culture. Their analyses agree, moreover, in perceiving this tendency to be most apparent in Dickens's later novels.

A number of other critics have noted a shift in Dickens's treatment of evil in his later works. According to Dennis Walder, the difference is that these later works evince a 'new sense of social evil'.[18] Humphrey House observes that while in the early novels, evil is embodied in individual villains, '[i]n the later novels, a stronger impersonal evil, created by society, works by their side'.[19] Likewise, Sally Ledger discerns a development from the melodramatic conception of individual evil in Dickens's earlier works to the type of depersonalized evil exemplified by *Bleak House*'s Chancery.[20] As Ledger's citation of *Bleak House* indicates, the question of whether evil was individual or systematic was largely provoked by the seeming complexity of modern industrialised and urbanised conditions. Chroniclers of this new society, like Dickens and Henry Mayhew, who sought to expose the wretched lives of the poor by 'forcing a wilfully ignorant readership to enlarge their field of vision,' demonstrated that the ills of the masses were so difficult to trace that a panoramic perspective was required.[21] In his *The City of Dickens*, for instance, Alexander Welsh argues that Mayhew's 1848 *Morning Chronicle* articles on the dire conditions of London's poorest inhabitants highlighted the difficulty in finding a simple

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[15] Ibid., pp. 5, 170.
[16] Ibid., p. 19.
[17] Ibid., p. 18-21.
[18] Walder, *Dickens and Religion* p. 144
[19] Humphrey House, *The Dickens World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1842), p. 112.
[20] Sally Ledger, *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 201.
[21] John McBratney, '"What connexion can there be?": Secrecy and Detection in Dickens' *Bleak House*', in *Victorian Secrecy: Economies of Knowledge and Concealment*, ed. by Albert D. Pionke and Denise Tischler Millstein (Farnham: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 59-74 (p. 59).

'moral cause' for their plight. The fact that work was unavailable even to the willing and industrious pointed instead to an 'impersonal amoral cause'.[22]

In his 1970 'Introduction' to *Dombey and Son*, Raymond Williams claimed that the 'great creative achievement of the nineteenth century' resided precisely in this 'way of learning to see general social causes behind and beyond individual failures and weaknesses'.[23] The high Victorian novel, with its expansive scope, was ideally suited to showcasing the bafflingly complex causative factors behind individual evils, in which all human events are potentially types of 'chain-shot or bomb-shells that can never hit a solitary mark, but must fall with widespread shattering'.[24] Perhaps owing to its perspectival ambitiousness, *Bleak House*, first published in monthly numbers between March 1852 and September 1853, is foremost among those Dickens texts which have been read as dramatizing a shift from a simplistic and moral view of evil to one which treats it as forbiddingly impersonal and systematic.[25] The multiple evils that the novel exposes have seemed to many critics to require an account of their origins. In fact, Robert Newsom has argued that 'causal relations' are the 'great subject' of Dickens' text.[26] The mystery plot concerning Mr Tulkinghorn's murder that occupies much of final third of the novel emphasises the pursuit of a cause, as do the strange deaths of Captain Hawdon and Mr Krook. The popular reading of *Bleak House* as a proto-detective novel reflects this element of the novel's interest in causation.[27] A number of readers, however, have held the consideration of causality in the novel to be more than a matter of tracking down

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[22] Alexander Welsh, *The City of Dickens* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 20.
[23] Raymond Williams, '*Introduction to Dombey and Son*', reproduced in *The Nineteenth-Century Novel: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Stephen Regan (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 246-61 (p. 253).
[24] Eliot, *Mill on the Floss*, p. 243.
[25] House, *The Dickens World*, p. 112; J. Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens: The World of His Novels* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), p. 208; Walder, *Dickens and Religion*, pp. 154-5; Christopher Herbert, 'The Occult in *Bleak House*', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 17.2 (1984), pp. 101-15 (p. 105-07); Bruce Robbins, 'Telescopic Philanthropy: Professionalism and Responsibility in Bleak House', in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 213-30 (p. 218); Sally Ledger, *Popular Radical Imagination*, p. 201.
[26] Robert Newsom, *Dickens on the Romantic Side of Familiar Things: Bleak House and the Novel Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), p. 70.
[27] McBratney, 'What connexion can there be?', p. 59.

before, it is Lucy who is pictured dreaming away the afternoon on the Brettons' sofa, in a room filled with cushions [pp. 181, 166]. Just prior to describing the picture, moreover, Lucy had recorded her decision to 'dispense with th[e] great labour' of 'spur[ring] and goad[ing]' herself to refine her taste when examining the paintings and instead allow herself to sink 'supine into a luxury of calm' [p. 199]. One consequence of privileging the power of circumstance, as we see in the works of Malthus and Sumner, is that it undermines any inherent difference between the 'savage' and the modern European, it being only a result of external conditions that the latter is held to have advanced.[198] This makes the conditions of ease and plenty enjoyed by the 'well-fed' Cleopatra all the more suspect.

While painted Cleopatra is necessarily a static figure, it is apt that Lucy is much more excited by an *actress*, 'Vashti'. As Penny Boulhelma notes, it is difficult to tell what exactly Vashti performs apart from her own suffering.[199] Vashti is described as being completely besieged by 'calamity' yet through her resistance to it she comes to represent pure 'energy', 'movement', and 'force' [pp. 258-59]. In contrast to the static water associated with the Brettons, Vashti's power is likened to rushing water, 'thundering in cataract and bearing the soul, like a leaf, on the steep and steely sweep of its descent' [p. 259]. Unlike the fleshly Cleopatra, she is emaciated, 'scarcely a substance' [p. 258]. Her power seems to exist in inverse relation to her physical existence, exhibited in the energy with which she fights to the last against 'the rape' of her body and faculties [p. 260]. Lucy explicitly asks the reader to compare the powerful actress to 'the Cleopatra or any other slug' [p. 258]. Her comment that Vashti would 'cut through the pulpy mass as the scimitar of Saladin clove the down cushion'[200] reflects the use she herself makes of the actress to attack the lure of comfort.

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[198] Malthus, *Essay on Population*, p. 357; Sumner, *Records*, II, p. 60.
[199] Boulhelma, *Charlotte Brontë*, p. 109.
[200] This was described in Walter Scott's *The Talisman* (1825).

Through these figures, Brontë postulates the dilemma between suffering and indolence as a contest between mind and body. Cleopatra is largely signified in the text by her 'full-fed flesh' [p. 258]. Just as Vashti's creative power depends on the attenuation and onslaught of her physical being, it seems that Cleopatra's bodily indulgence— her gluttony and lassitude— is incompatible with her having a mind or soul, reducing her to a mere 'slug' [p. 258].[201] This is similar to the implication made by the theodicies already considered that the development, even the existence of the mind, depends on the suffering of the body. Malthus is the most explicit in stating that suffering *produces* mind.[202] Many of those he influenced, however, agreed that it is bodily want or unease that forces the reasoning powers, or more generally, 'the faculties', to develop and then keeps them in action.[203] Such claims depend for their theodical force on a privileging of the mind above all; they frequently reveal an anxiety that unless the faculties are kept in constant exertion by means of outward stimulus, they will lapse into stagnation or torpor.

The figure in *Villette* who most powerfully conveys this same message is the unnamed 'crétin', Lucy's sole companion during the school holiday [p. 159]. It is difficult to make sense of this strange figure except as a pointed contrast to the narrator, a particularly appalling vision of the easy contentment that eludes Lucy:

> The crétin did not seem unhappy. I did my best to feed her well and keep her warm, and she only asked food and sunshine, or when that lacked, fire. Her weak faculties approved of inertion: her brain, her eyes, her ears, her heart slept content; they could not wake to work, so lethargy was their Paradise. [p. 159]

The language here is markedly similar to that used by defences of evil which insisted that an earthly paradise would lead to a state of torpor. It is difficult to differentiate Brontë's cretin from Malthus's slumbering savage. Contentment, dormancy and inertion are all

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[201] As I have already noted, Lucy later imagines a contest between her own mind and her 'matter', with the latter being termed a '[s]luggard' [p. 450].
[202] Malthus, *Essay on Population*, pp. 353, 355.
[203] Sumner, *Records*, II, p. 119; Bray, *The Philosophy of Necessity*, pp. 227-8.

Tulkinghorn's murderer or piecing together Esther Summerson's past; instead, they see the narrative as attempting 'explain, by a retrospective reconstruction going counter to the forward movement of the novel, how the world came to be in the befogged, mud-soaked, fragmented, and decomposed state presented in the initial paragraphs'.[28] Christopher Herbert argues that the social disorders delineated in *Bleak House* 'originate in no tangible or manageable sources but rather in the remote workings of vast, complex, totally impersonal social and institutional systems that not only baffle comprehension but seem to function with a menacing, all-pervading life of their own'.[29] Bruce Robbins likewise claims that 'evil is understood to be systematic' in the novel.[30]

Some critics have argued that *Bleak House* takes an even broader cosmological view of evil. Janet L. Larsen, for instance, contends that its opening passages move beyond 'social analysis' to enter an eternal perspective; while J. H. Miller considers that the world the novel portrays is meant to be read as having lapsed into a 'primal disorder'.[31] This impression of evil being located outside of individuals has led some to consider the novel as being in certain ways deterministic, stressing complex causation at the expense of individual agency.[32] The Court of Chancery, particularly, has been interpreted as symbolising the swamping of the individual will by an overwhelming determining cause.[33] As Peter K. Garret notes, the threat to the autonomy of the individual represented by the emphasis on 'some external, determining cause' is reinforced in the novel by the 'sense of the world being caught up in the dead hand of the cause [Jarndyce and Jarndyce]'.[34] Daniel

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[28] Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens*, p. 168.
[29] Herbert, 'The Occult in *Bleak House*', p. 106.
[30] Robbins, 'Telescopic Philanthropy', p. 215.
[31] Janet L. Larsen, *Dickens and the Broken Scripture* (Athens, Georgia : University of Georgia Press, 1985), p. 135; Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens*, p. 197.
[32] Alexander Welsh, *The City of Dickens*, p. 117; William F. Axton, 'Religious and Scientific Imagery in *Bleak House*', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 22. 4 (1968), pp. 349-59 (p. 358); Christopher Herbert, 'The Occult in *Bleak House*', p. 103; Anny Sadrin, 'Time, Tense, Weather in Three Flood Novels: *Bleak House*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *To the Lighthouse*', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 30 (2000), pp. 96-105 (p. 100).
[33] Peter K. Garrett, *The Victorian Multiplot Novel: Studies in Dialogical Form* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 67; D. A. Miller, 'Discipline in Different Voices: Bureaucracy, Police, Family and Bleak House', *Representations*, 1 (1983), pp. 59-89 (p. 60).
[34] Garrett, *Multiplot Novel*, p. 67.

Born argues that Chancery embodies the 'idea that evil has escaped its origins in the human heart and taken on a deadly life of its own'.[35] J. Hillis Miller makes the similar point that novel's suitors 'feel themselves to be caught up in a vast mechanical system of which they are the helpless victims'.[36]

There is certainly a shared sense that *Bleak House* problematizes human will and purpose in general. Critics point, for instance, to the novel's host of ineffectual characters and the central symbol of a 'Will' seemingly impossible to execute.[37] This focus on the paralysis of purpose is a curious aspect of a novel that seems elsewhere to call on a will to reform on the part of its readers.[38] This chapter will qualify the above readings by arguing that *Bleak House* actually rejects the interpretation of evil as impersonal and systematic, and does so on the very grounds that such a theodicy limits the scope of the human will and consequently prevents reform. I argue that the novel's interest in the meanings attached to evil is informed by contemporary experiences of mass suffering, in particular the cholera epidemic of 1848-49. It was not uncommon to attribute the extent of this epidemic and the other catastrophes of the 1840s to a 'do-nothing' government. In his 1850 *Latter-Day Pamphlet* entitled 'The Present Time', Thomas Carlyle railed against the empire of '[s]upply-and-demand, Leave-it-alone, Voluntary Principle, Time will mend it: —till British industrial existence seems fast becoming one huge poison-swamp of reeking pestilence physical and moral; a hideous living Golgotha of souls and bodies buried alive'.[39] I will show that *Bleak House* adds another dimension to this diagnosis, suggesting

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[35] Born, *Liberal Guilt*, p. 45.
[36] Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens*, p. 207.
[37] Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens*, p. 218; Joseph A. Fradlin, 'Will and Society in *Bleak House*', *PMLA*, 81.1 (1966), pp. 95-109 (p. 107); Timothy Peltason, 'Esther's Will', *ELH*, 59 (1992), pp. 671-91 (p. 671); Lauren Goodlad, *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State: Character and Governance in a Liberal Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), pp. 87, 114.
[38] The reader is implicitly called to action in the paragraphs following the deaths of Mr. Krook and Jo, for instance [pp. 479, 677].
[39] A stance most vehemently taken by Thomas Carlyle, whose *Latter-Day Pamphlet* 'The Present Time' railed against the empire of '[s]upply-and-demand, Leave-it-alone, Voluntary Principle, Time will mend it: —till British industrial existence seems fast becoming one huge poison-swamp of reeking pestilence physical and moral; a hideous *living* Golgotha of souls and bodies buried alive; such a Curtius' gulf, communicating with the Nether Deeps, as the Sun never saw till now' (*Latter-Day Pamphlets* (London: Chapman & Hall 1850), p. 23).

that institutionalised passivity in the face of evil was enabled by a mystifying form of theodicy. This theodicy discouraged action and silenced protest by invoking a remote unknowable cause or an inscrutable system of which individual evils made up but a part.

Those aspects of *Bleak House* which have most exercised its critics– causality, the human will and the question of how to interpret social and natural disorder –are all fundamental constituents of the problem of evil. Every theodicy addresses the cause of evil, whether it is held to be caused by the direct interposition of a deity, to be incidental to general laws, or to be inscrutably willed by God. Explanations of evil must also grapple with the question of human agency, with different answers assigning to human beings varying degrees of responsibility for their suffering and prescribing alternative courses of action in response. Theodicies also presuppose different accounts of the capacity of the human individual to comprehend how his or her experience fits into a broader perspective. On the face of it, theodicy seems as a project to depend upon a world amenable to human reason and evaluation, that – to draw upon the subtitle of one of the most influential nineteenth-century works of theodicy, William Paley's *Natural Theology* (1802) –the '*evidences* of the existence and attributes of the Deity, collected from the appearances of nature' will be legible to an interpreter.[40] As John Hick observes, this faith in the comprehensibility of the world was what made the Enlightenment era 'the golden age of theodicies, when the problem of evil was often at the centre of discussion and when comprehensive solutions to it were being confidently offered'.[41]

However, it is seldom noted how paradoxically dependent are even post-Enlightenment theodicies upon an insistence on human ignorance, on the inevitable enclosure of the individual sufferer within a finite perspective. Such defences of evil rely not on explaining the operations of the divine government but on obfuscating them. This mystifying form of theodicy was associated in mid-Victorian Britain with interpretations of

[40] Paley, *Natural Theology*. My emphasis.
[41] Hick, John *Evil and the God of Love*, p. 145.

the catastrophes experienced in Britain in the years immediately prior to *Bleak House*'s publication, especially the 1848-49 cholera epidemic. The cholera epidemic, possibly because of the rapid advancement since the first outbreak in 1832 of scientific accounts of how the disease spread and might be prevented (while its precise origins remained unknown), became the subject of much debate on the question of causation and what meaning should be attached to the suffering.[42] The popular and Establishment interpretation of the disease as an inscrutable divine judgement alarmed some commentators, mostly liberal Christians and reformers, with the prospect that unenlightened superstition, a hindrance to practical activity and reform, was alive and well in modern Britain. Consequently, solutions to the problem of evil that relied on mystification began to be brought into disrepute in the very circles in which Dickens moved.

Bleak House's theological contribution to the discussion surrounding the meaning of cholera can be summarised as follows. Firstly, the novel tutors the reader in the proper reading of evil by means of the account of disease and corruption that it elaborates, most revealingly in the description of Krook's death by spontaneous combustion. The value of this naturalised and simplified account of evil is highlighted by the symbolic use made of the Court of Chancery, which shows the deleterious effects on looking to unravel a complicated and remote " cause" of evil. Secondly, the novel takes the concepts of mystification and superstitious passivity, newly galvanised by responses to the cholera epidemic, and applies them to contemporary English society more generally. Mystification is the norm in *Bleak House*'s England, perpetuated by the elaborate misdirection by those in power and reliant on a superstitious ignorant public who can be bewildered into suffering passively. Defences of an unjust status quo are shown to depend on a form of theodicy that held in tandem inevitable human ignorance and the overall impartial

[42] Pamela K. Gilbert, *Cholera and Nation*, pp. 17-89. Gilbert traces the contest between medics and clergyman over 'the social meanings' of the disease, showing naturalistic interpretations to have gained ascendency in the course of the first half of the century.

beneficence of the larger scheme. Dickens's novel rejects this type of theodicy not because it denies any relationship between God and evil, but because, as Dickens's use of the fable of the Heathen wagoner suggests, it seeks to shift responsibility for man-made evils from Providence to human beings.

2.1 'Grievous Effects Must Have Grievous Causes': Naturalising Catastrophe

Bleak House is quick to raise the problem of evil, which is established in its early chapters chiefly via the descriptions of the Court of Chancery and the Jarndyce and Jarndyce suit. Parties to the court are imagined as victims above all: it has 'its decaying houses and its blighted lands in every shire', 'its worn-out lunatic in every mad-house, and its dead in every churchyard', and 'its ruined suitor, with his slipshod heels and threadbare dress, borrowing and begging through the round of every man's acquaintance' [p. 13]. Such is its reach and so various the sufferings for which it is responsible, from the degeneration of Tom-all-alone's to the orphaned condition of Ada and Richard [pp. 236, 556], that the court provides a shorthand for discussing the experience of unexplained suffering in general. To be made party to a Chancery case is to undergo indefinitely prolonged torture: 'it's being ground to bits in a slow mill; it's being roasted at a slow fire; it's being stung to death by single bees; it's being drowned by drops; it's going mad by grains' [p. 65]. A central component of such torture, moreover, is its unfathomability from the perspective of those suffering. Under the aegis of Chancery, apparently simple legal procedures, such as the disputed will which first brought Mr Gridley to court [pp. 230-1], become monstrously complicated, expanding to include ever more parties and becoming embroiled in constant legal and administrative obstructions the reasons for which seem incomprehensible [pp. 111, 180, 231]. This bewildering dimension of the suffering associated with the Court of Chancery is especially noticeable in the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case, of which it is said

'that no man alive knows what it means' [p. 14]. This suit is, like Chancery in general, a byword in the novel for encroaching 'evil' [pp. 14-5]. The innumerable victims of this evil are unable to make sense of it, having '*deliriously* found themselves made parties in Jarndyce and Jarndyce, *without knowing how or why*' [p. 14. My emphasis]. Those involved in the case experience it as a seemingly mysterious affliction. That the reader is intended to read the depiction of Chancery and its most notorious case as figuring the problem of evil in general is strongly suggested by the comprehensive phrasing of Mr Jarndyce's solemn declaration: 'How mankind ever came to be afflicted with Wiglomeration, or for whose sins these young people ever fell into a pit of it, I don't know' [p. 111].[43]

The novel's grim opening description of London is entitled simply 'In Chancery', which suggests that the evils associated with the Court are emblematic of a more pervasive crisis affecting the country. London was a fitting stage to play out the problem of evil at this time, given its ' strange incongruous chaos of wealth and want [...]where there are more houses and more houseless, where there is more feasting and more starvation, than on any other spot on earth'.[44] My introduction has described how appalled readers were by Henry Mayhew's a reports of the sheer misery of the metropolis, a few years before *Bleak House* was written. In Dickens's novel, the miserable ruination epitomised by Chancery proceedings extends to the rotten, diseased condition of London's poor, to the deteriorating disorderly houses of the better off who shirk their responsibility for their dependents and the poor, like Mrs Jellyby and Harold Skimpole, and to the pervading filth of London, at its worst around the 'slimy' graveyard where 'Nemo' is buried [pp. 15, 236, 442, 620, 165]. The England envisioned by the novel is, according to J. Hillis Miller, a 'world which has already gone bad'.[45]

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[43] "Wiglomeration" is Jarndyce's term for the undue complications that obstruct progress in the case and in the lives of its parties.
[44] Anon., 'Labour and the Poor', *The Morning Chronicle* (October 19, 1849), p. 5.
[45] Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens*, p. 195.

The novel seems on its first page to give biblical context for London's calamitous state when the narrator refers to 'the waters [having] but newly retired from the face of the earth' [p. 11]. This allusion to the Noahic deluge invokes the paradigmatic model of catastrophe as a divine imposition, coming from beyond the common course of nature. Such a model heavily informs the rhetoric favoured by the novel's ruling class, who like to represent the country as being in a state of unexpected and unaccountable crisis. Sir Leicester Dedlock interprets any hint of reform as 'a remarkable example of the confusion into which the present age has fallen; of the obliteration of landmarks, the opening of floodgates, and the uprooting of distinctions' [p. 414]. The political impasse described at the beginning of Chapter 40, 'National and Domestic', brought about by the reluctance of different parties to enter into government together, is likewise believed by those involved to be 'a stupendous national calamity' [p. 589]. Similarly, any inconvenience experienced by the different ministers—Lord Coodle, Sir Thomas Doodle & co—they perceive as a sign that the 'country is shipwrecked, lost and gone to pieces' [p. 174].

This language of flood and shipwreck allows the ruling class to disown responsibility for the national welfare, which is thereby represented as vulnerable to sudden, unpredictable cataclysm issuing, like a storm, from a sphere outside their control. The man-made evils which their misgovernment has created they categorise as natural evils. Their practiced stance of amazement, best encapsulated by Volumnia Dedlock's habitual 'little screams' of shock, implies that events are to them unexpected, that they bear no logical relation to their own actions [pp. 596, 749, 792]. One thing they pretend to be confused by, for instance, is the loss of 'picturesque' forms of faith amongst the 'Vulgar', 'meaning', the narrator adds, 'in the things that have been tried and found wanting, as though a low fellow should unaccountably lose faith in a bad shilling, after finding it out' [p. 173]. Sir Leicester is likewise frequently shown to be astonished or amazed. At one point he is apparently so taken aback by Mr Rouncewell's lack of deference that he can

only 'breathe amazedly' [p. 683]. We are told of his relations that '[n]ot a cousin of the batch but is amazed to hear from Sir Leicester, at breakfast time, of the obliteration of landmarks, and opening of floodgates, and cracking of the framework of society, manifested through Mrs Rouncewell's son' [p. 421]. Lord Boodle likewise 'perceives with astonishment' that the Crown would have only Coodle and Doodle to choose between should the current government be overthrown [p. 173]; while Jarndyce comments that the Court Chancellors would claim to be 'infinitely astonished' at one of their suitors being unjust and unreasonable, hinting that this stance absurdly implies that there is something unexpected in this behaviour being produced by a system of injustice and unreason [p. 849].

The unpredictable and unaccountable type of world that the ruling class's stance of astonishment would befit is also conjured up by Sir Leicester's constant lookout for 'signs' of what 'the present age is tending' towards [p. 175]. This search for omens makes him appear to be a mere passive and aggrieved spectator of events that are being driven from somewhere outside of his control. His implied refusal of accountable cause-and-effect is consistent with Sir Leicester's generally faulty reasoning. He infers the ruin of the country, for instance, from the fact that a minister cannot be supplied with a post. The narrator indirectly draws our attention to the absence of logical sequence in Sir Leicester's thinking:

> You can't put him in the Woods and Forests; that is hardly good enough for Quoodle. What *follows*? That the country is shipwrecked, lost, and gone to pieces (as is made manifest to the patriotism of Sir Leicester Dedlock), *because* you can't provide for Noodle! [p. 174, my emphasis]

Sir Leicester's hyperbolic mode of speech is patterned on a disruption of sequence, which the text usually underscores by inserting pauses before his most extravagant claims. Thus,

for instance, his reaction to the news that the iron-master Mr. Rouncewell and his son had campaigned against him in the general election:

> [T]hen upon my honour, upon my life, upon my reputation and principles, the floodgates of society are burst open, and the waters have — a — obliterated the landmarks of the framework of the cohesion by which things are held together! [p. 600][46]

Such pauses highlight for the reader the absence of any necessary relation between what Sir Leicester sees and the meaning he attaches to it. The breakdown in sequence effected by their insertion accords with the sudden violent cataclysmic imagery favoured by him and the rest of the ruling class, which presupposes a lack of relation between evil and preceding conditions.

By contrast, the third-person narrator insists that evil is the necessary and naturalistic result of gradually accumulating circumstances. Thus, the opening image of the retreated deluge is very literally grounded in the 'crust upon crust of mud' that swamps London. This image reflects the filthy condition of a city during a period when an 'unprecedented volume of waste matter overflowed from cesspools, rotted in out-of-the-way streets, and flooded the river Thames'.[47] Thomas Carlyle's *Latter-Day Pamphlet* 'The Present Time' (1850) had already applied a demystified version of the biblical flood to contemporary conditions when it spoke of the city's 'mud-deluges', by which he meant the 'poisonous cesspools, gully-drains, and detestable abominations' of the capital.[48] As I shall consider more fully below, emergent theories that held London's pervasive dirt to blame for the spread of disease such as cholera lent an ominous significance to such images of waste, slime and stagnant water. "Waste", the name of one of Miss Flite's birds, is a strong presence in *Bleak House*, both in the sense of wasted prospects and lives and in its various

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[46] Similar pauses punctuate his indignant speeches about Boythorn and Rosa [pp. 177, 600].
[47] Michelle Elizabeth Allen, *Cleansing the City: Sanitary Geographies in Victorian London* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2008), p. 1.
[48] Caryle, 'The Present Time', p. 26.

physical forms, such as the 'waste' scattered throughout the Jellyby home and 'the whole dark waste' Esther imagines London to be; the 'waste' near the brick-makers' cottages through which the fleeing Lady Dedlock passes ; and the 'waste' into which the area around Temple Bar is converted the long vacation [pp. 201, 450, 798, 279]. Similarly, Chesney Wold is swamped in 'quagmires' and a 'stagnant river' and Tom-all-Alone's is divided by a 'stagnant channel of mud' [pp. 18, 657]. This latter image strongly suggests that the novel uses "mud" as a euphemism for excrement, given that there were no means to dispose of the latter in such slums. Dickens had visited St. Giles rookery in 1850 and described 'its compound of sickening smells, these heaps of filth, these tumbling houses, with all their vile contents, animate and inanimate, slimily overflowing into the black road'.[49]

In *Bleak House*, the 'slime' of London's heart of darkness, the rookery of Tom-all-Alone's, is figured as a hotbed of 'infection and contagion, its 'pestilential gas' being carried on the winds to infect even the city's rich inhabitants [p. 654].[50] Disease is imagined to pass from the slum's filth into the air by which it enters the human body. This is in accordance with the 'miasma' theory of contagion, which held that 'disease [was] spawned by bad air, often emerging from rotting material'.[51] The narrator's indignation at Jo's death, directed at those in authority [p. 677], is thus justified by an account of disease according to which the physical ruin and mounting filth for which institutions like the Court of Chancery are responsible are the cause of diseases such as that that kills the boy. Hence another source of disease the novel focuses on, apart from the dirt begriming the neglected poor, is the overcrowded churchyard in which Captain Hawdon is buried and

[49] See Charles Dickens, 'On Duty with Inspector Field', *Household Words* (14 June 1851), pp. 265-70 (p. 265).
[50] The novel's use of contagious disease as a device for revealing otherwise hidden connections across the complex urban terrain has particularly excited critical attention. See for instance, Pamela K. Gilbert, *Mapping the Victorian Social Body* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), p. 116; F. S. Schwarzbach, '*Bleak House*: The Social Pathology of Urban Life', *Literature and Medicine*, 9 (1990), pp. 93-104; Michael S. Gurney, 'Disease as Device: The Role of Smallpox in *Bleak House*', *Literature and Medicine*, 9 (1990), pp. 83-5.
[51] Gilbert, *Cholera and Nation*, p. 94.

Lady Dedlock comes to die. This is described as 'pestiferous and obscene, whence malignant diseases are communicated to the bodies of our dear brothers and sisters who have not departed' [p. 165]. That overcrowded graveyards, in which bodies might be only partly buried, were a source of infection was a central claim of the public health and sanitary movement of the 1840s, a movement that, according to Alexander Welsh, was 'chiefly responsible for a new awareness of the physical causes of the city's ills'.[52] The 'thick humidity' that Esther sees breaking out 'like a disease' from the walls of the 'filthy houses' immediately surrounding the churchyard is on this view literally pestilential, which is partly why the 'wet' in which the whole place is 'drenched' is so 'fearful' to her [p. 844].

Such a consciousness of physical causation is characteristic of *Bleak House*'s view of calamity. The omniscient narrator proposes a straightforward cause-and-effect connection between existing circumstances and anticipated evils, and this connection is reflected in his prose: '*as* several more houses are nearly ready to go, the next crash in Tom-all-Alone's *may be expected* to be a good one'; 'these ruined shelters have *bred* a crowd of foul existence [...] *sowing* more evil in its every footprint ...' [p. 236, my emphasis]. This language of breeding and sowing eliminates the possibility of any external cause contributing to the predicted outcome. Occurrences, it insists, are the offspring of preceding circumstances alone. The novel's most prominent calamity, Mr Krook's spontaneous combustion, is similarly represented as the explosive denouement of certain diseased organic conditions, having been 'bred in the corrupted humours of the vicious body itself' [p. 479]. The narrator opposes the apocalyptic flood vaguely imagined by the ruling class with the 'drip, drip, drip' of accumulation, whether of the waters in Chesney Wold, the filth on the London streets, the piles of rubbish collected by Krook and

[52] Welsh, *The City of Dickens*, p. 24. The General Health Board's official report on the cholera outbreak of 1848-49 included a section on 'Effects of overcrowded Graveyards' alongside a table showing the relation between the proximity of an overcrowded graveyard and number of deaths in the area. (Dr Sutherland, *Appendix A to the Report of the General Board of Health on the Epidemic Cholera of 1848 & 1849* (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1850) pp. 26-9).

wastepaper created by 'Jarndyce and Jarndyce' or the bodies heaving in the overcrowded churchyard [pp. 18, 95, 61, 63, 832, 11, 108, 165, 240]. As the description of the death of Krook, considered below, will further clarify, to ground catastrophe in accumulating conditions is to propose so close a relation between known cause and effect that any unknown or mysterious causative factor is excluded outright: the flood *is* only its constitutive drops of water.

The significance of these different interpretations of the cause of catastrophe becomes clear when we consider that the theological dispute generated by the cholera epidemic of 1848-49 was framed in precisely these terms. The meaning of the cholera epidemic was very much a live question in the early 1850s, when *Bleak House* was appearing, due to the publication of the Board of Health's investigation into the epidemic in 1850. An overview of 'Cholera, and Its Causes,' published in the *Church of England Quarterly Review* in 1854, considered the arguments of six books on the subject, all published in 1852 or 1853.[53] Lauren Goodlad has argued that the sanitation movement, which was driven by the threat of cholera, raised the problems of pastoral responsibility that are a central concern of *Bleak House*.[54] Dickens was a vehement supporter of sanitation reform, which he argued in his preface to the cheap 1850 edition of *Oliver Twist* 'must precede all other Social Reforms'.[55] The discourse of public health, however, had an important theological component the influence of which on Dickens's novel has been overlooked. Boyd Hilton has argued that the cholera epidemic incited much public discussion about the meaning of the suffering being experienced; cholera was, he observes, 'a fruitful subject for those who liked to reflect on the dispensations of providence'.[56] The epidemic also raised theological questions because a willingness to take the preventive

[53] Anon, 'Cholera and its Causes', *Church of England Quarterly Review* (April 1854), pp. 374-99.
[54] Goodlad, *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State*, p. 88.
[55] Charles Dickens, 'Preface', reproduced in *The Adventures of Oliver Twist* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1855), p. v.
[56] Hilton, *Age of Atonement*, p. 155

measures favoured by reformers and a conviction that such measures were both possible and appropriate presupposed a particular and contested interpretation of evil.

In the autumn of 1853, just after the final instalment of *Bleak House*, *The Times* ran a series of articles entitled 'The Laws of Cholera', which drew upon the findings of the Board of Health's inquiry into the 1848-9 epidemic. These articles, published together as *The Laws of Cholera* in 1854, were intended to 'summon individuals and government to the grand work of sanitary reform'.[57] According to their author, the official report on the epidemic had finally proven that the disease spread in accordance with fixed ascertainable laws.[58] Since its first appearance in 1832, he claimed, the epidemic had 'already lost much of its mysterious character', as it was found to be 'subject to conditions which regulate its appearance, its progress, and its departure'.[59] Scientific investigation over the preceding twenty years had shown that epidemics 'disappear once these conditions disappear', which means that they are 'subject to human control'.[60] If epidemics are dependent upon certain conditions, then it seems a point hardly worth making that they will disappear once the latter no longer obtain. *The Times* writer, however, is impressing on his readers that it is these environmental factors alone that are the cause of disease. The possibility of any unknown, extra-environmental causative factor playing a role in the cholera epidemic is thereby ruled out. Cholera, these articles insist, is no 'riddle'.[61]

David Bebbington observes that the first cholera outbreak was a spur for the revival of enthusiastic forms of religion, noting that the duration of the twelve months preceding March 1833 'saw the largest increase [in membership] ever recorded in Wesleyan history'.[62] Bebbington notes that the religious tenor of this revival was characterized by a 'supernaturalism' that was articulated in a 'new craving for the divine to break into the

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[57] [Anon.], *The Laws of Cholera, Reprinted (By Permission) from The Times* (London: Charles Knight, 1854), p. 4. I'd say do a word search and make this consistent.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid., p. 3.
[60] Ibid., p. 4.
[61] Ibid., p. 22.
[62] Bebbington, *History of Evangelicalism*, p. 115.

world.'[63] The writer of *The Laws of the Cholera* seemed to have this background in mind when he insisted on a wholly naturalistic account of the disease, one that invested human beings with the power to predict and prevent outbreaks. The writer sought to dislodge an alternative understanding of epidemics that he believed to be impeding sanitary reform: 'There are many persons,' he notes

> who think they render the greatest homage to the Supreme Ruler by contemplating the cholera and other epidemics as ministers of the Divine vengeance, having a special mission to execute in certain places and then to pass on to others in a prescribed course *which no human agency can avert or arrest*. It is much to be lamented that inquiries into the physical causes of cholera have been rather deprecated than encouraged, from the impression that investigations of this nature were wanting in that humility and prostration which are appropriate to the visitation. Dogmas of this character, while they have a tendency to paralyse the exertions which society should make for its security, do very little honour to the character of a Wise, Just and Benevolent Ruler over the affairs of men.[64]

The author of *The Laws of Cholera* thus rejects the belief in a vengeful God who suspends the laws of nature in order to punish his creatures. The terms 'special mission' and 'visitation' both convey this sense of an interposition of the supernatural into the common course of events. This supernaturalistic worldview is represented as being incompatible with 'human agency,' given that it holds the course of the epidemic to be already 'prescribed' by God and therefore beyond human control. Since it is impious to scrutinize too closely the physical causes of—let alone seek to prevent—such divinely instituted suffering, the only recourse open to human beings undergoing evil is passive prostration.

The author considers this supernaturalistic vision to presuppose a degrading notion of God, whom he sees chiefly in terms of goodness, rather than vengefulness. The God he proposes actually wishes human beings to take measures to eliminate natural evils and has therefore set up the world in accordance with fixed perceptible laws, one such law being,

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[63] Ibid.
[64] Anon., *Laws of Cholera*, p. 3. My emphasis.

as the official report on the 1848-9 demonstrated, the development of disease from unsanitary conditions. As such,

> [t]he proper lesson to inculcate at the present season is the duty of acting in harmony with the Divine laws, by fixing on healthy localities for human habitations, and using all available means to keep them so; or, if they have become the abodes of pestilence, then to restore them to a natural and healthy state.[65]

The emphasis here is in on human beings 'acting', on controlling their environment to prevent disease. A naturalistic account of epidemics as stemming from known, fixed causes makes human beings wholly responsible for whether or not catastrophe occurs. By contrast, to assume a posture of 'humility and prostration' indicates that people are powerless over the evil immediately at hand; indeed it could be said to ritualistically perform that very powerlessness. Such a response to evil imputes causality wholly to God, whose mercy can only be implored and whose reasons are beyond fathoming. Human beings are thereby absolved of responsibility for preventing evil. The author takes issue with those who 'lead people astray' with their claims that the cholera is a 'mysterious visitation whose causes are unknown and whose movements unaccountable, when [in fact] we can indicate the nest in which it was hatched and predict the probable course of its flight'.[66] As this latter clause indicates, the repudiation of supernatural or otherwise unaccountable causation enabled an emphasis on the predictability of evil. The possibility of a cause separate from discernible physical conditions would obviously undermine such forecasting and discourage the preventive measures predictability permits.[67]

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[65] Ibid., p. 4.
[66] Ibid.
[67] It was often observed by those who first proposed that God had established nature to operate by fixed laws that any interposition of the supernatural into nature would undermine human ability to provide for the future because they would be unable to judge what conditions might then obtain. Thus George Berkeley wrote in 1710 that it is the fixity of God's laws alone which gives us 'that foresight which enables us to regulate our actions for the benefit of life: and without this, we should be eternally at a loss; we could not know how to act anything that might procure us the least pleasure, or save us from the least pain' (George Berkeley, *The Principles of Human Knowledge* in *The Works of George Berkeley*, 2 vols (London: Thomas Tegg, 1843), I,

These articles, then, juxtapose two possible interpretations of the cholera epidemic and the role each afforded human agency: it is either a mysterious phenomenon of unknowable origin, in which case the due response from those suffering is passivity and prayer; or it is an accountable phenomenon caused by knowable physical conditions, in which case the due response is practical action. Pamela K. Gilbert has suggested that interpretations of the disease in the years following the first outbreak were increasingly based 'on science rather than religion, on the secular rather than the sacred'.[68] The author of *The Times* articles, however, clearly considered a naturalistic interpretation of the epidemic to be as much a religious as a practical imperative. He suggested that to believe in a God who has established the world according to fixed— 'Divine'—laws, thereby empowering human beings to diminish suffering, did greater 'homage to the Supreme Ruler' than did the self-humbling submission of those whom he opposed. Rather than extolling science at the expense of religion, the distinction he makes is one between religion and superstition. These articles differentiate between a sound form of religion that harmonizes 'with nature' and that which actually profanes true religion by employing its name 'to secure immunity from the effects of violating [Nature's] laws'.[69] This latter pernicious type of religion the author of the article described in terms clearly intended to characterise those he opposes as superstitious: '[it] is quite out of the question to get at the *rationale* of this epidemic by a sermon, or stay its virulence by a Scotch fast or a popish mass'.[70] There is, instead, greater 'active piety' in working to remove 'the immediate cause of calamities we deplore [...] than in soliciting the authority of the government to try the virtue of a national fast'.[71] Fasting, like other forms of ascetic renunciation, was associated

p. 98.) As the final clause of that statement suggests, prevention of suffering depends on predictability, which depends in turn on natural law being constant and discernible.

[68] Gilbert, *Cholera and Nation*, p. 67.

[69] Anon., *The Laws of Cholera*, pp. 78-9.

[70] Ibid., p. 78.

[71] Ibid., p. 5.

with the morbid fanaticism of Catholics and other "superstitious" religions.[72] The practice is rejected here for its passivity and uncertain efficacy, with those who propose it implied to be taking a fingers-crossed stance of hopeful ignorance ('try the virtue of').

The author refers specifically to the request of the Edinburgh Presbyterians in November that a national day of fasting and humiliation be declared in response to the threatened return of cholera in 1853, as it had been during the first outbreak of cholera in Britain.[73] He approvingly notes that the Home Secretary Lord Palmerston had rejected this plea on the grounds that people had no right to call upon God's aid for a situation caused by their own neglect. Palmerston had issued an official statement, which was reproduced not only in *The Times* but in Charles Dickens's journal *Household Words*.[74] It asserted that Lord Palmerston questioned the suitability of a national fast 'to the circumstances of the present moment. The Maker of the universe has established certain laws for the planet on which we live, and the weal or woe of mankind depends upon the observance or neglect of those laws'.[75] Suffering is in this latter formula made wholly a consequence of human action or inaction. Having established a law which connects:

> health with the absence of those gaseous exhalations, which proceed from overcrowded human beings, or from decomposed substances, it has, at the same time, pleased Providence to place it within the power of man to make such arrangements as will prevent or disperse such exhalations [...] and it is the duty of man to attend to those laws of nature, and to exert the faculties which Providence has thus given to man for his own welfare.[76]

Such exertion is opposed to passive and futile rites proposed by the Presbyterians. If the 'causes and sources of contagion' remain, they 'will infallibly breed pestilence, and

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[72] Thus the Archbishop of Dublin, Richard Whately, noted that ascetic acts like fasting recommended themselves in particular to the 'superstitious fanatic or crafty imposter', while arguing that the 'Reformers' gave 'no countenance to the notion of substituting for gospel-morality, or super-adding to it, periodical austerities, and endurance of gratuitous sufferings' (Richard Whately, *Essays on the Some of the Difficulties in the Writings of the Apostle Paul and in other parts of the New Testament*, (London: John W. Parker & Son, 1844), II, p. 244, p. 267).
[73] Gilbert, *Cholera and Nation*, p. 34.
[74] Anon., 'Social, Sanitary and Municipal Progress', *Household Words* (October 1853), pp. 255-6.
[75] Anon., *The Laws of Cholera*, p. 79.
[76] Ibid., p. 80.

be fruitful in death, in spite of all the prayers and fastings of a united but inactive nation'. The agency that these rites attribute to God this statement transfers to human beings, with God being assigned a very minor role in human affairs: 'when man has done the utmost for his own safety, then it is time to invoke the blessing of Heaven to give effect to his exertions'.[77] As Pamela K. Gilbert notes, Palmerston's decision was controversial because it insisted that the causes of cholera were 'materialistic' rather than 'metaphysical'.[78] Palmerston's claims indicate that he felt compelled, like the author of *The Laws of Cholera*, to exclude metaphysical causation because that would enable human beings to shirk their responsibility for the epidemic. Although his is still evidently a theist vision, it is not one that accommodates the possibility of any unknown supernatural agency, given that the latter would undermine that fixity of natural law that—through the goodness and wisdom of God—guaranteed the efficacy of human agency and exertion. In its conclusion, the *The Laws of Cholera* loudly summarised this position thus:

> THE CHOLERA, INSTEAD OF BEING A MYSTERIOUS VISITATION, WHOSE ORIGIN AND MODE OF PROPAGATION ARE HIDDEN IN OBSCURITY, IS THE RESULT OF KNOWN PHYSICAL CONDITIONS WHICH ARE SUBJECT TO HUMAN CONTROL.[79]

The author and Church of England clergyman Charles Kingsley similarly distinguished in his sermons on cholera between a rational Christianity that encouraged the removal of the physical causes of cholera, in conformity with God's observable natural laws, and a regressive religious response, which insisted on the mysteriousness of the epidemic.[80] When cholera first appeared in 1832, he claimed, the 'pitiable' people 'got frightened and proclaimed a Fast and confessed their sins and promised repentance in a

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[77] Ibid.
[78] Gilbert cites the Scottish Presbyterian Revd Robert Buchanan to this effect (*Cholera and Nation*, p. 34).
[79] Anon., *The Laws of Cholera*, p. 79.
[80] There were three 'Sermons on the Cholera' and one sermon on 'The Day of Thanksgiving', also about the epidemic, published in his *Sermons on National Subjects, Preached in a Village Church* (London & Glasgow: John J. Griffin & Richard Griffin, 1852).

general way. But did they repent of and confess those sins which had caused the cholera?'.[81] By such 'sins' Kingsley meant that greed and negligence which caused the physical conditions that directly and naturally led to the disease.[82] The 'general' repentance for unspecified sins Kingsley describes suggests a confusion about the actual causes of the epidemic, interpreting it as a judgement on common human depravity. This interpretation allowed those responsible for unsanitary conditions to obscure what was, from Kingsley's perspective, a plain connection between their neglect and the calamitous consequences.

> But you will say, perhaps, it is presumptuous to say that Englishmen have brought the cholera on themselves, that it is God's judgment, and that we cannot explain His inscrutable Providence. Ah! my friends, that is a poor excuse and a common one, for leaving a great many sins as they are![83]

Here again, any appeal to mysterious causation is repudiated in the interest of preserving human responsibility for suffering. According to Kingsley, God's will is made fully comprehensible by means of his plain-speaking natural laws.[84] What God desires is that men act to prevent evil.[85] Far from being a pious stance, Kingsley further argued, the recourse to divine inscrutability is 'an old excuse and a great favourite with Satan, I have no doubt'.[86] As much as the author of the 'Laws of Cholera', Kingsley considered his to be a more honourable conception of God than that of those from whom he differed. While his God might be said to be always present in the form of his divine laws, these 'superstitious fools' imagined God to be generally absent, only 'visiting us' by means of 'cholera, or plague, or pestilence, or famine, or some other misery'.[87] Kingsley thus makes the same link between ignorant superstition and a mystifying supernatural account of the cholera we have seen in the *Times* articles on the epidemic.

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[81] Charles Kingsley, 'First Sermon on the Cholera', *Sermons on National Subjects*, pp. 174-85 (p. 175).
[82] Ibid., p. 176.
[83] Ibid., p. 177.
[84] Charles Kingsley, 'Second Sermon on the Cholera', *Sermons on National Subjects*, pp. 186-96 (p. 186)
[85] Ibid., p. 187.
[86] Kingsley, 'First Sermon', p. 177.
[87] Charles Kingsley, 'On the Day of Thanksgiving', *Sermons on National Subjects*, pp. 212-25 (p. 213).

It was not unusual then, for those intent in the late 1840s and early 1850s on popularizing an account of the cholera epidemic favourable to preventive measures to do so by invoking an alternative interpretative paradigm characterised by supernatural, superstitious obscurantism, an emphasis on human ignorance and the ritualization of human passivity. By this means, any interpretation implying a supernatural cause for the outbreaks—even the perfectly Anglican sermons the author of *The Laws of Cholera* grouped with Popish masses—could be maligned as superstitious. The belief that evil was an inscrutable visitation had long been disputed by interpretations believed to be more compatible with human improvement and progress. My previous chapter explored one such interpretation, which considered evil to be a stimulus to mental and cultural development. Nevertheless, while a writer like Robert Malthus might argue that we 'ought not to be so wonderstruck' by physical phenomena like population variations as to 'attribute it to the miraculous interposition of Heaven', he still made allowance for the possibility of this very interposition in his cautious phrasing:

> It accords with the most liberal spirit of philosophy to believe that no stone can fall, or plant rise, without the immediate agency of divine power. But we know from experience, that these operations of what we call nature have been conducted *almost* invariably according to fixed laws.[88]

That, by 1853, the Home Secretary was willing to publically and strongly assert this doctrine to support his refusal of a national fast, suggests that the urgency of sanitary reform to prevent another epidemic lent a new dimension and visibility to the question of whether evil was held to be mysterious in origin or the result of human deviation from fixed, knowable laws.

This discursive context gives contemporary significance to *Bleak House*'s demystifying treatment of evil. There is no doubt that Dickens was familiar with the

[88] Malthus, *Essay on Population*, p. 127. My emphasis.

discussion of naturalistic versus mystifying conceptions of evil, not only as it was applied to the Cholera epidemic but also to social and natural disorder more generally. Not only did *Household Words* approve of Lord Palmerston's statement as a sign of 'progress',[89] but the journal also ran a number of articles and stories supporting a naturalistic account of evil that privileged human agency. One such *Household Words* story is 'The Highest House in Wathendale' (1851) by Harriet Martineau. The story, which shares *Bleak House*'s concern with neglected children, describes a mother who, instead of taking active measures to protect and provide for her child, mistakenly 'trust[ed] that all would be well' under God: '[s]he had not considered (as too many do not consider), that "the promises" are given under conditions, and that it is impious to blame Providence for disasters when the conditions are not observed'.[90] The mother in question, Janet, soon learns the hard lesson that the divine promises to which she clings cannot prevent the fact that entrusting her child to her 'drunkard' husband will endanger him.[91] When the husband accidentally dashes the child's head against a door, the child's consequential idiocy is implied to be the natural result of human disobedience of Providence's 'conditions'.[92]

Bleak House is equally concerned to exclude from its etiology of disease the possibility of causation beyond human understanding and control. This imperative explains why the novel describes disease as being 'bred' and 'sow[n]' [p. 236], both of which figurative expressions indicate that it is developed from natural present conditions, without the contribution of any external factor. The novel lays emphasis on the inexorability of contagion given prevailing conditions. Just as Palmerston saw infection as 'infallibly' spreading unless action was taken, the third-person narrator can confidently predict that '[t]here is not a drop of Tom's corrupted blood but propagates infection and contagion somewhere. It *shall* pollute, this very night… There is not an atom of Tom's slime [...] but

[89] Anon., 'Social, Sanitary and Municipal Progress', p. 255.
[90] Harriet Martineau, 'The Highest House in Wathendale', *Household Words* (September 1851), pp. 389- 96, p. 392.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Ibid.

shall work its retribution, through every order of society' [p. 654, my emphasis]. The inseparability of cause and effect permits this certain knowledge of what is, the narrator insists, the inevitable outcome of the ruin and filth in which the city's poorest inhabitants live. That nothing can be expected to intervene between natural cause and effect in this movement towards catastrophe is also indicated by the description of Captain Hawdon's inadequately buried dead body, the likely source of future contagion, as being 'sow[n] in corruption, to be raised in corruption' [p. 165]. This revision of scripture produces a materialistic vision of resurrection by means of contamination, rhetorically denying the role of the miraculous in the course of the disease. The prose embodies the inseparability of naturalistic cause-and-effect. Instead of paradox—the disruption of sequence—there is continuity. Having primed the reader for the familiar dramatic inversion ('It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption'),[93] the repetition of 'corruption' comes as a deliberately anti-climactic thud at the end of the phrase, underscoring the obvious inevitable identity between what goes into the grave and what comes out. The inseparability of cause and effect is also underlined by Jo's confusedly referring to the graveyard as 'consequential ground', when he is unable to make sense of Lady Dedlock's question about whether it is consecrated [p. 243]. [94]

It is easy to overlook the significance of this emphasis on inevitable naturalistic cause-and-effect in the novel's depiction of disease. However, Dickens's consciousness of what was at stake in different interpretations of cholera is evident from a series of letters he published in the *Examiner* between January and April 1849, relating to the Tooting cholera disaster. 180 pauper children under the care of Mr Peter Drouet had died from the single worst outbreak of the disease in the only site to be affected in that part of the country. Drouet is a shadowy presence in *Bleak House*, whose traumatized Guster is said to have been 'farmed' at Tooting by an 'amiable benefactor of his species', who is later

[93] The original phrase from 1Corinthians 15:42 was used in the Anglican burial service.
[94] The word emphasizes the *sequence* of cause leading to effect.

sarcastically referred to as Tooting's 'patron saint' [pp. 144, 164]. Three years after the trial, Dickens was evidently still irate about the aspect of the case that most exercised him in his letters to the *Examiner*: that when the disease first broke out in Tooting, the district's Poor Law Guardians exonerated Drouet and conditions in his school from having contributed to the epidemic. In his first letter, Dickens summarised their position thus: '[o]f all the wonders ever wondered at, nothing perhaps had ever occurred more wonderful than the outbreak and rapid increase of a disorder so horrible, in a place so perfectly regulated. There was no warning of its approach. Nothing was less to be expected'.[95] Dickens clearly finds ridiculous this notion of an inexplicable phenomenon unrelated to preceding conditions. It is something he also ridicules in his depiction of Guster, who although she 'cannot fail to have been developed under the most favourable circumstances, "has fits"—which the parish can't account for' [p. 144]. When members of the recently established Board of Health subsequently visited Drouet's school, they found it to be actually overcrowded and unsanitary and the children to be neglected and undernourished. Dickens approvingly describes these latter investigators as being motivated by the belief that 'such grievous effects must have some grievous causes'.[96]

The findings of the Board of Health inspectors, Dickens notes, confirmed that 'the age of miracles is past, and of all conceivable places in which pestilence might — or rather must — be expected to break out, and to make direful ravages, Mr Drouet's model farm stands foremost'.[97] Dickens here scornfully repudiates recourse to the miraculous, the wonderful and the unaccountable as simply an evasive tactic on the part of those actually responsible for catastrophe. He was furious when Drouet was eventually acquitted on the grounds that there was no way to establish for sure that the disease would not have broken out if conditions had been different at the school.[98] Such a judgement depended on the

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[95] Charles Dickens, 'The Paradise at Tooting', *Examiner* (20 January 1849), p. 1.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Charles Dickens, 'A Verdict for Drouet', *Examiner* (23 April 1849), p. 1.

possibility of a causative factor independent of environmental conditions, which would therefore be beyond human reckoning. This possibility Dickens discards by asserting that pestilence not only might but 'must' develop from such conditions as obtained at Drouet's school. The outbreak was both retrospectively accountable, insofar as it developed in accordance with natural causation, and plainly 'conceivable' in advance to the human observer. Dickens's letters on the disaster can be read as an intervention in the contemporary debate on the meaning of the cholera epidemic in which he opts decidedly for a demystified interpretation of the disease, which is applicable to evil in general: 'grievous results must have grievous causes'.[99] He does so, moreover, in order to preserve human agency and responsibility.

The same imperative informs *Bleak House*'s depiction of Mr Krook's death by spontaneous combustion, one of the most controversial episodes in the novel.[100] The narrator gives his explanation for this 'catastrophe' at the end of chapter XXXII and the subsequent chapter is devoted to describing how it is received by the inhabitants of the surrounding court as well as by the official authorities [pp. 479-91]. The former section offers a paradigmatic reading of disaster, one reinforced by the ensuing description of the characters' very different response to what they see as the 'mystery' of the rag-and-bottle merchant's death [p. 483]. Janet Larsen notes that Krook's explosion occurs in 'an atmosphere pregnant with prophetic expectation'.[101] The type of prophecy involved, however, is not one that relies on supernatural revelation but is instead comparable to the predictability of catastrophe insisted upon in naturalistic accounts of cholera. Like cholera, Krook's death is described as being '*in*born, *in*bred, *en*gendered in the corrupted humours

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[99] Dickens, 'The Paradise at Tooting', p. 1.

[100] G. H. Lewes notoriously criticised Dickens for 'giving currency to a common error' in seeming to present spontaneous combustion as a scientific possibility (G.H. Lewes, 'Literature', p. 1189). Consequently when Dickens prepared the complete text of the novel for publication in 1853, he listed a number of scientific accounts of spontaneous combustion in Chapter XXXIII (pp. 490-1) and stood by his description of the phenomenon in the preface accompanying the complete text. Lewes's accusation that Dickens was shirking responsibility by propagating what he saw as a popular superstition clearly rankled, and Dickens insisted in his preface that 'I do not willfully or negligently mislead my readers' [p. 6].

[101] Larsen, *Broken Scripture*, p. 142.

of the body itself, and that only — Spontaneous combustion' [p. 479. My emphasis]. Why 'that only'? The narrator is clearly at pains to exclude the possibility of another causative factor external to Krook's organic condition, the disordered state of which was long evident to all who visited his shop. Esther, for instance, observes his 'breath issuing in visible smoke from his mouth, as if he were on fire within' [p. 62]. It is notable, however, that while Dickens vehemently defended the scientific basis of his description, the text's description of Krook's death uses highly figurative and imprecise language, allowing for the narrator's message to be extended from this specific catastrophe to any evil emerging in any corrupt, 'vicious body', individual, institutional or national [p. 479]. The scene reveals signs, though, of its origin in the discourse surrounding cholera. According to prevailing scientific accounts of how cholera developed from accumulated waste, Krook's shop, in which waste is never disposed of but allowed to pile up — where, Esther notes, 'everything seemed to be bought and nothing to be sold' [p. 61]— would have seemed a fitting site for a catastrophic outbreak. Spontaneous combustion, too, was understood, according to Ann Wilkinson, to occur as a result of the build-up of alcohol within a closed system, which tallies with the description of Krook's constant drinking.[102] The unanticipated explosion is actually, according to this understanding of spontaneous combustion, the result of the gradual accumulation of chemicals in the body with no outlet, just as sanitation reformers argued that cholera epidemics were caused by 'collections of filth' accumulating in unventilated areas.[103]

The reader, however, is left to infer these specific physical causes of Krook's death, while the passage restricts itself to ruling out the possibility of any but immediately proximate causes: it is 'Spontaneous Combustion, and none of the other deaths that can be died' [p. 479]. *Spontaneous* combustion, of course, means precisely combustion occurring

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[102] Ann Y. Wilkinson, 'Bleak House: From Faraday to Judgment Day', *ELH*, 34 (1967) pp. 225-47 (pp. 235-7).

[103] Dr Sutherland, *Appendix A to the Report of the General Board of Health on the Epidemic Cholera*, pp. 1, 17, 94, 38.

in the absence of any external influence.[104] While it may seem alarmingly sudden and unaccountable, it is the predictable result of given conditions. By saying that this is the 'same death eternally' experienced wherever false authority holds sway, the narrator emphasises the constancy of the laws connecting corruption and catastrophe, revealing the absolute necessity of reform. Those in peril might look for external supernatural intervention, just as some confronting cholera wanted to petition divine aid and as, upon discovering Krook's remains, Guppy and Jobling cry out for 'Help, help, help!'— but, the narrator comments, 'none can help' [p. 479].

The omniscient narrator's certain diagnosis of Krook's death is in pointed contrast with how his demise is understood in the surrounding court and beyond. The death creates enormous 'public excitement' as a result of its apparent inexplicability and the coincidence of it taking place in the same building as that other 'mysterious death from opium' [p. 480]. For the second time, a Coroner's inquest is held, an act that draws the reader's attention to the pursuit of causation. Both inquests, however, serve only to thicken the mystery rather than dispel it. At the first inquest, although they ascertain that Captain Hawdon died from an opium overdose, they fail to make known 'any more about him', the jury instead being confused by rumours that the deceased had sold himself to the devil and by Mrs Piper's rambling report of her dream that he had split open her son's head with a pickaxe [p. 161]. The testimony of the sweeping-boy Jo, the only possible source of enlightenment given that he was the only one to have had regular contact with the man, is not admitted [p. 162]. In the case of Krook's death, the inquest fails even to discern the cause, with the coroner informing the Jury that 'that would seem to be an unlucky house next door, gentleman, a destined house; but so we sometimes find it, and these are mysteries we can't account for!' [p. 491]. The absurdity of that phrase 'a destined house' implies the foolishness of this superstitious appraisal, even had the third-person narrator

[104] Oxford English Dictionary, definition 3.a: 'Of natural processes: Occurring without apparent external cause; having a self-contained cause or origin (In 19th cent. use especially of chemical or physical changes)'. (Second Edition, 1989. Accessed online at http://www.oed.com.elib.tcd.ie on 10 June 2013).

not already underlined just how accountable Krook's death actually is. The coroner is not alone, however, in wishing the cause of death to remain a mystery. The reporters, the owner of the Sol's Arms and the local entertainers are all depicted as capitalising on the 'sensation' generated by the event, which is dependent upon the latter seeming inexplicable: 'the less the court understands of all this, the more the court likes it' [pp. 481, 490-1]. The individual characters with which the reader is familiar, moreover, Mr Snagsby and Jobling, react in a way that recalls the superstitious behaviour decried by Charles Kingsley and the author of the *The Laws of Cholera.* Snagsby's response to what he terms 'a dreadful mystery' is an increase in his habitual nervousness and a generalized sense of guilt that he cannot logically attach to any of his actions [p. 483]. The narrator underlines his confusion about causality and therefore about how his actions might relate to the calamity:

> He is not positively prepared to deny that he may have had something to do with it. He has had something—he don't know what—to do with so much in this connexion that is mysterious that it is possible that he may even be implicated, without knowing it, in the present transaction. [p. 483]

Snagsby's sense of guilt depends on his belief that there might be 'some *inconceivable* part in the catastrophe' whose obscurity to him means he cannot rule out his having contributed to it [p. 484. My emphasis]. In his confusion about causal relations and his consequent fear of taking any action, he is reduced to helpless passivity before his wife, Mr Bucket and Mr Tulkinghorn. Mr Jobling is likewise alarmed that his 'conspiracy' with Mr Guppy may have somehow led to Krook's death and refuses any further part in their plots, saying to Guppy that '[w]e shall have *you* taking fire next, or blowing up with a bang' [p. 484].

Bleak House, then, recalls the theological discussion produced by the cholera epidemic of 1848-49 by parodying a mystifying view of catastrophe, associating such an outlook with passive and confused superstition. Much discourse surrounding the cholera

epidemic posited the existence of two rival theodicies, each informed by a different version of religion, one rational and naturalistic, favouring human agency, the other irrational and superstitious, enjoining human beings to a prayerful prostration. *Bleak House*'s sympathy with the former theodicy can no doubt be attributed to Dickens's frustration that the ruling classes were shirking their responsibility for the epidemic by delaying sanitary reform. Not only does the novel establish, by means of its description of Krook's disastrous end, a naturalistic account of catastrophe, but it also utterly undermines recourse to supernatural, mystifying theodicies via its depiction of the deleterious effects of the Court of Chancery.

2.2 'No Man Alive Knows What It Means': The Mystifications of Chancery

The Court of Chancery is *Bleak House*'s most thoroughly worked out symbol for the cultural manufacture of the belief that evil is an inscrutable phenomenon of remote origin, the only possible response to which is submissive patience. Mr Jarndyce describes the proceedings in court as an 'infernal country-dance of costs and fees and nonsense and corruption, as was never dreamed of in the wildest visions of a witch's Sabbath' [p. 108]. The comparison to this latter extreme version of superstitious ritual, in which witches invoke supernatural forces to do their bidding, implies that the court's array of form and ceremony represents a symbolic denial of naturalistic causation. The court's baroque procedures, like the witches' rites, serve to displace agency away from the actors onto a mysterious third party, in this case 'the system'.[105] As J. Hillis Miller has observed, the court presents 'human actions [as] an absurd vaudeville, solemnly performed, but apparently empty of inner meaning'.[106] To the 'uninitiated' peering in, it is impossible to tell what exact relation its ceremonies bear to the legal actions supposed to be performed there [p. 12]. The legal system represents itself as inhospitable to reason, requiring instead

[105] Complaints about the Court of Chancery are invariably met by the individual legal practitioners deflecting responsibility onto the legal system as a whole [pp. 231, 877-8].
[106] Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens*, p. 164.

such humble venerations before its mysteries as that offered by Mr Snagsby, whose legal counterpart is the lawyer Mr Tangle [pp. 15, 374]. That the court represents an enclave of pre-enlightenment thought is suggested by its literal darkness [p. 12]. Of course, the emphasis placed on ceremony, mystery and the subjection of reason in the description of the Court of Chancery lends it a peculiarly Catholic quality. This impression is compounded by the omniscient narrator's division of the novel's characters into the 'initiated' (those in the legal profession) and the 'laity' [pp. 279, 325, 573]. The court is fittingly located in the 'cloisterly Temple' [p. 404]; its 'owlish' [p. 12] aspect recalls the learned pedantry of medieval cloisters; and the Lord Chancellor is adorned in papal 'crimson' regalia [p. 12] . Just as demystifying accounts of the cholera epidemic ended up denominating 'sermons', Scotch masses and Popish fasts as all alike superstitious, this depiction of Chancery seeks to discredit the mysterious – anything that is not 'plain and to the purpose' in Jarndyce's terms [p. 876] — by characterising it as essentially Catholic and therefore superstitious. The depiction of Chancery, and especially its most impenetrable of cases, Jarndyce and Jarndyce, is as much informed by the problem of evil, as it was made manifest in the years following the cholera epidemic, as the novel's naturalistic account of Krook's death. The recent catastrophes, both cholera and famine, are actually recalled in the language used to describe the destructive effects of Chancery. The Court is 'pestilent' and has 'its *blighted* lands in every shire', while the narrator wonders how many lives its most notorious case has 'stretched forth its unwholesome hand to *spoil* and *corrupt*' [pp. 12, 13, 15. My emphasis]. Jarndyce later comments that Richard's 'blood is infected' by the case, his 'manly qualities [...] touched by that fatal blight' [pp. 373, 517]. Jarndyce and Jarndyce, moreover, operates precisely in the way demystifying accounts of the cholera described the superstitious theodicy that they opposed. Preoccupation with the meaning of a remote and inscrutable 'Cause' leads to the suspension of human agency and consequently to ruin.

Although the predisposing physical conditions favouring the spread of cholera were known, its ultimate source, what contemporary writers termed its "final cause", remained, like the cause of potato blight, in 'obscurity'.[107] Proponents of naturalistic understandings of the disease, however, argued that trying to figure out this final cause was futile and distracted from the important work of taking action based on was what known of its proximate causes. 'The truth is', one American medical expert wrote, in language very resonant of *Bleak House*'s depiction of Chancery, that

> this anxiety to solve final causes, and to lay bare the ultimate operations of nature will ever, as in this instance [i.e. cholera], lead the inquirer into inexplicable labyrinths, and at last terminate in complete discomfiture.[108]

An 'all-wise Ruler,' he added, had clearly intended that human beings should limit inquiry to 'effects and results' rather than those 'secret and intangible causes which must ever elude the grasp of the most astute finite philosophy'.[109] *Bleak House* similarly exposes the futility and paralysing effects of trying to unravel the mystery of the 'endless cause' that is Jarndyce and Jarndyce [p. 12]. This cause is both remote, relating as it does to a will made 'years upon years ago', and inscrutable: 'no man alive knows what it means' [p. 14]. Mr Jarndyce's description of the case suggests that it serves as an oblique comment on the pernicious effects of searching out God's 'Will' to the detriment of human wellbeing:

> It's about a Will [...]. In the question how the trusts under that Will are to be administered, the fortune left by the Will is squandered away; the legatees under the Will are reduced to such a miserable condition that they would be sufficiently punished, if they had committed an enormous crime in having money left them; and the Will itself is made a dead letter. [p. 108]

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[107] Anon., 'Lawson on Cholera', *The Western Lancet and Hospital Reporter* (November 1848), pp. 257-80 (p. 269).
[108] Ibid.
[109] Twelve years after *Bleak House* in 1866, Dickens himself made the same case quite explicitly in an article on cholera published in *All the Year Round*: 'For the past thirty years, people have been asking, What is cholera? Whence comes it? How can its return be prevented? [...] We may fairly pass with slight considerations any hypothetical, dreamy, or superstitious notions respecting its final causes' (Charles Dickens, 'All the World Akin', *All the Year Round* (7 October 1865), p. 250-252 (p. 252).

The reader is struck by the repetition of 'Will', not usually capitalised in this manner mid-sentence,[110] apart from when referring to the Will of God. Moreover, the allusion to the Will being made a 'dead letter' carries unmistakable Christian overtones, due to the common charge that overly severe or outdated versions of Christianity emphasised the 'dead letter' of Old-Testament law at the expense of the living spirit of the New Testament.[111] This distinction accords with the accompanying suggestion that these searchers of the Will have converted what was originally a benevolent legacy into a punishment for some 'enormous crime', a charge similar to that which Dickens had levelled at sabbatarian Christians: the day which his Maker intended as 'a blessing, man has converted into a curse'.[112] Edward Bickersteth had described the New Testament as 'the will of our gracious Redeemer, full of noble gifts and legacies, confirmed to us by the death of the testator'.[113] In fact, the New Testament itself described Christ as a 'testator' whose will could only come into force after his death.[114] Read in this theological context, we might see the Court of Chancery as representing the religious leaders who have, according to *Bleak House*, claimed exclusive jurisdiction over interpreting the legacy of Christ and had so complicated and darkened it that its original meaning was lost. Speaking of those who attributed the cholera epidemic to an inscrutable divine judgement, Charles Kingsley had condemned those who talked 'about God's will as something so very deep and unfathomable, that poor human beings cannot be expected to find it out.[115] This is, of course, precisely how *Bleak House*'s lawyers represent the Jarndyce will.

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[110] It is not capitalized in Mr Gridley's explanation of the circumstances that involved him in the Court of Chancery [p. 230].

[111] Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, for instance, announced that the 'dead Letter of Religious [must] own itself dead, and drop piecemeal into dust, if the living spirit of religion, freed from its charnel-house, is to arise on us'; see *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1831), p. 80.

[112] Charles Dickens ["Timothy Sparks"], 'Sunday under Three Heads' (London: Chapman & Hall, 1836), p. 29.

[113] Edward Bickersteth, *A Scripture Help,* p. 79.

[114] Hebrews 9:15-17.

[115] Kingsley, 'Second Sermon on the Cholera', p. 177.

Liberal Christians argued that the preoccupation with working out God's will and the belief that it was something complex and mysterious, effectively discouraged people from acting in accordance with what in fact was God's will, that they do good in this world. Thus Thomas Arnold, whom Dickens admired,[116] counselled a young man who came to him distressed by the problem of moral evil that, instead of being perplexed by trying to work out the origin of such evil, he should 'struggl[e] against it and attempt to put an end to it'.[117] Arnold held Christ up as the ideal model of someone who 'repell[ed] all questions of curiosity, and reprov[ed] in particular such as had a tendency to lead men away from their great business, – the doing good to themselves and others'.[118] *Bleak House* likewise represents the preoccupation with deciphering the Jardynce Will as being at odds with human action. Just as nothing is ever achieved in court, the suitors, such as Mr Gridley, Miss Flite and Richard Carstone, put their lives on hold, investing all their hopes in the resolution of the case. Mystification begets inaction and negligence. According to Jarndyce, his great uncle Tom Jarndyce had spent his days 'poring' over the suit, 'hoping against hope to disentangle it from its mystification and bring it to a close. In the meantime, the place became dilapidated…' [p. 109]. Mystification and stagnation are most closely united in the imagery of mud, described as being at its thickest in the vicinity of the Court of Chancery [p. 12]. The latter is described symbolically as 'groping and floundering' in 'mire,' suggesting that its obscurantist habits, muddying what ought to be 'simple' matters [p. 231], impede any progress both in the suits and in the lives of the suitors who get drawn, like Richard, into trying to solve the mystery themselves.

The depiction of the effects of Chancery thus recapitulates the vision of human responsibility being impaired by mystification and deference to remote causation that we have already seen in contemporary discussions of the meaning of cholera. Those suitors

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[116] See Walder, *Dickens and Religion,* p. 11.
[117] *Letter from Thomas Arnold to a Person distressed by Sceptical Doubts, Rugby, 24 June 1835*, reproduced in Arthur Penhryn Stanley's *The Life and Correspondence of Thomas Arnold*, 2 vols (London: B. Fellowes, 1845), I, p. 426.
[118] Ibid.

who pin all their hopes on the outcome of the case resemble believers in supernatural intervention. Thus Jarndyce's warning to Richard about the Heathen wagoner, to which I referred at the beginning of this chapter, encourages us to interpret Richard's subsequent behaviour as being comparable to praying for divine aide rather than taking personal responsibility. The description of Miss Flite as awaiting some 'incomprehensible judgement' is similarly suggestive, given that the word 'judgement', particularly one held to be inscrutable, was associated with interpretations of evil as a special interposition of the divine will into the common course of nature [p. 13].[119] Trusting in the case, moreover, means expecting that what has had the same effect numerous times will somehow have a different outcome. It is emphasised that every single suitor who ever got drawn into the case, including Richard Carstone by the novel's end, has gone the same ruinous way. To expect otherwise, Jarndyce remarks, is to expect to gather 'grapes from thorns, or figs from thistles,' or again, to expect 'moss-roses' to grow from wig powder — that is, to expect a breakdown in natural cause-and-effect [pp. 848-49]. '[L]ittle short of a miracle could bring any good out of it to anyone', is Esther's similar observation [p. 365]. Even those in the legal profession privately concur, one lawyer implying that they were as likely to get through Jardyce and Jarndyce as it was to rain potatoes [p. 14].

The irrationality of such expectations is underlined by the fact that the case's most ardent suitor is the 'mad' Miss Flite, who has been unable to learn from what happened to the rest of her family:

> 'My father expected a judgment', said Miss Flite. 'My brother. My sister. They all expected a judgment. The same that I expect'.
> 'They are all—'
> 'Ye-es. Dead of course, my dear', said she. [p. 522]

[119] One demystifying work on the cholera, whose author took the telling pseudonym "Sensus Communus" was entitled 'The Cholera: No Judgement!' (cited in Gilbert, *Cholera and Nation*, pp. 31-2).

Miss Flite's continued expectations depend on the possibility that what has always been a fixed sequence will be disrupted in her case. Jarndyce's refusal to have anything to do with the case is explained as the wisdom of the 'burnt child' [p. 217] — that is, knowing that what has burned once will burn again, he keeps away. That the other suitors persist in hoping that the course of nature will be suspended – that fire will not burn them – is actually an almost inevitable effect of the 'mystification' of the legal system [p. 109]. So impossible is it for them to penetrate the operations of the law, that they cannot know for sure that a judgement will not be forthcoming. Richard, like Tom Jarndyce before him, wastes vast amounts of time, money and energy trying to get at the 'core of that mystery', to no avail [p. 349]. Being, from their perspective,[120] an 'incomprehensible heap of uncertainty', developments of the case seem to them like unpredictable 'chance' [p. 342].[121] The suit has on them the very deleterious effect that rational Christians, beginning with George Berkeley, had often insisted would occur if God's laws were not fixed but permitted occasional supernatural intervention: human foresight and activity, even reason, are completely undermined.[122] William Paley, for instance, defended the constancy of God's natural laws by arguing that 'any dependency upon a supernatural aide, by unfixing those motives which promote exertion, or by relaxing those habits which engender patient industry, might introduce negligence, inactivity and disorder, into the most useful occupations of human life; and therefore deteriorate the conditions of human life itself'.[123]

Paley's words can certainly be applied to Richard, who is unable to commit to any line of work when everything 'seems unsettled, uncertain and confused' [p. 180]. Richard's relation to the case is described as that of a 'gamester, who felt that he was part of a great gaming system' [p. 245], a comparison which suggests that he has disowned

[120] Esther and Jarndyce, while still confused by the case, are in no doubt about its ruinous outcome.
[121] Dickens is clearly capitalizing on double significance in the name of the Court of Chancery.
[122] Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge*, p. 98; William Paley made a similar point, arguing that 'any dependency upon a supernatural aide, by unfixing those motives which promote exertion, or by relaxing those habits which engender patient industry, might introduce negligence, inactivity and disorder, into the most useful occupations of human life; and therefore deteriorate the conditions of human life itself' (*Natural Theology*, II, p. 559.).
[123] Ibid.

responsibility for his own life, putting his faith in the unpredictable and fortuitous. Gambling, like the 'delays and uncertainties' of Chancery, creates the impression of a sphere beyond human control and fathoming, in which outcomes are mysteriously effected. This can be contrasted with what we have already seen of the omniscient narrator's insistence on the predictability of natural evils, given certain conditions. As the author of the *The Laws of Cholera* argued, such predictability was what enabled preventive measures to be taken, thus granting human beings a measure of control over evil. The Chancery suitors, however, are paralysed because they have been misled by legal obfuscations into believing that the relationship between cause and effect is wholly arbitrary and inscrutable, like the interpositions of the divine will into the common course of nature. That Miss Flite has, like Richard, been led by Chancery procedures to believe instead that causation is mysterious is indicated by her interest in omens. She eagerly takes her encounter with the Jarndyce wards as a 'good omen' that a judgement in the case with soon be forthcoming [p. 61]. The relation of this encounter to the forecast outcome is in naturalistic terms an incomprehensible one. It fatalistically positions Miss Flite, moreover, as a mere passive interpreter of events already mysteriously prescribed.[124] Such superstitious fatalism is also evident in Miss Flite's belief that the Court of Chancery's power somehow resides in the Lord Chancellor's 'Mace and Seal', to which she assigns supernatural agency, imagining them 'drawing' people under their influence [p. 523]. She signs over her own agency entirely to this mysterious force, saying 'you *must* expect', though Esther tries to tell her that 'this was not so'. The fantastical nature of what she imagines to be this 'awful secret' is consistent with her generally eccentric behaviour and 'mysterious manner' [p. 522-3]. Although she tells the Jarndyce wards that she has captured and kept her collection of birds with 'an object [they] will readily comprehend' [p. 67] – that is, to release them all again once the case is finished –this pretence that there is some perceptible rationale underlying

[124] We recall that the author of *The Laws of Cholera* accused those who saw the epidemic as mysterious of believing that it followed a 'prescribed course which no human agency can avert or arrest'.

this activity only draws the reader's attention to how actually incomprehensible it is. Her treatment of the birds is, like the ceremonies in court and the 'blank forms of legal process' [pp. 71, 142], an empty ritual, bearing no logical relation with the progress of the case and serving only to underline how mysterious and beyond human reckoning Jarndyce and Jarndyce appears to her.

The depiction of the Court of Chancery and its effects on those under its spell can therefore be said to represent an eschewal of mystifying and supernaturalist interpretations of evil. Even putting aside Dickens's commitment to the cause of sanitary reform, there is no doubt that he inclined personally to the liberal end of the Victorian religious spectrum.[125] His novels, Dennis Walder notes, tended to be welcomed by liberal Christians and reviled by many Evangelicals.[126] Victorian readers were able to recognise Dickens's theological sympathies in features of his works that might be overlooked today, such as the reliance in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1) upon signs of God's benevolence in the natural world rather than upon scripture.[127] It is not that Dickens neglected scripture entirely; in fact, he was devoted to the New Testament. But this devotion was largely owing to his belief that Jesus Christ modelled a way of practically working to better the world to which Dickens held the prevailing religious temperament to be an impediment. Accordingly, in a letter to Emmeley Gotschalk in 1851, he advised her to 'dismiss' her 'speculations' about 'what we call evil things' and focus instead on her 'duty', adding that '[o]ur saviour did not sit down in the world and muse, but labored and did good'.[128] Dickens believed that theologians and clergymen, by their 'audacious interposition' between the New Testament and the common people, had destroyed the 'sublime

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[125] According to Linda Woodhead, 'liberal' Christians can be defined as those who 'rejected transcendent forms of Christianity while retaining Christian allegiance'. A 'stress on the greater importance of deeds (particularly service of one's fellow humans) than doctrines and dogmas became a defining mark' of such Christians, she writes ('Introduction', *Reinventing Christianity*, p. 6).
[126] Walder, *Dickens and Religion*, p. 3.
[127] Ibid., p. 76.
[128] *Letter from Charles Dickens to Miss Emily Gotschalk, 16th July 1851*, in *Letters*, VI, ed. by Graham Storey and Kathleen Tillotson, pp. 431-2 (pp. 431-2).

simplicity' of its ethic of good works.[129] He objected to the tendency of the country's religious leaders to substitute the 'letter' of the gospel for its 'spirit', 'to the extraordinary confusion of ignorant minds'.[130]

Confused and ignorant minds are plentiful in *Bleak House*, and in the world of the novel, it is the legal profession that is the source of their perplexity. True to their names, characters like the 'afflicted stationer' Snagbsy and Jobling are confounded in the face of mysteries not of their making [pp. 117, 374]. The 'snag' in the former name suggests the experience of unravelling a mystery, only for it to catch on an obstruction of some sort, thwarting pursuit of the thread, while *Job*ling alludes to the archetypal Old Testament sufferer who must learn to submit to God's incomprehensible decrees. Snagsby, really 'blameless' like the righteous Job despite his sense of culpability, uses Joban language when he declares, 'I find myself wrapped around with secrecy and mystery, till my life is a burden to me'.[131] Janet Larsen has noted other parallels with the Book of Job in the novel.[132] The difference, however, is that while *Job* dramatizes what readers are meant to take as an essential truth, the impenetrability of God's ways by human inquiry, the mysteries besetting *Bleak House*'s characters have nothing to with the inherent nature of things but are shown to be fabricated and perpetuated by powerful predators like Mr Tulkinghorn.[133] We are told that Snagsby's sense of being involved in some imponderable secret is chiefly owing to his 'veneration for all mysteries presided over by' the deeply secretive Tulkinghorn [p. 374]. The latter is described as 'the steward of the legal mysteries' and as being 'surrounded by a mysterious halo of family confidences' [p. 20]. The lawyer is himself 'impenetrable' [p. 21]. That he could be said to almost embody

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[129] *Letter from Charles Dickens the Rev. David Macrae, 1861*, in *Letters,* IX, ed. by Graham Storey, pp. 556-57 (p. 556).

[130] Charles Dickens, Preface to the Cheap Edition of *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (1847), cited in Walder, *Dickens and Religion*, p. 17.

[131] Job 7: 20 (for the complaint that he has become a burden to himself); 3:23 (for an image of man's 'light' being rendered useless by his way being 'dark' and his being 'hedged in'; 10:15 (for a reference to Job being 'full of confusion', although his anguish in general is occasioned by his inability to understand why he is suffering).

[132] Larsen, *Broken Scripture,* pp. 125-30.

mystery is underlined by the fact that in a novel which associates the literal absence of light with obscurantism —as when the narrator observes in the opening chapter how suited is the dim sunless day to Chancery procedures [p. 12] —Tulkinghorn's clothes are so black that they 'never shine' [p. 20]. He is of 'the old school', moreover, his 'rusty' 'old-fashioned' *ancien regime* dress of knee breeches tied with ribbons suggestive of his role as a pre-enlightenment throwback. As one of the third-person narrator's images—the law throwing dust into the eyes of the laity [p. 325] —indicates, the public's confused superstition is just what its exploiters depend upon and have ensured. Those who preside over the mysteries of the law are treated here in the same way that Dickens treated obscurantist theologians and clergymen.

Defenders of the legal system, like Mr Kenge, silence public protest about the evils they cause, by suggesting that such complaint is borne of narrow 'prejudice', an inability to take an impartial perspective of a system so generally beneficial. In his preface to the complete novel, Dickens reported that a Chancery judge had insisted in his presence that 'the Court of Chancery, though the shining subject of much popular prejudice (at which point I thought the Judge's eye had a cast in my direction), was almost immaculate' [p. 5]. 'We are the victims of prejudice,' *Bleak House*'s vampiric lawyer Mr Vholes complains [p. 854]; 'Prejudice, prejudice' is likewise Mr Kenge's response to Mr Jarndyce's assertion that no good can come of the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case [p. 877]. Mr Kenge goes on to chide Jarndyce for being 'bent, even with your enlarged mind, on the popular prejudice' against the legal system [p. 878]. Kenge's dismissal of Jarndyce's objections as the mere effect of ignorance is parodied in Mr Krook's parenthetical comments on those neighbours who liken him to the Lord Chancellor because all his stock is going to ruin '(but *they* know nothing)' and because he cannot bear to part with anything he has laid hold of '(or so my neighbours think, but what do *they* know?)' [p. 63]. Despite Kenge's appeal to an enlarged

perspective, however, the system clearly relies on this continued ignorance among the public. Consider the narrator's ironic description of how it is defended:

> The one great principle of the English law is, to make business for itself. There is no other principle distinctly, certainly, and consistently maintained through all its narrow turnings. Viewed by this light it becomes a coherent scheme, and not the monstrous maze the laity are apt to think it. Let them but once clearly perceive that its grand principle is to make business for itself at their expense, and surely they will cease to grumble.
>
> But, not perceiving this quite plainly — only seeing it by halves in a confused way — the laity sometimes suffer in peace and pocket, with a bad grace, and do grumble very much. [p. 573]

There are unmistakable parallels between this passage and theological defences of evil. The claim it parodies is that it is only the limited perspective of the public that prevents malcontents like Mr Jarndyce and Mr Gridley from appreciating what is overall a 'coherent scheme'. Were they to achieve a total view of the system, they would supposedly acquiesce uncomplainingly. The description of the laity's obscured perspective evokes St. Paul's assurance that although 'now we see through a glass darkly' and 'in part,' believers will one day be granted total apocalyptic clarity.[134] Of more relevance, however, to *Bleak House*'s interest in the part played by theodicies in practical social and political matters, is the passage's claim that 'grumbling' about evil arises from a limited partial perspective, an inevitable ignorance of the operations of a generally beneficial 'scheme' or 'system. This form of post-enlightenment theodicy was one commonly used in early nineteenth-century culture to prevent interference with the status quo.

2.3 'Things Lazily Adapted Themselves to Purpose': The Theodicy of Non-Interference

[134] 1 Corinthians 3:12.

The first British writer to incorporate the alleged perfection of the social system into his vindication of God was the Anglican divine William King, who in his *De Origine Mali* (1701) anticipated G. W. Leibniz's claim that the world as it was constituted represented the 'very best' possible one:

> You'll say that some particular things might have been better. But since you do not thoroughly understand the whole, you have no right to affirm this much. We have much greater reason to presume that no one part of it could be changed for the better, without greater detriment to the rest.[135]

This was a negative apology for evil, which was premised on the impenetrability of God's system by the finite human mind. King's argument reached a wider audience as a result of Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man* (1734), which asserted, in language resembling *Bleak House*'s ironic defence of the legal system, that this world, which seemed 'a mighty maze,' was nevertheless not 'without a plan'.[136] 'Wisdom Infinite' has formed the best 'system,' in which everything was related through 'strong connections, nice dependencies, / Gradations just'.[137] Man was in no position, then, to evaluate the entire scheme, being ignorant of how any partial injustice or suffering he perceived might be necessary to the perfection of the system: '[r]especting man, whatever wrong we call, / May, must be right, as relative to all. / Tis but a part we see, and not a whole'.[138] This theodicy operated, then, by obfuscating rather than explaining the workings of God's goodness, wisdom and justice in the world. It invalidated complaint by stressing the inscrutability of the system and the limitation of the human perspective. As William Paley argued, 'imperfection, inaccuracy, liability to disorder, occasional irregularities [...] ought to be referred to some cause,

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[135] William King, *An Essay on the Origin of Evil*, trans. by Edmund Law (Cambridge: W. Thurlbourn & J. Woodyer, 1758), p. 137.
[136] Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man, or the first book of ethic epistles to H. St. John L. Bolinbroke* (published 1733-34), *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. by John Butt (Methuen & Co, Suffolk, 1963), pp. 501-47 (p. 504).
[137] Pope, *Essay on Man*, p. 505.
[138] Ibid., p. 506.

though we be ignorant of it, other than defect of knowledge or benevolence in the author [God]'.[139] As he observed of the human ability to interpret God's system in general,

> our situation is precisely like that of an unmechanical looker-on, who stands by a stocking-loom, a corn-mill, a carding-machine, or a threshing-machine, at work, the fabric and mechanism of which, as well as all that passes within, is hidden from his sight by the outside case; or if seen, would be too complicated for his uninformed, uninstructed understanding to comprehend.[140]

Being unable to judge how its individual parts contribute to the overall effect, such a 'looker-on' should hesitate before judging any one part to be an absolute evil.

This defence of evil can be said to have smuggled in superstition under the guise of enlightenment, as does Mr Kenge when he recommends an enlarged perspective from the very pit of mystification. This type of theodicy posited that that since God worked by means of impartial, only generally beneficial, laws, any judgement of his goodness, wisdom or justice would have to be comprehensive enough to take in his entire scheme. Such an all-inclusive judgement was impossible, however, the perspective of any individual sufferer being inevitably partial, just any individual evil was but a part that contributed to the unimpeachable whole. Because suffering was always incidental to some beneficial law, although precisely how might be beyond human fathoming, any removal of that suffering, by God or man, would actually make the world worse. In effect, this meant that people had to take the goodness of the overall system on faith alone, despite any sufferings they underwent.

It is no accident that the legal system is shown in *Bleak House* to use such a theodicy to resist external interference. Nineteenth-century defences of non-interference often made the case that 'pernicious legislation' interfered only 'to mar the mechanism' which had already come perfect from the Creator and the operations of which were ultimately beyond human probing. Thomas Chalmers's *Bridgewater Treatise* lamented at

[139] Paley, *Natural Theology*, pp. 60-63.
[140] Ibid., p. 95.

length human attempts to 'traverse the processes of a better mechanism instituted by the wisdom of God, through the operation of another mechanism devised by a wisdom of their own'.[141] Writers for the Whig *Edinburgh Review* had likewise long warned against tampering with the 'great arrangements of Nature' or trying to 'counteract the benevolent arrangements of Providence'.[142] Such writers supported their argument by pointing to the disastrous results of legislation intended to mitigate evils, such as the Poor Laws and the Corn Laws. To the shortsighted human perspective, these must have seemed like wise and benevolent acts of legislation. Their long-term 'evil consequences,' pauperization and starvation, testified, however, to the danger of allowing the 'wisdom of man [to come] into conflict and collision with the wisdom of God'.[143] Only in retrospect had it become clear that the apparent evils of poverty and fluctuating grain prices had all along served unexpected beneficial purposes, which human meddling had then counteracted.[144] Elaine Freedgood has argued that by claiming that economic and social relations were regulated by divine laws beyond human control, nineteenth-century political economists 'authorized inaction in the face of increasingly evident social problems'.[145] Such claims worked to mystify the social system at the expense of human agency. They established an antagonism between human agency and divine wisdom, which meant that the best results were achieved only when individuals were ignorant or 'unconscious' of how their part related to the beneficent whole.[146] Interference was prohibited on the grounds that the social system, being composed, from the human perspective, 'by unseen and unguessed relations',[147]

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[141] Chalmers, *On the Power, Wisdom, and Goodness of God*, I, p. 230.
[142] Anon., 'The Causes and Cure of Pauperism', *Edinburgh Review* (February 1818), pp. 263-302 (p. 285); Anon., 'The Standard of National Prosperity', *Edinburgh Review* (March 1823), pp.1-31 (p. 18); Anon., 'Distress in the Manufacturing Districts — Causes and Remedies', *Edinburgh Review* (February 1843), pp. 190-227 (p. 227); Anon., 'Unsound Social Philosophy', *Edinburgh Review* (October 1849), pp. 496-524 (pp. 503, 512, 519); Anon., 'English Agriculture in 1852', *Edinburgh Review* (July 1852), pp.142-76 (pp. 165-6).
[143] Chalmers, *On the Power, Wisdom and Goodness of God*, II, p. 3, pp. 30-1.
[144] Anon., 'The Causes and Cure of Pauperism', p. 285; Anon., 'Standard of National Prosperity', p. 18; Anon., 'Abolition of the Corn Laws', *Edinburgh Review* (October 1824), pp. 55-78 (pp. 76-7); Anon., 'Unsound Social Philosophy', pp. 503-8.
[145] Freedgood, *Victorian Writing about Risk*, p. 46.
[146] Chalmers, *On the Power, Wisdom and Goodness of God*, II, pp. 35-6.
[147] Anon., 'Providential and Prophetic Histories', *Edinburgh Review* (January 1830), pp. 286-344 (p. 308).

could be interfered with (as with William King's claim about God's system in general) only to be made worse. As Eleanour Courtemanche observes of the philosophy undergirding nineteenth-century *laissez-faire* attitudes, there was a 'superstitious element' to arguments that centered on 'the naïve individual to whom all economic activity appears random and who cannot guess at the underlying laws'.[148] Christianized versions of *laissez-faire* philosophy therefore normalized an attitude of passive superstition before the mysterious mechanism of the social system. They implied the superfluity of human reform efforts, given that the social system's self-regulating '*vis conservatrix*' spontaneously countered every 'threatened evil, from whatever quarter it may proceed'.[149] As Frank M. Turner observes, the attribution of 'contemporary social arrangements' to the 'wisdom of God [...] undergirded the correctness of the British social order and similarly foiled the mischief of social critics'.[150]

Bleak House's allusion to this mystifying defence of evil is clearly significant, given the novel's critique of the political and social ethos of non-intervention. Lauren Goodlad has argued that the novel represents Dickens's 'most trenchant plea for paternalistic intervention at the very point when nineteenth-century *laissez-fairism* was resurgent.'[151] The world of *Bleak House* has been struck by a 'general paralysis',[152] reflected in its opening overview of a society in a state of 'suspended animation'.[153] London is described as being layered with 'crust upon crust of mud', which we are invited, I have already suggested, to read symbolically as reflective of a country 'floundering' and at a standstill [pp. 11-12]. Hence, the narrator emphasises the obstructive nature of the 'mire', which impedes movement through the streets. The 'muddy streets are muddiest' near the Court of Chancery, depicted as likewise inimical to progress and action [p. 12].

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[148] Eleanour Courtemanche, *The 'Invisible Hand' and British Fiction, 1818-1860: Adam Smith, Political Economy and The Genre of Realism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2011), p. 51.
[149] McCosh, *Divine Government*, p. 234.
[150] Turner, *Contesting Cultural Authority*, p. 108.
[151] Goodlad, *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State*, p. 102.
[152] Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens*, p. 179.
[153] Newsome, *The Victorian World-Picture*, p. 25.

This diagnosis of institutionalised paralysis is extended to the ruling class as represented by the landed gentry and by Parliament. The former, of course, is embodied in the almost stationary Sir Leicester Dedlock, who is alarmed at every prospect of change. Sir Leicester is intermittently literally prostrate throughout the text, owing to both the family gout and his subsequent stroke [pp. 234, 792]. Boythorn indeed likens him to a stopped clock [p. 294]. Parliament, largely composed of individuals like Sir Leicester, is unsurprisingly represented as putting off action or 'moving on' of any kind in favour of rhetoric and theory [pp. 285, 654].

Bleak House's evident animus against *laissez-faire* theory and practice was shared by many of Dickens's contemporaries in the aftermath of a series of national catastrophes that seemed to show the dismal shortcomings of the non-interventionist approach. An article in *Blackwood's Magazine* in June 1848, for instance, complained that

> The long-protracted distress from 1838 to 1841 and the dreadful suffering of 1847-8, have been alike unable to extort for British suffering one farthing in aid of the national industry from the Chancellor of the Exchequer. The principle *laissez faire* has prevailed alike over the strongest claims of justice and the most piteous tales of suffering.[154]

An 1847 *Times* article likewise argued that events had shown the 'enormous error' the government had committed 'by leaving men and things too much to themselves, and placing a fatal confidence in the moderation and wisdom of society'.[155] It criticised the proponents of *laissez-faire* for having placed too much faith in 'the social machine', which 'was sure to work well, we were assured, only leave it alone'.[156] These comments from both articles indicate how much *laissez-faire* could appear to function as a form of blind faith, asking its adherents to close their eyes to immediate suffering and look instead to the overall system.

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[154] Anon., 'How to Disarm the Chartists', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (June 1848), pp. 656-73 (p. 660).
[155] Anon., 'Among the Questions of the Day There Are Some', *The Times* (18 May 1847), p. 6.
[156] Ibid.

Bleak House is highly alert to this element of superstition at the heart of the allegedly enlightened theories undergirding the institutionalized passivity it decries. The novel suggests that governmental inaction is enabled by a form of mystification that diminishes human agency and deflects responsibility for the country's ills from those in power onto an inscrutable system. This mystification is shown in turn to depend upon and produce a public heathenishly confused. In his letters to the *Examiner* on the cholera outbreak at Tooting, Dickens had already compared the mystifications of British institutions to a form of superstitious ritual. He claimed that the authorities responsible for the disaster, not only Mr Drouet, but also the state-appointed Poor Law guardians who had initially vindicated Drouet, managed to escape charges only because the legal system trying them was set up to unduly complicate and obscure what were simple matters of cause-and-effect. The 'toiling multitudes', Dickens argued, were in sore need of plain dealing by those in power, because they were already 'dazed' by their sufferings under 'complicated commercial circumstances difficult to be explained to them'.[157] Instead of taking due responsibility for their part in the suffering of the pauper children at Tooting, however, which would have rendered the relationship between 'governors and the governed' [...] in a fair, bold hand that all may read', those in power sought to 'bewilder' the public with 'official gabble'.[158] In his third letter, before the verdict but at the point that Dickens began to have misgivings as a result of how the trial was being conducted, he accused not only the British legal system but all British institutions, including the Church, Parliament and the Royal Court, of engaging in heathenish mystification. Referring to an exhibition of Native American customs at the Egyptian Hall which had a caused a stir some years before, he recalled how 'mightily entertained' were the public

> to observe how necessary 'medicine,' or mystery, was to the greater part of their proceedings; and how impossible the red men considered it to set

[157] Charles Dickens, 'The Tooting Farm,' *Examiner* (27 January 1849), p. 2.
[158] Ibid.

> hopefully about any grave undertaking without divers preliminary conjurations from the 'medicine man'.[159]

These 'conjurations' which apparently consisted of dancing rituals performed by the medicine man, the effect of which was to infuse any proceeding with an air of 'mystery', Dickens likened to the 'perplexing and complicated mysteries' and ridiculous 'ceremonies' afflicting British institutions. 'Really,' he wrote, 'the custom obtains quite as extensively among the white men of England'.[160]

This image of the white heathen brings to mind *Bleak House*'s sweeping-boy Jo who, though English, is in 'soul a heathen' [p. 669]. The characterisation of Jo establishes a connection between heathenism and an ignorance so thorough that the world is reduced to an 'unintelligible mess' [p. 375]. Jo's most common phrase is 'I don't know nothink!' [p. 237]. He is shown to be constantly perplexed, with everything he sees being 'puzzling', 'mysterious' and 'unaccountable' [pp. 236-7]. Being unable to discern any order in the world around him, he perceives the city as a 'great tee-totum', an image of random casualty that disrupts any notion of cause-and-effect [p. 237]. The city 'whirls and spins' before his bewildered gaze, just as Dickens had described the medicine-man 'dancing around and around' the heathen believers 'in a wild manner'.[161] This is only an extreme version of the confusion afflicting many of the novel's other characters. We have already seen that Snagsby 'cannot make out what it is that he has had to do with. Something is wrong, somewhere; but what something, what may come of it, to whom, when and from which unthought of and unheard of quarter, is the puzzle of his life' [p. 374]. His mysterious interview with Mr Tulkinghorn haunts him with the prospect that there might be other spheres hidden from him, leaving him perplexed and paralysed. His servant Guster has likewise been led by her time in Tooting (associated in Dickens's mind, we have already seen, with institutional mystification) to hold comically confused notions of

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[159] Charles Dickens, 'The Recorder's Charge', *Examiner* (3 March 1849), p. 1.
[160] Ibid.
[161] Dickens, 'Recorder's Charge', p. 1.

causation, believing that the creaking of Mrs Snagbsy's marital espionage is caused by there being 'buried money underneath the cellar, guarded by an old man with a white beard, who cannot get out for seven thousand years, because he said the Lord's Prayer backwards' [p. 375].

This superstitious attitude ensures that Guster regards the law with 'mingled dread and veneration' [p. 174]. The lawyers produce an attitude of submissive 'awe' in characters like Snagsby and Guster not by their actions but through the impressive grandeur of their 'robes and coronets, the stars and garters' of their profession [p. 374]. This mystification enables the legal system to resist reform. It both insists on its absolute necessity to the wellbeing of the country as a whole [pp. 278-9], and is deliberately obscure about precisely how it ensures this wellbeing. It passes itself off as a 'great Palladium', a term which refers to the mythological statue upon which the safety of ancient Athens allegedly inscrutably depended.[162] Such a claim clearly forbids interference because it suggests that the legal system bears an unfathomable relation to the safety of the country. It ensures the preservation of even this manifestly unjust and dysfunctional system by implying that the inability of an on-looker to detect any discernable way in which it contributes to national wellbeing is only to be expected. This pre-Christian allusion, moreover, shows the reliance of the system upon a heathenish public.

The dependence of institutional evil upon an obscurantist form of theodicy is also made evident in the novel by the arguments used by members of the ruling class to resist reform. Sir Leicester Dedlock, for instance,

> regards the Court of Chancery, even if it should involve an occasional delay of justice and a trifling amount of confusion, as a something devised in conjunction with a variety of other somethings, by the perfection of human wisdom, for the eternal settlement (humanly speaking) of everything. And he is upon the whole of a fixed opinion, that to give the sanction of his countenance

[162] According to Charles Kingsley's novel *Alton Locke* (1850), a contemporary Tory publication 'had talked about the English constitution, and the balance of queen, lords, and commons, as the 'Talismanic Palladium' of the country'; see *Alton Locke*, I, p. 86.

> to any complaints respecting it, would be to encourage some person in the lower classes to rise up somewhere — like Wat Tyler. [p. 22]

There is an obvious confusion in this passage about how the different parts — the 'somethings'—of the social system relate to each other, which explains Sir Leicester's horror of any change whatever, given that he has no idea that such change will not somehow lead to revolution. He is equally unclear about whether institutions like the Court of Chancery are of divine or human 'devis[ing]', an uncertainty that would also forbid interference. The insertion of the parenthetical 'humanly speaking' into his muddied reasoning indicates how close this line of thinking comes to blasphemously imputing human institutional abuses to God's wisdom. The members of the legal profession, likewise, respond to any alteration proposed by the discontented public by observing that such reform would ruin a class of men that 'the social system cannot afford' to lose:

> Alter this law, sir, and what will be the effect of your rash proceeding on a class of practitioners very worthily represented, allow me to say to you, by the opposite attorney in the case, Mr Vholes? Sir, that class of practitioners would be swept from the face of the earth. [p. 574]

The complexity of the social system, however, means that there will always be such a class of men the impact of reform on whom the public will have neglected to take into account, just as Christian apologists like William King reminded their readers that the complexity of God's system meant that they could not alter any part of it 'without detriment to the rest'. This is why both narrators (and Mr Jarndyce) represent the Court of Chancery as an *unmixed* evil, an abuse 'that can never come to good' [p. 15].

Bleak House's depiction of the character Harold Skimpole, above all, highlights Dickens's sensitivity to the theological and philosophical claims that underwrote the non-interventionist approach his novel opposes. Skimpole, based on the 'apostle of

cheerfulness' Leigh Hunt,[163] is both an inveterate optimist and one of the novel's most damagingly irresponsible and negligent characters. He sets himself in opposition to 'worldly grumblers' and those 'growling' individuals (like Jarndyce with his Growlery) who complain about the evils caused by what he sees as a 'system of harmony' [pp. 272, 549]. He brings his cosmic optimism to bear on every problem, from his own carelessness with money to the existence of slavery, insisting that they must serve some beneficial 'purpose' and thus lead to some 'pleasant consequences' [pp. 83-4, 273]. The former, for instance, may have been intended to increase the happiness of people like Mr Jarndyce by granting them the gratification of being his benefactors, while 'one of the pleasanter objects' of the existence of slaves might be to 'people the landscape for [him] and give it a poetry for [him]' [p. 273]. Like the speaker in Pope's poem, this 'runaway logician', as Alexander Welsh calls him, aligns himself with the impartial perspective: he is has 'sympathy for everything', is 'truly cosmopolitan', and 'not warped by prejudices' [pp. 625, 273, 863].[164] The system is to be judged, he claims, not on its individual parts but on 'the general cohesion of things' [p. 864]. Welsh consequently remarks that the novel condemns Skimpole for trying to occupy the position of God, 'whom theology credits for understanding the purpose of evil when we do not'.[165] This neglects the fact that one of the hallmarks of Skimpole's speech is actually a display of epistemological uncertainty. His claim is only ever that '[f]or anything I can tell' or 'for anything I can say', a given evil *may* serve some particular function [pp. 84, 273]. Able to discern the 'agreeable' aspects of even Chancery abuses and injustice, his characteristic comment is 'I don't say it is for that they exist [...] but it may be so' [p. 549]. He is likewise prompted by Esther's illness to muse that 'he *didn't know* but what it *might* be in the scheme of things that A should squint to make B happier in looking straight' and so forth [p. 549. My emphasis]. His optimism is

[163] See my introduction, p. 29.
[164] Alexander Welsh, *Dickens Redressed: The Art of Bleak House and Hard Times* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 97.
[165] Ibid., pp. 99-100.

based not on the fact that he knows what the good of every evil is but that neither he nor anyone can know for certain that no good is served by it. The persistence of the unknown or the uncertain, then, is what enables Skimpole's cheerful tolerance of evil.

When Jarndyce observes that the universe makes 'rather an indifferent parent,' Skimpole characteristically replies 'Oh I don't know!', to which Jarndyce responds 'I think I do' [pp. 84-5]. Jarndyce's declared knowledge of the impersonality of the universe helps explain why he himself assumes parental responsibility for his wards as well as for other vulnerable characters like the child-labourers Charley and Jo. For Skimpole, however, as for Pope, the universe is already so perfectly arranged that the best response is 'to receive things childishly, as they fall out' rather than 'taking trouble' [p. 271]. This do-nothing policy is made to seem all the more necessary by Skimpole's implication that any perception of evil is likely to be merely the result of the individual's inevitably limited perspective. His speech after the death of his creditor 'Coavinses', for instance, insinuates that endeavours to identify and remove evil are misguided:

> Mr Skimpole, himself, had sometimes repined at the existence of Coavinses. [...] There had been times, when, if he had been a Sultan, and his Grand Vizier had said one morning, 'What does the Commander of the Faithful require at the hands of his slave?' he might have even gone so far as to reply, 'The head of Coavinses!' *But what turned out to be the case?* That, *all that time*, he had been giving employment to a most deserving man; that he had been a benefactor to Coavinses; that he had *actually* been enabling Coavinses to bring up these charming children in this agreeable way, developing these social virtues! [p. 233. My emphases.]

Given *Bleak House*'s concern with obstructions to reform, it is surely significant that this speech serves as a warning against removing apparent evils. Skimpole applies the same logic as those who pointed out the errors of legislation intended to remove evils such as poverty. In this view of things, even had Skimpole the power, he would have been mistaken to abolish the evil under which he 'repined', being unable to discern the distant benefits to which they contributed. He later similarly refers to the 'mixture of good and

evil' in the world [p. 549], a phrase which implies that good and evil are so inextricably mixed that it would be foolish to tamper with them.

Skimpole is able to discern the unexpected potential benefits of even Chancery abuses. The frustrations they cause, he argues, actually 'accommodated [Mr Gridley] with the exact thing he wanted' [p. 233], absorbing that superfluous combativeness that might otherwise been put to worse purposes. 'Accommodation' was a notion freighted with theological assumptions. One of William Paley's chief arguments that design was demonstrable in the order of things was the fact that different natural features were so evidently accommodated to meet certain ends (as, for example, the physical constitution of the eye was so wonderfully adapted to meet the purpose of vision in different conditions), while certain fixed physical laws were also adapted to accommodate the respective circumstances of different life forms.[166] Paley's point was that such specific adaptation to achieve certain ends far surpassed the scope of human ingenuity and foresight. Skimpole similarly claims that the surprising benefits he descries both in Gridley being occupied with Chancery and in his own constant need for credit 'illustrated' his principle that 'things lazily adapted themselves to purpose' [p. 232], that is, without being so directed by human agency.

Such assertions disclose the connection between the type of theodicy represented by Harold Skimpole (one that held in tandem the ignorant human perspective and the impartial but unknowable system) and the *laissez-faire* irresponsibility afflicting the world of the novel. The portrayal of the treacherous Skimpole can be taken, along with the account of Krook's death and the symbolic treatment of the Court of Chancery, as exemplifying the demystifying outlook of *Bleak House*'s third-person narrator. This narrator's suspicion of supernaturalist and obscurantist interpretations of evil is mirrored in

[166] Paley, *Natural Theology*, pp. 19-23, 227, 237, 523.

the trajectory of the first-person narrator Esther Summerson, the only character to directly confront Skimpole about his irresponsibility.

2.4 'Guilty and Yet Innocent': Esther Summerson's Reinterpretation of Sin

Esther's psychological growth is shown to depend upon her coming to deny the dark Augustinian vision of her inherited Evangelicalism, which was foisted upon her by her zealously religious aunt and Godmother, Mrs. Barbary.[167] Esther is raised in an atmosphere of secrecy, her aunt having failed to enlighten her about the circumstances of her birth [p. 26]. Her aunt's treatment of her produces a perfect model of what liberal Christians would have interpreted as the superstitious devotee, convinced of her own depravity and general guilt without understanding the cause: 'why am I so different from other children, and why is it my fault?' she pleads with her aunt to explain [p. 26]. When the latter responds with only further daunting obscurity and wrath, suggested in the 'darkened face [which] had such power over me,' Esther, 'kneeling to her,' can only hope to propitiate her with pleas and prostration: 'I put up my trembling little hand to clasp hers, or to beg her pardon with what earnestness I might.' Esther's plight is similar to Mr Snagsby's insofar as she 'confusedly [feels] guilty and yet innocent' of a 'fault [she] was born with' [p. 27]. As her aunt views Esther's as only an extreme case of 'common human sinfulness', we may take the child's perplexity to be a comment on the doctrine of original sin, by which all humanity was held to be guilty and depraved as a result of actions not directly committed

[167] Mrs Barbary is a Dissenting, rather than Anglican, Evangelical, associated as she is with the non-conformist Christianity represented by Mr Chadband. This is consistent with her frequent attendance of church and religious lectures as well as Mr Jarndyce's description of her 'gloomy' and 'distorted religion' [pp. 24, 254]. In his attack on Sabbatarianism, 'Sunday under Three Heads', Dickens had described non-conformist churches as strongholds 'of intolerant zeal and ignorant enthusiasm' ('Sunday under Three Heads', p. 8).

by them but nevertheless mysteriously inherited by them.[168] As J. H. Miller has observed, '[t]here is no acceptance of original sin in Dickens' anthropology. Each human creature comes pure and good from the hand of God'.[169] Esther, however, continues to be haunted as she grows up by her sense of inherited depravity, in particular by her aunt's warning about the sins of others being visited upon her head, 'according to what is written' [p. 26]. This latter phrase is a reference to Exodus 20:5, in which God is described as 'visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me'. It thus endorses an account of evil as a judgement sent by a 'jealous' God for inherited guilt. Although Esther escapes the 'gloomy medium' of this religion [p. 254], it becomes apparent once she discovers the true circumstances of her illegitimate birth that she has never quite cast off this vague sense of being mysteriously doomed by her mother's sin. In the aftermath of Lady Dedlock's revelation, Esther is shown to nearly succumb to superstition. '[C]onfused and shaken,' she feels a sudden 'terror' of herself, becoming, again like Job under inexplicable affliction, 'heavily sorrowful that I'd ever been reared' [p. 539].[170] She suddenly sees a 'new and terrible' meaning in her aunt's language of disgrace; and the phrase 'Pray daily that the sins of others be not visited on your head' returns to her. That the narrator considers herself in retrospect to have been thinking irrationally at this moment is evident from her explanation that she 'could not disentangle all that was about' her. In her confusion, she interprets her distress as a 'visitation,' deserved by the 'blame and shame [that] were all in me'.

The text implies the benighted irrationality of this interpretation by having Esther, under its influence, rush out into the night-time grounds of Chesney Wold, where she is surrounded by shadows and bats [p. 540]. While there, she comes upon the 'Ghost's walk'

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[168] Dickens rejection of the doctrine of Original Sin is well known. See House, *The Dickens World*, p. 112; and Carolyn W. de la L.Oulton, *Literature and Religion in Mid-Victorian England: From Dickens to Eliot* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 96.

[169] Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens*, p. 68.

[170] 'Why died I not from the womb? why did I not give up the ghost when I came out of the belly?' (Job 3:11.)

and becomes convinced that she is herself the fulfilment of the curse allegedly borne by the Dedlock family. As Janet Larsen writes, 'Esther's fantasy of her own evil influence outside any benevolent order [...] unleashes a gothic influx near the Ghost's Walk, temporarily obscuring her religious hope'.[171] This moment, however, is the climax of Esther's superstitious terror, and once back in her room, she realizes how 'wrong and thankless this state was' [p. 543]. Esther's belief that her superstitious episode was 'thankless' recalls the viewpoint of those who argued that to interpret suffering as a mysterious visitation from God was to fail to fully acknowledge divine goodness, wisdom and justice. Like real-life liberal Christians, such as the American Unitarian preacher W. E. Channing, whose sermons prompted Dickens to attend Unitarian services and a volume of whose writings was owned by Dickens, [172] Esther discredits the belief in evil as an inscrutable judgement for transmitted guilt by implying that this is simply incompatible with the evidence of God's goodness she detects in the fact that 'many things had worked together, for my welfare' [p. 543].[173]

This restoration of her faith in God's overriding benevolence is accompanied by Esther's rejection of her godmother's interpretation of scripture: '[I]f the sins of the fathers were sometimes visited upon the children, the phrase did not mean what I had in the morning feared it meant' [p. 543]. Esther is not forthcoming about the new meaning she finds in the scriptural phrase, possibly because by the time *Bleak House* was published, Dickens may have expected his readers to be already familiar with an alternative interpretation of this phrase associated with the cholera epidemic. Charles Kingsley had subtitled his 'Second Sermon on the Cholera', 'Visiting the Sins of the Fathers upon the Children'. In this sermon, he continues his argument that 'cholera, fever and many other diseases were men's own fault' and could only be considered divine judgements insofar as

[171] Larsen, *Broken Scripture*, p. 170.
[172] See Walder, *Dickens and Religion*, pp. 12, 115.
[173] This is a slightly amended version of St. Paul's promise to Christians: 'And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God' (Romans 8:28).

they expressed 'God's plain spoken opinion of the sin of filth and of habits of living unfit for Christian men'.[174] He imagines that some might object that people die of the cholera who are not responsible for the filth in which they live, such as children.[175] 'But, my friends, it must be someone's fault [...]. You dare not lay the blame on God. And yet you do lay the fault on God if you say that it is no *man*'s fault that children die of fever'.[176] His listeners, he imagines, will respond that it is actually 'the fault of the Fall, of Adam's curse which brought death and disease into the world'.[177] Kingsley points out how much less morally acceptable and believable it is to say that children suffer now because of 'Adam's sinning six thousand years ago' than to 'say that one little child's fever came from his parents keeping a filthy house a month ago'.[178] It is not that Kingsley denies original sin as the ultimate spring of human misery. He considers it, however, to operate naturalistically through more proximate causes within human control. He reinterprets the visitation of the sins of the fathers upon the children as a natural 'law' linking cause—the irresponsibility or corruption of parental figures—with inevitable effect—the suffering of those rightfully in their charge.[179] This law is evident, for instance, in the fact that miserable depraved urban children have parents 'as bad as themselves';[180] that poor children have parents who squandered their money, while sickly children are born to self-indulgent or vicious adults. Kingsley also applies this law to the nation in general, instancing a situation in which the citizens suffer in a war provoked by their reckless or lazy rulers.[181] Likewise, under this Providential law, tenants living in unsanitary, ruinous houses will die of the cholera, even

[174] Kingsley, 'Second Sermon on the Cholera', p. 186. Kingsley's view of disease as an expression of God's will is compatible with his naturalistic interpretation of evil. God's opinion of filth, Kingsley argued in his first sermon, is made known by the fact that, according to his natural laws, it inevitably causes disease.
[175] Ibid., p. 187.
[176] Ibid. Original emphasis.
[177] Ibid., p. 189.
[178] Ibid.
[179] Ibid.
[180] Ibid., p. 191.
[181] Ibid., p. 192.

though it is the 'landlord's fault': 'God visits the sins of the fathers upon the children, and landlord's ought to be fathers to their tenants'.[182]

It is likely this latter paternalistic reinterpretation of the scriptural phrase that Esther has in mind. The novel presents a catalogue of inadequate negligent parenting,[183] some parents being simply dead or absent like those of Esther, Ada and Richard, while others, like the Jellybys, Harold Skimpole and Mr Turveydrop, are negligent or uncaring. The Lord Chancellor, legally in *loco parentis* for the wards in court, is described by Esther as being 'so poor a substitute' for actual parental love [p. 39]. Her words have bearing on the Lord Chancellor's inadequacy as a paternalistic figure in the broader sense meant by Kingsley, given that the novel diagnoses the ruin of the country and neglect of the poor such as the inhabitants of Tom-all-Alone's to be the result of a widespread failure of paternalistic responsibility on the part of governing and legislative institutions [pp. 236, 654]. It may be significant that much of the plot is instigated by the death of a 'Captain', the heroine's father, who even before his death had dwindled to the status of a 'nobody'. In his condemnation of the failure of paternal governance, Thomas Carlyle had complained that because 'we have been endeavouring to dispense with governing' the masses had been left 'captainless'.[184] This pervasive 'failure of paternalism'[185] in the world of the novel provides a context for the new meaning Esther detects in the scriptural message of sins of the fathers being visited on the children, one that permits a this-worldly and naturalistic, although still theistic, account of the cause of suffering in place of the message of inscrutably inherited guilt with which she has grown up.

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[182] Ibid., p. 194.
[183] Robert Newsom suggests the importance to this aspect of the novel of the fact that Dickens' own inadequate father had died shortly before he began *Bleak House* (*Dickens and the Romantic Side*, p. 112).
[184] 'By multifarious devices we have been endeavouring to dispense with governing [...]. The Real Captain, unless it be some Captain of mechanical Industry hired by Mammon, where is he in these days? (Thomas Carlyle, 'The Present Time', p. 32).
[185] Ledger, *Popular Radical Imagination*, p. 207.

As such, although critics have tended to see God as absent from the omniscient narrator's worldview and present in Esther's,[186] I consider them to present complimentary sides of a single Christian vision. Dennis Walder, for instance, points to the 'tension between the faith of the first-person narrator, Esther Summerson, and the corrosive despair of the omniscient narrator of *Bleak House*'.[187] J. Hillis Miller similarly argues that there is a 'contrast between Esther's way of seeing the world, and that of the anonymous narrator': 'To Esther the course of her life seems secretly governed by a divine Providence [...]. To the other narrator, no such [benign] presences [intimating providence] are visible. He sees a world darkening toward death'.[188] What both narrators have in common, however, is an investment in a view of evil that enables human responsibility. In the same manoeuvre made by Kingsley's sermons and the *Laws of Cholera* articles, the omniscient narrator insists on expunging the mysterious from accounts of evil and Esther's narrative then accommodates this cause-and-effect naturalism within an unimpeachably theistic framework.

Those who have read *Bleak House* as demonstrating Dickens's shift towards treating evil as impersonal and unfathomable make the same error as Miss Flite and the other Chancery suitors, mistakenly investing Chancery with a remotely determining causality. Dennis Walder observes that the 'Chancery case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce takes on the overtones of some primal curse upon mankind', while J. Hillis Miller argues that the novel's 'characters seem to be involved in a kind of original sin for which they must innocently suffer'.[189] According to my reading, however, the novel actually restores responsibility for evil to human beings, exposing the mystifying tactics whereby it is falsely made to *appear* inscrutable and pre-determined. It is not that the novel denies that

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[186] Hillis Miller, *Charles Dickens*, p. 145; Wilkinson, 'Bleak House: from Faraday to Judgment Day', p. 246; Garret, *Multiplot Novel*, pp. 67-8; Hillis Miller, 'Interpretation in Dickens' *Bleak House'*, in J. Hillis Miller, *Victorian Subjects*, pp. 179-199 (pp. 197-98); de la l'Oulton, *Literature and Religion*, p. 123.
[187] Walder, *Dickens and Religion*, p. 5.
[188] Hillis Miller, 'Interpretation in Dickens' *Bleak House*', p.
[189] *Dickens and Religion*, p. 155; Miller, *Charles Dickens*, p. 197.

there is any religious meaning to be found in suffering. It asks, however, like Mr Jarndyce, that its readers forget about the Cause and 'take the past for granted' [p. 74]. I have provided a context for this demystification of evil in contemporary writings regarding the due response to catastrophe that implied that any concession to the non-naturalistic was incompatible with human agency.

The novel is therefore only able to preserve room for the type of personal responsibility modelled by Mr Jarndyce and Esther Summerson by deliberately narrowing its focus to the known. At one point Esther interrupts Skimpole's flow of optimistic suppositions about the sick boy Jo to observe that 'in the meantime, he is getting worse' [p. 456]. Likewise, the narrator comments that while Parliament endlessly discusses the best ways to reclaim Tom-all-Alones, 'in the hopeful meantime, Tom goes to perdition headforemost' [p. 654]. Mr Gridley attends court daily to await a resolution to his case 'and in the meantime, his prospects in life are ended' [p. 13], just as Tom Jarndyce had shut himself in to unravel his case, while 'in the meantime, the place became dilapidated' [p. 109]. We therefore might call the space *Bleak House* reserves for human responsibility towards evil 'the meantime', a space purposely sequestered from remote causes and inscrutably beneficent systems. This narrowed focus on the immediate sufferings of the present puts the novels at odds with contemporary theodicies that minimized the importance of the 'meantime' and instead assumed a longer harmonizing perspective. My next chapter will consider George Eliot's very different handling of the question of the relationship between theodicy and the evils of the 'meantime' in her novel *The Mill on the Floss*.

CHAPTER THREE

'Vexed with the painful riddle of this world': *The Mill on the Floss* and the Evils of Social Progress

> 'Not all the evils of our condition are such as we can justly blame others for; and, I repeat, many of them are such as no changes of institutions can quickly remedy. To discern between the evils that energy can remove and the evils that patience must bear, makes the difference between manliness and childishness, between good sense and folly. And more than that, without such discernment, seeing that we have grave duties toward our own body and the country at large, we can hardly escape acts of fatal rashness and injustice'.[1]

The above passage appeared in George Eliot's 'Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt', published as a standalone article in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1868. A political tract written amid class anxieties provoked by 1867 Reform Act, which enfranchised part of the working population for the first time, the 'Address' is at the same time a philosophical argument about the 'causes of human trouble'.[2] The poor, the tract suggests are dangerously confused about how to make sense of the evils they face.[3] More directly than in her novels, this piece gives us an insight into the novelist's complex attitude towards the social and political evils of nineteenth-century Britain. On the one hand, its alleged writer, the enlightened artisan 'Felix Holt' from Eliot's novel of the same name, accepts the validity of working-class discontent and admits that 'many of the evils under which our country now suffers are the consequences of folly, ignorance, neglect, or self-seeking in those who, at different times, have wielded the powers of rank, office and money'.[4] This diagnosis of human wrongdoing implies that the evils pressing upon the Victorian poor were man-made. On the other hand, however, Holt places the suffering of the poor within a broader progressive narrative, claiming that it is the 'forces of a maturing world', the 'changing conditions of a struggling world' that have brought the labourers to their current

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[1] George Eliot, 'Address to Working Men, by Felix Holt', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (January 1868), pp. 1-11 (p. 11).
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Ibid., p. 3.

pass.[5] He draws a revealing analogy between the plight of the working-class and the Irish potato blight, observing that '[m]en will go on planting potatoes, and nothing else but potatoes, till a potato disease comes and forces them to find out the advantage of varied crop'.[6] Both evils, he suggests, are the instruments of the broader 'Wisdom' by which the 'slow stupendous teaching of the world's events' makes men stop trying to 'adapt the world to their desires' and instead live in 'obedience' to the order of that world.[7]

Rather than foolishly attempting to eradicate the perceived institutional sources of his suffering, the worker who had learned this lesson about evil would educate himself and his children in how to adapt their conduct to best secure their own well-being and that of their fellow men.[8] By conflating the morally neutral potato blight and the particular social and economic injustices that exercised those whom he addresses, Felix elevates his discourse far above the whole incendiary question of 'blame'.[9] Whatever its ultimate origins, evil is largely understood throughout the 'Address' as an organic part of the 'wonderful slow-growing system of things';[10] the naturalistic *telos* through which Felix views the plight of the poor converts all evils into growing pains, part of the incremental natural progress through which 'Wisdom' gains ascendency.

'The myth of steady progress' which underpins Felix Holt's view of evil is one upon which, Jerome Meckier has argued, George Eliot and Charles Dickens were fundamentally opposed.[11] While both novelists tackled the fallout of early nineteenth-century social change, they differed in their estimations of 'not just the way the world works but whether it could be said to work for good or ill'.[12] According to Meckier, 'George Eliot wanted her more optimistic conception of existing social conditions to supersede Dickens's view. Tensions develop between his bleak perspective and her

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[5] Ibid., p.10
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid., pp. 6-7.
[9] Ibid., p. 11.
[10] Ibid., p. 5.
[11] Meckier, *Hidden Rivalries*, pp. 4-6.
[12] Ibid., p. 17.

affirmation of life's organic soundness'.[13] As Meckier observes, Eliot's optimism, like that of Felix Holt's 'Address', was based on a view of the social system as an 'evolving' one, the 'harbinger of a brighter future'.[14] The organicist framework of Eliot's optimism is in line with the critical reception of her work as advancing a *telos* based on natural law rather than on theology. According to Jerome Thale, when faced with the 'problem of humanity without a providence',[15] Eliot looked 'for some kind of replacement or restatement, some new, more secular, narrative of ultimate purpose and incremental human improvement, outlining and sustaining progress not necessarily towards the City of God but towards the possible perfection of the City of Man'.[16] Her novels have therefore been read as 'secular scriptures',[17] with their focus on 'the growing good of the world rather than the kingdom of God'.[18]

It has likewise been noticed that Eliot's secular *telos* served one of the same ends as theistic ones: making sense of and legitimating temporal evils. 'Her rejection of the old creeds,' according to Bernard Paris, 'left George Eliot with a need of new consolations for the hardship and injustice of the human lot'.[19] Neil McGaw likewise observes that the 'quasi-religious metanarrative' informing Eliot's visions 'clouds the distinction between History and theodicy'.[20] U. C. Knoepflmacher has also claimed that Eliot's secular worldview functioned as a theodicy of sorts:

> In the figurative mode of her novels, George Eliot thus tried to recreate what had formerly been promised by religion only—the annulment of time. Through the promise of a divine redemption, Christian poets like Milton had justified

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[13] Ibid., p. 13.
[14] Ibid., p. 4.
[15] Barbara Hardy, *The Novels of George Eliot: A Study in Form* (London: University of London, The Athlone Press, 1959), p. 233.
[16] Jerome Thale, *The Novels of George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), p. 2.
[17] Norman Vance, *The Bible and Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 96.
[18] Ibid., p. ix.
[19] Bernard J. Paris, *Experiments in Life: George Eliot's Quest for Values* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1965), p. 22.
[20] Neil McCaw, *George Eliot and Victorian Historiography: Imagining the National Past* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p. 95.

> death, suffering and evil in a mutable world [...] George Eliot hoped to effect a similar "transhumanation" through the medium of her own philosophical art.[21]

In this formula, philosophy replaces theology as the raw material from which Eliot is seen to have constructed her theodicy.

The philosophy by which Eliot's view of evil was most heavily informed was that which held that human progress was governed by immutable natural law. There is little doubt that Eliot believed in the subjection of moral and social affairs to inexorable general laws. In a review of Robert William MacKay's *The Progress of the Intellect* written for the *Westminster Review* in 1851, Marian Evans had praised the author for his acknowledgement of 'the presence of undeviating law in the material and moral world' and complained that most people still 'perversely' refused to recognize that 'our social organization, our ethics and our religion' are as much subject to 'invariability of sequence' as the world of physical science.[22] The belief that progress was governed by fixed natural laws, which I considered in its theistic form in my introduction had enormous purchase in Eliot's intellectual milieu.[23] In her study of *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science* (1984), Sally Shuttleworth has considered in detail the ways in which Eliot's work can be placed, albeit uneasily, in the tradition of social organicism associated with Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer and G. H. Lewes.[24] 'Instead of civilisation being artificial', Herbert Spencer argued, 'it is a part of nature, all of a piece with the development of the embryo or the unfolding of a flower'.[25] G. H. Lewes was likewise persuaded by Comte's theory of organic social evolution, conflating 'our progressive evolution' with 'the gradual

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[21] U. C. Knopflmacher, *George Eliot's Early Novels: The Limits of Realism* (Berkeley: University of California 1968), p. 22.
[22] Marian Evans, 'R.W. Mackay's *The Progress of the Intellect, as Exemplified in the Religious Development of the Greeks and Hebrews*', in *George Eliot Selected Critical Writings*, ed. by Rosemary Ashton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 18-36 (p. 21).
[23] Sally Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science: The Make-Believe of a Beginning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 3.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Herbert Spencer, *'Social Statics': or the Conditions Essential to Human Happiness Specified and the First of them Developed* (London: John Chapman, 1851), p. 65.

ascendency of the industrial'.[26] As Meckier's reading of Eliot's work implies, a concomitant of this naturalistic view of human society was an optimistic interpretation of evil.

The organic metaphor positioned society within a developmental trajectory, allowing evil to be seen as something that will be outgrown naturally. Thus, Herbert Spencer included in his *Social Statics* (1851) a chapter on 'The Evanescence of Evil,' in which he argued that 'evil tends perpetually to disappear'.[27] Because the natural laws ensured growth 'toward a complete development and more unmixed good, [...] [e]ven in evils, the student learns to recognize only a struggling beneficence'.[28] For Marian Evans, her belief that society was inevitably progressing in accordance with the natural laws

> shed[]a bright beam of promise on the future career of our race, it lights up what once seemed the dreariest region of history with new interest; every past phase of human development is part of that education of the race which we are sharing; every mistake, every absurdity into which poor human nature has fallen, may be looked on as an experiment of which we may reap the benefit.[29]

But what, in the meantime, about those who, as Eliot expressed it in one of her letters 'must live in the bad times'? [30] The organic view of evil, as Felix Holt's 'Address' makes clear, did not exactly favour endeavours to tackle immediate evils through political and institutional reform. Recognising the complex relation between Christian theodicy and the naturalistic attitude towards evil, Bernard Paris writes

> Whereas the traditional religions had taught complete submission to the will of God and the vanity or sinfulness of attempting to alter the existing order, the positivist, with his Comtean motto of 'resignation and activity', strove to resign himself to the unalterable and to mitigate or eliminate accidental evils.[31]

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[26] G. H. Lewes, *Comte's Philosophy of the Sciences: Being an Exposition of the Principles of the Cours de Philosophie Positive of Auguste Comte* (London: Henry G. Bohn 1853), p. 269.
[27] Ibid., p. 60.
[28] Herbert, *Social Statics*, p. 263.
[29] Evans, 'R.W. Mackay's *The Progress of the Intellect*', p. 21.
[30] *Letter from George Eliot to Barbara Leigh-Smith Bodichon, 5th December 1859*, in *The George Eliot Letters*, III, p. 228.
[31] Paris, *Experiments in Life*, p. 23.

The importance of resignation to the unalterable constitutes a large part of Eliot's didactic vision; and her novels tend to stretch only to the possible mitigation, rather than elimination, of immediate individual evils. Privileging the larger perspective of communal well-being, her novels seem to agree with the assessment of Robert Chambers, another radical thinker in her intellectual circle, that the operations of the natural laws showed 'that the individual, as far as the present sphere of being is concerned, is to the Author of Nature a consideration of inferior moment'.[32] Because the natural laws tended towards universal progress, the individual could hardly expect special treatment. As Eliot's narrator opines in *Adam Bede,* if Nature sometimes seems 'harsh', it is because we are all 'children of a large family and must learn, as such children do, not to expect that our hurts will be made much of'.[33]

The lesson of submitting uncomplainingly to inevitable evils takes on a political dimension when considered in the context of the type of working-class discontent which Eliot had in mind when composing Felix Holt's 'Address'. An organic view of evil enabled social injustices and inequality to be legitimised as part of a natural process. As Daniel Cottom argues in *Social Figures: George Eliot, Social History, and Literary Representation* (1987), the ills of competition could be 'taken as epiphenomena subsumed within the greater harmony of nature'.[34] While *Bleak House* sought to expose this naturalisation of evil, restoring responsibility to individual human beings, George Eliot's novels promote the opposite conclusion, with evil being seen to arise from an inexorable natural order or, more avoidably, from her characters' refusal to accept the mandates of that order. Eliot, however, was also aware that, from a certain perspective, the inevitability of the evils associated with modern British social and economic existence was far from

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[32] Robert Chambers, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (London: John Churchill, 1844), p. 377.
[33] George Eliot, *Adam Bede*, ed. by Carol A. Martin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), p. 178
[34] Daniel Cottom, *Social Figures: George Eliot, Social History, and Literary Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 28.

self-evident. As my introduction has shown, the writings of Eliot's friends Charles Bray and George Combe contended that modern industrial existence represented in fact an unwholesome deviation from the Natural Laws and that the evils associated with it were therefore far from morally neutral. It was, I argue, this question of the extent to which the evils of industrialisation could be understood as part of a blameless 'External Order' which Eliot took up in her second novel *The Mill on the Floss* (1860).[35]

Norman Vance has described *The Mill on the Floss* as an 'exploration of pain and suffering',[36] and the novel certainly foregrounds the interpretive dilemma posed by experiences of evil. Like Felix Holt's working men, the Tullivers are shown to be in painful want of answers to the problem of evil. Mr Tulliver, most notably, is repeatedly perplexed by the course of events of the plot, accounting for the dysfunctional state of this 'puzzling world' by recourse to the 'Evil principle': 'Old Harry's got a finger in it'.[37] His daughter, Maggie, likewise, seeks 'some explanation of this hard, real life' [p. 286], finding a temporary solution in the mystic vision of Thomas à Kempis [pp. 289-91]. Even her pragmatic brother, Tom Tulliver, while undergoing his first experience of adversity while at Mr. Stelling's school, struggles to make sense of the 'cause and tendency of his sufferings' [p. 140]. Mrs Tulliver likewise lapses after the family's ruin into a state of bewilderment: 'why that should have happened to her which had not happened to other women, remained an insoluble question' [p. 276]. Instead of coming to satisfactory solutions to the dilemmas which plague them, this common struggle with the problem of evil is violently cut short by means of the flood which closes the novel. The sheer might and resistlessness of the flood seems in fact a perfect emblem of the unvarying natural laws. The narrator describes the inexorability of the collision which kills Maggie and Tom

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[35] In one of her letters, Eliot wrote that 'the Internal Order proposes and the External Order disposes' (Cited in Paris, *Experiments in Life*, p. 44).
[36] Vance, *The Bible and Novel*, p. 104.
[37] George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss,* ed. by Gordon S. Haight with an Introduction by Dinah Birch (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 1998), p. 263. For the remainder of this chapter, further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text.

Tulliver, as the unswerving current leaves them helpless to avert their fate. The heedlessness of the river recalls a common claim that the general laws that governed progress were unswerving in their operation, whatever the partial suffering they might occasion. Robert Chambers observed that the system of general laws meant that 'we are committed to take our chance in a natural system of undeviating operation, and are left with apparent ruthlessness to endure the consequences of every collision into which we knowingly or unknowingly come with each law of the system'.[38] The narrator of *The Mill on the Floss* shares this worldview, describing the young Maggie as lamentably ignorant of 'the irreversible laws within and without her' [p. 288]. She also shares Chambers's recognition of the cruelty of general laws from the perspective of those who come into collision with them. Having torpedoed Maggie and Tom's boat, the Guest & Co. machinery is pictured 'hurrying on in hideous triumph' [p. 521]. Nevertheless, as a number of critics have observed, Maggie's sufferings are glorified by relating them to those of 'victim and martyr'.[39] The sacrificial and salvific overtones of the chapter ('The Final Rescue') imply that we are to read her death as a providential 'apotheosis'.[40]

This infusion of the operation of the natural laws with religious meaning makes sense, given what has been observed of the way in which natural law theory served in Eliot's circle as a form of theodicy. Nevertheless, the novel's conclusion, and especially the 'disturbing sacrifice' of the heroine,[41] have tended to 'raise more questions than they resolve'.[42] Barbara Hardy terms the flood a '*deus ex machina*',[43] while Sally Shuttleworth

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[38] Chambers, *Vestiges*, pp. 383-4. This 'apparent ruthlessness', Chambers went onto say, was made up for by an undefined 'system of Mercy and Grace behind the screen of nature'.
[39] Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science*, p. 58.
[40] Kenneth M. R. Mason, 'George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss:* Tragic Harvest and Pastoral Deceit', *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 15.2 (1985), pp. 169-82 (p. 171).
[41] The phrase is from Deanna K. Kreisel, *Economic Woman: Demand, Gender and Narrative Closure in Eliot and Hardy* (Toronto & Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2012), p. 113. See also Knoepflmacher, *George Eliot's Early Novels*, p. 204; Carol Christ, 'Aggression and Providential Death in George Eliot's Fiction', *Novel*, 9 (1976), pp. 130-40 (pp. 130, 136) ; Rosemary Mundhenk, 'Patterns of Irresolution in Eliot's Mill on the Floss', *Journal of Narrative Technique*, 13 (1983), pp. 20-30 (p. 20); John P. Bushnell, 'Maggie Tulliver's 'Stored-up Force': A Re-Reading of *The Mill on the Floss*', *Studies in the Novel*, 16.4 (1984), pp. 378-95 (pp. 378).
[42] Nina Auerbach, 'The Power of Hunger: Demonism and Maggie Tulliver', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 30.2 (1975), pp. 150-71 (p. 164).

views it as the entrance of a wholly different order of time into the temporality of the novel.[44] U. C. Knoepflmacher, Carol Christ and Rosemary Mundhenk have all drawn attention to how the ending seems to deviate from Eliot's clear-eyed, unromantic and agnostic perception of human life. Knoepflmacher perceives a shift in tone between the first two volumes and the third volume, an introduction of the lofty and the sublime that can hardly be accommodated in Eliot's broader endeavour to 'lead her readers towards an acceptance of a reality which was finite and unheroic'.[45] Christ likewise argues that the Providential overtones of Maggie's drowning are inconsistent with the rest of the novel's secular vision.[46] In a letter to her publisher, John Blackwood, the novelist herself had confessed that she considered the final books of *The Mill on the Floss* to have been comparatively rushed, as a result of the expansiveness with which she had treated the earlier sections.[47] Consequently, 'the tragedy is not adequately prepared'.[48]

As Eliot's reservations suggest, the novel's conclusion does seem to sit uneasily with what precedes it. There is a shift from the focus in the earlier books on the minutiae of everyday life — bonnets and crockery, bills of sale and disputes over water-power — to the image of Maggie alone in the darkness with God' [p. 517] and a death that seems infused with 'redemptive intent'.[49] Despite this change of emphasis, Knoepflmacher argues that Maggie's sacrifice is intended to lend 'a wider meaning to the little world ignobly lost through Mr Tulliver's recklessness'.[50] My claim is also for the existence of an intimate relationship between what at first seem widely differing types of evil: the gradual economic and social dispossession of Mr Tulliver in the novel's first five books which culminates in his sordid death brought on by his disgraceful attack on Mr Wakem, and the tragic death of the daughter whom he believed to so closely 'take after' him [p. 12].

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[43] Hardy, *The Novels of George Eliot*, p. 57
[44] Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science*, p. 52
[45] Knoepflmacher, *George Eliot's Early Novels*, pp. 27, 105-6.
[46] Christ, 'Aggression and Providential Death', p. 130.
[47] *Letter from George Eliot to to John Blackwood, July 9 1860*, in *Letters*, III, p. 374.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Mundhenk, 'Patterns of Irresolution, p. 171.
[50] Knoepflmacher, *George Eliot's Early Novels*, p. 194.

Although Eliot held Maggie's death to have been insufficiently foreshadowed, the novel had, prior to the flood, encouraged us to view the heroine in the light of a martyr. The narrator asks us to interpret the evils experienced by Maggie and Tom as elements of a broader development: '[t]he suffering, whether of martyr or victim, which belongs to every historical advance of mankind, is represented in this way in every town, and by hundreds of obscure hearths' [p. 273]. This assertion implies that we are being presented with a study of the evils inevitably accompanying human progress, what the narrator terms 'the onward tendency of human things' [p. 272-3]. If Maggie is a martyr by the novel's end, then these words suggest we think of her as being martyred to progress, the onward momentum of the river, on this view, being symbolic of the progressive *telos* of social evolution.

The difficulty with this conflation of sacrifice to social progress with sacrifice to irresistible natural forces is that most of the evils actually experienced in the novel are brought about by quite particular, local forces that seem far from inevitable—above all, by Mr Tulliver's dispute over the water used by Dorlcote mill and his family's subsequent ruin and dispossession. The precise circumstances of 'The Downfall' (the title of the third book), the catastrophe that issues the Tullivers into the 'Valley of Humiliation' (Book 4) and grants the lawyer Mr Wakem custody of their hereditary property, are hard to justify as necessary elements in the advance of mankind. Yet they are circumstances produced by what many of Eliot's middle-class contemporaries would have considered one form of progress, the transformation of Britain into an industrial, commercial nation. The novel shows the revolutionary effects industrialisation and commercialisation had on rural society. The Tullivers are the 'puzzled', thwarted victims of the shift from a society based on traditional relations and customary rights to one based increasingly on profit-making, underwritten by legal rights. Although some readers have viewed the family's downfall as a punishment brought on by what Knoepflmacher terms Tulliver's 'recklessness' in going

to law, or what Dinah Birch considers his desire to 'dominate the river',[51] such a reading obscures the fact that their story of dispossession, dislocation and descent into poverty and hunger was the experience of a vast section of Britain's rural population as a result of the structural changes and industrial innovations required to maximise land productivity during the Industrial Revolution.[52] The agricultural distress caused by these changes was a perennial point of debate during the first half of the nineteenth century, when the tragedy of the Tullivers was a common one.

At the time Eliot was writing, rural life in England has been radically altered by the onset of industrialisation and the new market economy. Reflecting on the economic and social changes of the previous decades, the statistician and ardent proponent of economic progress, George R. Porter, observed in 1836 that 'during the last half century a great revolution has taken place in the management of land'.[53] This revolution consisted largely in a shift from subsistence farming to a type of agriculture which capitalised on growing markets and in the appropriation by a bourgeois class of landowners and their tenants of land traditionally cultivated by peasants to feed themselves and their families.[54] This legally-underwritten transfer of land was made in the name of increasing productivity and the commercial value of crops at a time of growing population because these new owners possessed the capital and enlightened knowledge necessary to modernise agriculture.[55] The impoverishing and demoralising effects that these changes had on a large segment of the

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[51] Diane Birch, 'Introduction', *The Mill on the Floss*, pp. vii-xxx (p. xx).
[52] E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Random House 1964), pp. 213-33.
[53] George R. Porter, *The Progress of the Nation in its Various Social and Economical Relations from the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century to the Present Time* 8 vols (London: Charles Knight & Co. 1836), I-II, p. 163.
[54] Joel Mokyr, *The Enlightened Economy: Britain and the Industrial Revolution 1700-1850* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), pp. 173-97; Michael Winstanley, 'Agriculture and Rural Society', in *A Companion to Nineteenth-Century Britain*, ed. by Chris Williams (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 205-20 (p. 209).
[55] Mokyr, *The Enlightened Economy*, pp. 183-93; Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 217; '[I]t is well known that the tendency of late years—at least in England and Scotland—has been to enlarge the size of farms, and to place them under the charge of men possessed of capital, who have enjoyed a degree of instruction beyond that which fell to the lot of farmers in those days, the departure of which is so ignorantly deplored by the poet [i.e. Oliver Goldsmith in his poem 'The Deserted Village' (1770) which laments the changes to rural life]' (Porter, *The Progress of the Nation*, II, p. 181).

rural population did not go unnoticed.[56] Commenting on 'The Distressed State of the Agricultural Labourers' in 1830, Joseph Marriage observed that 'the peasantry, once a cheerful and industrious race, from the operation of circumstances beyond their own control, are become very destitute and dependent and branded with the degrading epithet of pauper'.[57] The political radicals at the *Northern Star* agreed, contending that '[t]he state of society in the land of "green lanes" and "merry woods" has become totally changed: the workers sullen, discontented and revengeful'.[58] This emphasis on the sullenness and vengefulness of this new class of rural workers was owing to the signs of violent resistance on their part to the industrialism and market relations that were impoverishing them and eroding their traditional way of life. Above all, the so-called Swing riots of 1830-31 revealed the dangerous extent and depth of discontent in the English countryside, pitting the victims of new social and economic evils against the liberal defenders of "progress". This on-going rural discontent and the outbreaks of violence associated with it are recalled by the experiences of the Tulliver family. The basic elements of their ruin are those of many of labouring poor of the 1830s: hunger, dispossession, dislocation, a helpless uncertainty in the face of rapid change, as well as what some contemporary commentators adjudged to be a reckless and misdirected desire for revenge on people they misguidedly held responsible for their lot.

The labourer's vengeful hostility towards the source of his displacement and impoverishment, like Tulliver's animus against Mr Wakem, represented a concept of embodied personal evil, morally culpable and something to be fought. Tulliver is like the hypothetical workmen 'Felix Holt' addresses, preoccupied with the question of who is to

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[56] The detrimental effects of industrialisation on the rural peasantry has also been a key theme in Marxist readings of the modern period. Eric Hobsbawn and George Rudé, for instance, describe the 'poverty and degradation into which the English farm-labourer fell as result of the economic and social developments in the countryside of which he, and he alone, bore the burden' (E.J. Hobsbawn and George Rudé, *Captain Swing* (London: Lawrence and Wishart 1969), p. 52).

[57] Joseph Marriage, *Letters on the Distressed State of the Agricultural Labourers: And a Suggested Remedy Addressed to the Nobility of England and other Large Landed Proprietors* (Chelmsford: Meggy & Chalk, 1830), p. 6.

[58] Anon., 'Agriculture and "Incendiarism"', *The Northern Star* (25 January 1845), p. 4.

'blame' for his plight. Against this highly moralistic conception of evil, *The Mill on the Floss*'s narrator naturalises and neutralises the evils experienced by families like the Tullivers by conflating traumatic social and economic transformation with the geological destructions and renovations writers like William Buckland and Robert Chambers traced in the history of the Earth. Like political economical accounts of the progress and effects of industry, these writers described the face of the earth as undergoing tremendous changes in accordance with irresistible natural laws. William Buckland's *Bridgewater Treatise* (1836), which so fascinates Maggie Tulliver [pp. 380-1], presented the Earth's history as a succession of epochs that, while causing the extinction of many types of species over time, had also paved the way for the current relatively tranquil state of the earth, ideally suited to human life and prosperity. Eliot's insertion of Buckland's treatise into her novel at the start of the book that immediately follows Tulliver's death provides a clue to how we might interpret the geological allusions throughout the novel and how we might make sense of the novel's conclusion. Buckland supplied Eliot with a reassuring way to make sense of the tragedy of social and economic supersession. His model of the earth's history was optimistic insofar as it stressed the *relative* good of each stage, with the types of life forms and their ways of life being ideally suited to then prevailing conditions. As these conditions inevitably change, sometimes through violent cataclysm, of course some species would die out and others take their place. The flood that closes *The Mill on the Floss* encourages us to interpret the destruction of the old rural order, epitomised by the downfall of the Tulliver family, as part of this natural, though violent, process of inexorable change.

Like a number of Eliot's novels, *The Mill on the Floss* is set in the 1830s, thirty years before the novel was written, and a decade of crisis for industrial capitalist Britain[59]

[59] Both the 1832 Reform Act and the New Poor Law of 1834 can be seen as responses to the dramatic social and economic changes wrought by industrialisation. The Cholera epidemic of 1832 was implicated in urbanization, as it was in the overcrowded cities that the disease spread. The People's Charter, which demanded political reform on behalf of disenfranchised workers, was drawn up in 1838. As we shall see, the 1830s also saw the outbreak of rural rebellion in the form of incendiarism and the Swing riots. While some

as well as a formative one for the novelist, who was then growing up in rural Warwickshire. In her well-known article, 'The Natural History of German Life' (1856), Marian Evans had noted the far-reaching effects of the rise of a market society in Britain, arguing that it, along with Protestantism, had 'modernized the face of the land and the aspects of society in a far greater degree than in any continental country'.[60] *The Mill on the Floss*, which opens with the image of trading ships carrying seed and coal up the river Floss [p. 7], and concludes with the death of the Tulliver siblings in a collision with machinery from one of the Guest and Co. ship-building wharves [p. 521], allowed the novelist to explore the social impact of industrialisation. As Jerome Thale observes, *The Mill on the Floss* records this 'final breakdown of the old hierarchic order and [...] the great social dislocations which accompanied it'.[61] It also reveals the extent to which this experience of social and economic crisis necessitated fresh solutions to the problem of evil.

The *Mill on the Floss*'s narrator is fully conscious of the radical changes to rural life, drawing our attention to the fact that she is reflecting on a time wholly different from her own and that of her readers, one 'separated from us by changes that widen the years' [p. 118]. For Mr Tulliver, however, that world is already experiencing the social and economic alterations that would convert it into one familiar to Eliot's readers. That 'this is a puzzling world' is Tulliver's constant refrain and his final verdict on his death bed [pp. 15, 263, 359]. As David Carroll observes, Mr. Tulliver harks back to a 'time of simple, unquestioned verities before the devil, in the shape of the lawyers, began to interfere in the affairs of the world'.[62] Tulliver sees the changes to rural life as a type of fall from grace, into an unnatural state in which the evil principle is triumphant. At the novel's opening, a series of lawsuits and arbitrations over the use of the river upon which the mill depends has

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people have placed *The Mill on the Floss* in the 1820s, the references to 'Swing', which are made during the first year of the novel's action, mean it cannot be set before 1830.

[60] Marian Evans, 'The Natural History of German Life' in *George Eliot's Selected Critical Writings*, pp. 260-95 (p. 283).

[61] Thale, *The Novels of George Eliot* (New York: University of Columbia Press, 1967), p. 38.

[62] David Carroll, *George Eliot and the Conflict of Interpretations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 109.

shown Tulliver that the future lies in the hands of a new professional class whose relation to the land is highly technical and profit-based. As Knoepflmacher notes, Tulliver is unfit to cope with this 'new world'.[63] This is why he wants his son Tom to be educated to be 'a sort o' engineer, or a surveyor, or an auctioneer and vallyer, like Riley, or one o' them smartish businesses as are all profits and no outlay...They're pretty nigh all one' [p. 9]. Although reluctant to make a 'downright lawyer' of Tom, he sees these professions as akin to the law in their perverse distortion of the natural order — 'the world [...] as God made it' [p. 20]. In contrast to Tulliver's simple apprehension of the world— 'water is water' — these professionals have so complicated matters with 'unreasonable words' that more straight-forward people like Tulliver are inevitably at a loss. His indiscriminate grouping of all these professions also shows how strange they are to him, although he is astute enough to see they are fitter than he is to thrive in the altered 'twisted' world in which he finds himself [p. 20].

If Tulliver believes that the world has changed for the worse, his brother-in-law Mr Deane, who has risen to be manager and partner of the 'great mill-owning, ship-owning business' Guest & Co. [p. 63] has benefited from the change. Guest & Co. is the main representative of industrial capitalism in St. Oggs and the surrounding area. Considering taking over Dorlcote Mill, Mr Deane's first thought is that his company will mechanise it with 'steam-power' [p. 243], which either hadn't occurred to Tulliver or, more likely, was beyond his means. Although the steam engine had been invented by James Watt in 1788, it was upon its mass introduction into factories and above all upon the invention of the railway locomotive in the 1830s, that steam power began to epitomize the new age of industrialism.[64] Guest & Co. are clearly in the van of progress. The narrator summarises the attitude of the inhabitants of St. Oggs towards the Guests in the phrase 'Nothing like commerce nowadays!' [p. 491]. These words indicate how much commerce is seen by

[63] Knoepflmacher, *George Eliot's Early Novels*, p. 190.
[64] Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Technology: Invention, Innovation and the Rise of the Machine* (Oxford: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2009), pp. 1-3.

them as a new phenomenon and how much potential they invest it with, which is also evident in their assumption that Stephen Guest, the company's heir, will be elected to Parliament. The successful Mr Deane is the novel's champion of the beneficial influence of industrialisation and commerce, while being well aware of the enormous difference they have made to economic and social life:

> You see, Tom [...] the world goes on at a smarter pace now than it did when I was a young fellow. [Back then t]he looms went slowish, and fashions didn't alter quite so fast [...] It's this steam, you see, that has made the difference; it drives on every wheel double pace, and the wheel of fortune along with 'em. [p. 395-6]

Mr Deane's words acknowledge how disruptive industrialisation has been to social existence, his image of the accelerated pace of the wheel of fortune, borrowed from the rising spokesman for commercial interests, Stephen Guest, encapsulating the experiences of men rising at an unprecedented pace. Mr Deane's own prodigious rise in the world is shown by the increasingly expensive clothes and household goods, 'the handsome new gig with the head to it, and the livery-servant driving it', which Mrs Deane is able to afford and which, it is noted, sits uneasily with the Dodson sense of tradition and creates tension with her sisters when she prefers new smarter linen and plate to her inherited ones [p. 206]. The narrator's comment on Mrs Deane's lavish spending, 'Mr Deane had been advancing in the world as rapidly as Mr Tulliver had been going down in it', sets up a relationship between the different positions of both men, which Mr Deane's image of the wheel of fortune suggests is a necessary relationship. For some men to rapidly prosper on the wheel, others must be equally rapidly ruined.

For Friedrich Engels, whose interest, unlike that of Mr Deane, was in the social devastation wrought by industrialisation rather than its virtues, the distribution of winners and losers in the new system was far less even than Deane's metaphor suggests. Writing about the disappearance of the lower middle class into an increasingly divided poor class

and rich class, he observed that of all the people of this class 'eager to make fortunes, industrial Micawbers and speculators [...] one may amass a fortune, while ninety-nine become insolvent, and more than half of the ninety-nine live by perpetually repeated failure'.[65] While Engels's interest in the 'sacrifices' and human 'cost' of industrialisation was chiefly confined to its effects on the urban proletariat, his book also contains a chapter on its effects on rural life:

> It is manifest that here, too, the system of industrial production has made its entrance, by means of farming on a large scale, by the abolition of the patriarchal relation, which is of the greatest importance just here, by the introduction of machinery, steam, and the labour of women and children. In so doing, it has swept the last and most stationary portion of working humanity into the revolutionary movement.[66]

The revolutionary movement Engels had in mind was the outbreak of widespread rural unrest in 1830 and 1831, which took the form of incendiarism, machine-breaking and the Swing riots. As a number of historians have shown, and as indeed was recognised at the time, it was the rural poor who suffered the most as a result of the 'structural change, regional specialisation, commercialisation and productivity gains' that secured the prosperity of men like Mr Deane and the nation as a whole.[67]

Mr Deane's assertion that he doesn't 'find fault with the change as some people do' [p. 396] alludes to the fact that rather than simply submit hopelessly to these developments as part of inevitable change, many of the rural poor resisted furiously. The rural unrest of the 1830s was only the most obvious symptom of the discontent and despair that had been growing among the rural poor for decades. Although Mr Tulliver might seem an unlikely figure to consider in this context, given that he is first presented to us as a well-to-do mill-owner, the representation of his downfall bears unmistakable signs that Eliot had in mind

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[65] Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 1993), pp. 34-5.
[66] Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class*, p. 269.
[67] Michael Winstanley, 'Agriculture', p. 209.

the broader plight of the rural poor as a result of the rapid transformations caused by industrialization. In her 'Natural History of German Life', Evans had indicated that she held the 'inveterate habit of litigation', certainly one of Tulliver's distinguishing qualities, to be a peculiar trait of the peasant.[68] Tulliver also tallies with her description of the peasant's 'dim instinct, that reverence for traditional custom, which is the peasant's principle of action', an instinct she believed to have been disturbed by modern 'economical changes'.[69]

When we consider *The Mill on the Floss*'s allusions to the 'economical changes' affecting the British rural poor, the background of enclosure, the commercialisation and industrialisation of agriculture, as well as the resistance of the rural labourers, Mr Tulliver's downward trajectory gains a new significance. His resistance to the innovations which, by means of the law, are encroaching on the common resource, the river, from which his family have made a living for generations, his experiences of dispossession and descent into poverty, his brooding over his grievances and finally his desperate act of violent retaliation against the person he holds responsible, the lawyer Wakem, all suggest that, for Eliot, he represents, as did the Swing rioters, a counter-narrative to her optimistic view of inevitable social evolution.

3.1 'This Puzzling World': The Social Dimensions of Mr Tulliver's Plight

Dropping his son off to school at Mr Stelling's, Mr Tulliver is said to be impressed by that tutor's knowledge of '"Swing" and incendiarism' [p. 137]. The rural unrest of 1830-31 is again alluded to after Tulliver's ruin when the miller Luke observes, in support of Mr Tulliver's routine lament that this is a 'puzzling world' ,'Ay sir [..] what wi' the rust on the wheat, an' the firin' o' the ricks an' that, as I've seen I' my time—things often looks

[68] Marian Evans, 'The Natural History of German Life', p. 272.
[69] Ibid.

comical' [pp. 263-4]. The phenomena referred to, the blight of the harvest and the rick-burning carried out by the Swing rioters, would have recalled sharply for Eliot's readers the agricultural distress of the first part of the century and what the radical William Cobbett termed the 'rural war' which erupted from it.[70] The Swing uprising, so-called because the threatening letters sent by its leaders were signed 'Captain Swing' ,broke out in the autumn of 1830, quickly spreading from Kent to almost every county south of the Scottish border. Those involved were chiefly the labouring poor who worked short contracts on land owned by others in return for pittance wages that had to be supplemented by the Poor rates, which at this time was being severely reduced due to the unprecedented numbers drawing upon it.[71] A series of poor harvests throughout the 1820s, combined with the introduction of threshing machines, which took away work in the most necessitous winter months, exacerbated the situation. The uprising took the form of arson against farm property and hayricks, and sometimes workhouses; labourers amassing at the homes of landlords and farmers, demanding food, cash and wage-rises; and the destruction of the recently introduced agricultural machinery, especially the threshing machines, where farmers refused to comply with demands that they cease using then.[72] Such was the alarm these outbreaks produced among the higher classes that for decades after 'even isolated acts of protest' served to 'reinvigorate Swing in the public mind'.[73] Almost everyone was appalled by the spectacle of 'the south of England [...] spread with the smoking ruins of farm-houses and the ashes of corn-stacks and barns' and the idea of 'triumphant bands of insurrectionary labourers [...] parading the country to destroy agricultural machinery'.[74] Looking back in 1861, Thomas Hughes' novel *Tom Brown at Oxford* recalled the 'very bitter feeling' amongst the agricultural poor which had finally broken out 'in the long

[70] William Cobbett, 'Rural War', *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register* (4 December 1830), pp. 1-6.
[71] Hobsbawn & Rudé, *Captain Swing*, pp. 38-56.
[72] Ibid., pp. 97-173.
[73] C. J. Griffin, 'Swing, Swing *Redivivus*, or Something After Swing? On the Death Throes of a Protest Movement, December 1830-December 1833', *International Review of Social History*, 54. 3 (December 2009), pp. 459-97 (p. 486).
[74] Anon., 'The Principles of Political Economy, with a Sketch of the Rise and Progress of the Science', *Edinburgh Review* (January 1831), pp. 322-37 (p. 337).

nights of the winter months in blazing ricks and broken machines'.[75] Hughes's narrator adduces several causes for this discontent, among them 'the rigours of the new poor law' and the introduction of machinery which was thought by workers to be 'taking the food out of the mouths of the poor'.[76]

The riots were seen as a symptom of a deeper malaise afflicting rural life, an expression of the unprecedented suffering of the nineteenth-century poor. Thus the protagonist of Benjamin Disraeli's Condition-of-England novel, *Sybil; or the Two Nations* (1845) asks if the condition of the labouring poor had advanced in 'due relation to that progress of their rulers, which had accumulated in the treasuries of a limited class the riches of the world; and made their possessors boast that they were the first of nations [...] Were there any rick-burners in the times of the lord-abbots? And if not, why not?'.[77] In his pamphlet 'Swing Unmasked; or the Causes of Rural Incendiarism' (1831), Edward Gibbon Wakefield offered a more specific catalogue of evils suffered by the rural poor, such as the enclosure of land, the maintenance of wages at subsistence levels, the constant spectre of the workhouse and the ostentatious 'display of wealth and enjoyment' by their rich neighbours.[78]

Wakefield's first mentioned culprit, the large-scale enclosure of land which accompanied industrialisation from the mid-eighteenth century onward, was one of the deeper causes of the Swing riots, both because it contributed largely to the impoverishment of the rural labourers and because, according to Hobsbawm and Rudé, the riots that sometimes accompanied attempts by landlords to appropriate traditionally common land provided some districts with a precedent of rebellion to draw upon'.[79] Enclosure, accomplished through 4,000 private Acts of Parliament between 1750 and 1850, was part

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[75] Thomas Hughes, *Tom Brown at Oxford*, 2 vols (Boston: Ticknor &Fields, 1863), II, p. 267.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil, or the Two Nations*, 3 vols (London: Henry Colburn, 1845), p. 135.
[78] Extracted in 'Mr Wakefield on the Mystery of Swing', *The Tatler: A Daily Paper of Literature, Fine Arts and Public Amusements* (20 December 1831), pp. 585-85 (p. 585).
[79] Hobsbawm & Rudé, *Captain Swing*, p. 68.

of the movement towards commercial agriculture, justified on the grounds of increasing land productivity.[80] These Acts of Parliament were made necessary, according to Joel Mokyr, by the resistance of the peasants who were being debarred from the common land to which they felt a traditional claim.[81] This history of land enclosure is recalled early on in *The Mill on the Floss* when Maggie runs away to try to join the Gypsies. The only 'commons' left in the area is described as sandy, so it is obviously impossible to grow anything there and it is only made use of by gypsies [p. 107] who live by begging and stealing. As Deborah Epstein Nord observes, the Acts of Enclosure had a serious detrimental effect on the life of the Gypsies, who were frequently forced to move on if they settled on common land.[82] This may be the reason that when Maggie finally finds them, they are not on the common, as she expected, but in a lane [p. 107].[83] Because they were 'casualties of rural transformation', the Gypsies were constructed in the nineteenth-century imagination as a 'marker of the transition from rural to industrial society'.[84] Mr Tulliver is dismissive of the man who returns his daughter to him — 'It's the best day's work *you* ever did' [p. 115] — and clearly sees himself as far removed from him. Nevertheless, the Tullivers are also victims of the changes to rural life.

Although Maggie's perspective as a child might mislead us into imagining rural existence to be an idyllic one, the narrator forces her readers to acknowledge that it is more usually one of hunger and hardship. While the Tullivers are able, before their ruin, to enjoy the additional charm the snow gives to their Christmas, the narrator points out that this 'kindness' of the season

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[80] Ibid., p. 27.
[81] Mokyr, *The Enlightened Economy*, pp. 173-4.
[82] Deborah Epstein Nord, *Gypsies and the British Romantic Imagination 1807-1930* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 43.
[83] Nord cites John Clare's remark about the Gypsies: 'the inclosure has left nothing but narrow lanes w[h]ere they are ill-provided with a lodging' (*Gypsies*, p. 44).
[84] Nord, *Gypsies*, p. 45.

> fell but hardly on the homeless,- fell but hardly on the homes where the hearth was not very warm, and where the food had little fragrance; where the human faces had had no sunshine in them, but rather the leaden, blank-eyed gaze of unexpectant want. [p.153]

The passage enters clearly into that 'fear of the winter'[85] that was a constant component of agricultural distress. The winter months were the harshest time of year for the rural poor as it was then that the 'main burden of unemployment was concentrated [...] and this was the reason for the almost universal hostility to the threshing machines, which took away the standard winter labour'.[86] The winter preceding the outbreak of the Swing riot was extremely severe and the dread of another one like it contributed to the uprising of the labourers the following autumn.[87] The 'want' Eliot's narrator imagines being made worse by the ravages of winter is shown later in the novel to be directly related to the prosperity of the wealthy classes. '[G]ood society' she observes, in a passage criticised by the *National Review* (1860) for its 'bitter' tone,[88] 'is of a very expensive production', and her subsequent words show that the 'expense' she refers to is a wholly human cost [p. 291]. The wealth of a few 'requir[es] nothing less than a wide and arduous national life' condensed into factories and mines—'sweating at furnaces, grinding, hammering, weaving [...] or else, spread over sheepwalks, and scattered in lonely houses and huts on the clayey or chalky corn-lands' [p. 292]. It is this 'want', suffered by the 'myriads of souls' that constitute this national life, which 'urges [them] into all the activities necessary for the maintenance of good society'. She describes the unrelievedly oppressive existence lived by these labourers, one not only of hunger but also of aching weariness and 'family discord unsoftened by long corridors'. As Sally Shuttleworth notes, this passage not only offers a

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[85] The phrase was listed as one of the causes of the Swing riots in response to the 'rural queries' sent out by the Commissioners of the Poor Law Commission in 1834 (Hobsbawm & Rudé, *Captain Swing*, pp. 81, 85).
[86] Hobsbawm & Rudé, *Captain Swing*, p. 74.
[87] Ibid.: 'The labourers must have faced the spring of 1830 with the memory of cold, hunger and unemployment, and the reflection that another winter like the last was more than flesh and blood could bear' (p. 85).
[88] Anon., 'The Novels of George Eliot', *The National Review* (July 1860), pp. 191-219 (p. 200). The writer noted that this passage was full of sarcasm, especially where Eliot 'intimates that it is discontent with the uncomfortablenesses of life rather than any positive yearning, which precipitates the sufferers, some into excess, others into faith.' See my introduction, where I consider this passage in similar terms (p. 1).

'clear picture of the class structure of society' but gives a social dimension to the experience of suffering, 'tragedy and conflict [being] shown to be social creations'.[89]

The novel offers a straightforward example of the sufferings of the specifically rural poor in its depiction of Tulliver's brother-in-law Mr Moss and his wife and children. The Mosses live in the much poorer neighbouring parish of Bassett [p. 78] and are depicted as 'shabby' and 'worn' [p. 216], downtrodden and constantly pressed for money. Mr Moss likens himself to a 'day-labourer', the type of agricultural worker produced by the advent of commercial farming, whose day-to-day work contracts, pittance wages and dependence on the poor rates to keep above water epitomized the most precarious existence possible in rural life.[90] The Mosses, in fact, are only preserved from having to be 'sold up' and enter upon such an existence by Tulliver's decision not to take back the money they owe him [p. 216].

In Mr Glegg's opinion, Tulliver's decision not to take back his money amounts to a reckless alienation of property [p. 219]. It is thus of a piece with Tulliver's complicated relationship with legal rights. 'I never wanted anything but what was fair', Tulliver insists on his deathbed [p. 359], and throughout the novel he pits this desire for simple justice against the diabolical deviousness of the law, embodied for him in the "raskill" Wakem. Wakem's offensiveness to Tulliver is that his legal manoeuvrings enable the encroachments on the source of water that has been used by the mill-owning family for generations. While Dinah Birch suggests that Tulliver is punished for wanting to dominate the river, what he demands is actually his 'legitimate share of water power' [p. 154], which he believes faces the prospect of being literally absorbed into the commercial activities of newcomers. The threat that finally leads to his financial ruin comes from a planned irrigation scheme, one of the 'improvements' that went hand-in-hand with agricultural

[89] Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science*, p. 64.
[90] Hobsbawm & Rudé, *Captain Swing*, pp. 44-7.

commercialisation.[91] Pivart represents both technological advancement — 'Talk to me o' what th'engineers say!' — and a capitalist relationship to the land, against which Tulliver asserts his customary, hereditary rights:

> Dorlcote Mill's been in our family a hundred year and better, and nobody ever heard of a Pivart meddling with the river, till this fellow came and bought Bincome's farm out of hand, before anybody else could so much as say 'snap'. [155]

Tulliver asserts the claims of the traditional moral economy against the incipient market economy, which latter favours purchasing power above all else. Pivart is evidently one of those enlightened appropriators of the land, 'possessed of both capital and intelligence', whose ability to benefit from 'the labours of experimentalists and the researches of the men of science' G. R Porter believed augured so well for Britain's prosperity.[92] By contrast, Tulliver, 'totally unfit for economic life',[93] bases his claim on those issues which, according to E. P. Thompson, 'provoked the most intensity of feeling' amongst the exploited poor at this time: 'such values as traditional customs, "justice", "independence", security, or family-economy'.[94] There is an unmistakable parallel between the disputes over access to the river in *The Mill on the Floss* and the troubled history of that other once-common resource, the land. Tulliver could be speaking on behalf of those peasants dispossessed of their rights to use common land when he observes that 'water's a very particular thing; you can't pick it up with a pitchfork. That's why it's been nuts to Old Harry and the lawyers' [p. 155]. While the pitchfork imagery might suggest a contrast between the two resources, the important parallel is between the ambiguity surrounding rights of access to both.

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[91] Mokyr, *The Enlightened Economy*, p. 188.
[92] Porter, *The Progress of the Nation*, II, p. 179.
[93] Thale, *The Novels of George Eliot*, p. 44.
[94] Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 222.

As Joel Mokyr has noted, enclosure was abetted by the fact that 'in open-field agriculture "property rights" were not defined with the sharpness that they are today'.[95] When rights to land were merely 'traditional, [...] they were often lost without compensation during the enclosure process'.[96] The need to parse these rights, as well as the other activities requisite for enclosure - which included surveying each section of land in question, assessing titles and leases, revising rental contracts and tithes for the newly enclosed land and ensuring those whose legal rights were infringed upon were compensated[97]—means that enclosure must certainly have been profitable to lawyers. The people who took possession of the land, moreover, were often prosperous lawyers like Wakem. *The Mill on the Floss* alludes to this when Mrs Tulliver innocently tells Wakem that her husband always used to say that 'lawyers had never no call to buy anything,- either lands or houses, —for they allays got 'em into their hands other ways' [p. 249]. The historian T. W. Beastall, in his report of the '[r]ick-burning, sheep-maiming and the demolition of gates' which accompanied enclosure in Lincolnshire, where Eliot's novel is set, notes too an occasion on which the local 'attorney's office was invaded by angry fenlanders'.[98] There were clearly those, then, that would agree with E. P. Thompson's more recent description of enclosure as 'a plain enough case of class robbery, played according to fair rules of property and law, laid down by a Parliament of property-owners and lawyers'.[99] According to Tulliver, moreover, Wakem represents a certain more general reprehensible manner of treating the poorly off: 'he's one o' them fine gentlemen as get money by doing business for poorer folks, and *when he's made beggars of 'em he'll give 'em charity*' [p. 266. My emphasis]. This last clause could serve easily, from a certain perspective, to summarise the actions of the ruling class towards the poor during

[95] Mokyr, *The Enlightened Economy*, p.174.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid.
[98] T. W. Beastall, *The Agricultural Revolution in Lincolnshire* (Lincoln: History of Lincolnshire Committee, 1978), p. 67.
[99] Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, pp. 237-8.

industrialisation, impoverishing them and then expecting them to be grateful for the relief provided by the Poor rates.[100] Wakem, too is representative of modernised agriculture, telling Tulliver that 'you men never learn to farm with any method' [p. 355]. Considered in this context, Tulliver's distrust of the law and his conviction that Wakem is at the root of all the threats to his customary rights takes on a broader social significance.

In ruin, Tulliver continues to evoke the experiences of the rural poor who resorted to incendiarism and rioting in the early 1830s. Like the peasants who had been pushed off common land, he faces the possible prospect of 'day-labour' and dependence on charitable relief, in his case from his wife's family [p. 262]. Worse, he faces the threat of dislocation, that need to migrate to another village or even the city in order to find work, that became such a distinctive feature of nineteenth-century life under the pressures of industrialisation. Tulliver, however, 'couldn't bear to think of himself living on any other spot than this' where the 'Tullivers had lived [...] for generations': 'I should go off my head in a new place' [p. 264]. It is largely for this reason that he opts to remain and take wages from the man who has appropriated his land, Wakem. At this juncture, Tulliver bears an increasingly close resemblance to the men who took part in the Swing riots. Like them, he has experienced the agony of being superseded. Not only has he resentfully submitted to 'the harness' [p. 264], serving under the very man who has profited from his impoverishment, but his life and that of his family has also become one of daily hardship and deprivation. The family is now part of the mass of labouring national life, living an existence of 'dull, unexpectant sameness' in an 'uncarpeted' and 'empty house', economizing on food and fuel, and all the family members toiling, Tulliver on the farm, Mrs Tulliver 'scouring' the home [p. 277], Maggie plain sewing [p. 293] and Tom working for Guest & Co.

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[100] Thus Engels: 'As though you rendered the proletarians a service in first sucking out their very life-blood and then practising your self-complacent, Pharisaic philanthropy upon them, placing yourselves before the world as mighty benefactors of humanity when you give back to the plundered victims the hundredth part of what belongs to them!' (*Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844*, p. 278).

Mr Tulliver's condition at this time is one of constant 'ruminating' [p. 349], dwelling over a 'perpetually repeated round of sad and bitter thoughts' [p. 280]. This new 'sullen, incommunicative depression' [p. 277], his 'savage silence' [p. 280] and 'taciturn, hard concentration of purpose' [p. 277] resembles contemporary accounts of the mental state of rick-burners. Thus an article in the otherwise unsympathetic *Times* in the midst of the outbreak of 1830-31 observed of the country labourers that 'there is a spirit of discontent brooding in their bosoms [...] which only awaits an opportunity to burst forth as the director of desolation'.[101] The account given by an article in *Fraser's Magazine*, 'Incendiarism, Its Causes and Cure' (1844), of the wretchedness of the rural poor and its effects on their state of mind, could likewise apply to Tulliver. It notes that while 'all the other classes in the community were taking large strides upwards on the ladder of life, the feet of the poor peasant went continually downwards', with the result that the typical labouring man is 'now always grave, moody and silent [...]. Who can wonder if, brooding continually in solitude over his wrongs, real or imaginary, he has become that which we too often find him — desperate, and, therefore, reckless?'.[102] Similarly, an 1845 article in *Douglas Jerrold's Shilling Magazine* described the incipient rick-burner's dark preoccupation with his grievances:

> He broods over it; that little spark of reason, which degradation and ignorance have not quenched, burns within and shows him the picture of his wrongs; heats, too, while it shows; heats all his bad passions; breeds and fosters everything foul and wicked in his dark mind.[103]

This emphasis on the gradually overheating mind of the labourer points towards the literally inflammatory nature of the crime he is about to commit.

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[101] Anon., 'State of the Country', *The Times* (29 November 1830), p. 2.
[102] Anon., 'Incendiarism, Its Causes and Cure', *Fraser's Magazine* (August 1844), pp. 243-52 (p. 245).
[103] A[ngus].B. R[each], 'Peasants and Pheasants', *Douglas Jerrold's Shilling Magazine* (1845), pp. 130-30 (p. 133).

Mr Tulliver is likewise described as 'simmering' and 'suddenly boiling up' immediately prior to his attack on Wakem [p. 355]. At the moment when Tom reveals to his father their restored position, Tulliver's chief focus is still on how this will vindicate him against Wakem; he is revealingly described as 'kindling with triumphant fire' [p. 351]. Like the accounts of rick-burners, *The Mill on the Floss* both partly explains Tulliver's outburst as the long result of oppressive circumstances and condemns it as a species of irrational and narrow-minded recklessness. The intensity of Tulliver's preoccupation with Wakem, his conviction that it is the lawyer who is behind all of his misfortune, who has 'set on' Dix, Pivart and even his creditors against him, is depicted as a type of paranoia [p. 196]: 'the irascible miller was a man to interpret any chance-shot that grazed him as an attempt on his own life' [p. 247]. Maggie is appalled by her father's violence and refusal to forgive Wakem. She tells him 'about trouble being turned into a blessing' but 'Mr Tulliver did not want spiritual consolation — he wanted to shake off the degradation of debt, and to have his revenge' [p. 294].

The depiction of Tulliver's attack on Wakem as a futile and desperate 'frenzy of triumphant vengeance' [p. 356] again recalls contemporary perspectives on the Swing riots. Most nineteenth-century accounts reduced the rebellion to a misguided act of revenge. Having brooded long over his troubles, 'schemes of the most unreasoning, most wicked, most absurd revenge, crowd dimly upon' the rural labourer;[104] it is 'vengeance' that 'give[s] birth to the diabolical malice that places the lucifer match in the corn stack'.[105] It was implied that, unable, in his ignorance, to make sense of the complicated causes of his suffering, the rioter foolishly took out his anger on its most visible and proximate sign, agricultural property and machines. 'His "wild justice" is misdirected. Blindly, madly, he thinks — 'Property has wronged me; I will revenge myself on property'. That most at hand

[104] Ibid.
[105] Anon., 'Incendiarism — Condition of the Rural Population', *The Monthly Review* (May 1844), pp. 117-26 (p. 123).

and most liable to injury naturally suffers'.[106] The rioters had erred, it was alleged, in the causes they had adduced for the evils they were experiencing: '[u]nfortunately the sufferers look upon their own position only from one side [...]. Like most men they have but an imperfect perception of their own shortcomings and thus they regard their misery as the result of a general conspiracy of the more successful classes against them'.[107] They were, according to, William Ellis, a proponent of popular education who was well known to Eliot, drawing a 'false inference' about the sources of their misery.[108]

For many onlookers, especially those educated in the principles of political economy, acts of violence towards machines seemed the height of pointless, self-defeating absurdity. While the agricultural riots were still on-going, a pamphlet issued under the auspices of *The Society of the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge* sought to convince the labourers of the irrationality of their animus against machinery.[109] The writer concedes that the motive of the machine-breakers is a 'natural, and if lawfully expressed, a proper impatience, under a condition that certainly has many hardships'; their mistake lies, however, in 'imputing those hardships to machinery'.[110] One passage in *The Mill on the Floss* significantly compares Mr Tulliver's hostility towards Wakem to an irrational direction of blame towards a machine. The narrator asks the reader to consider if the attorney is any 'more guilty towards him, than an ingenious machine, which performs its work with much regularity, is guilty towards the rash man who, venturing too near it, is caught up by some fly-wheel or other, and suddenly converted into mincemeat' [p. 247].

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[106] A. B. R, 'Peasants and Pheasants', p. 133. Even the sympathetic northern star described the rick-burner as being 'maddened with the frenzied delight of REVENGE', driven to fire 'the homestead of the man who to HIM appeared the oppressor' (Anon., 'Agriculture and "Incendiarism"', p. 4).

[107] Council of the Society of Arts, *Report of the Committee Appointed by the Council of the Society of Arts to Inquire into the Subject of Industrial Instruction* (London: Longman 1853), p. 26.

[108] William Ellis, *Outlines of Social Economy* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1850), p. 90. See *Letter from George Eliot to George Combe, November 13, 1852*, in *Letters*, II, pp. 65-6.

[109] Knight, Charles, 'The Working Man's Companion: *The Results of Machinery, Namely Cheap Production and Increased Employment Exhibited: Being an Address to the Working-Men of the United Kingdom*', (London: Charles Knight, 1831), p. 25.

[110] Ibid., p. 26. On the absurdity of machine-breaking, see also 'Machine-Breaking', *Westminster Review* (January 1831), pp. 191-210 (p. 191).

To accept this analogy would both acknowledge the appalling fact of Tulliver's suffering and render absurd his holding Wakem personally accountable for it. This is the perspective held by those who, according to Tulliver, insist that 'he meant me no harm' [p. 266]. The hypothetical scenario is very similar to one imagined by Harriet Martineau in one of her *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832-3), the didactic purpose of which was to illuminate the ignorant masses about how the social world operated according to natural laws.[111] The story, 'The Hill and the Valley', is concerned with the resentment against new machinery introduced into an iron-works but its lessons were also applicable to rural labourers. A boy operating one of the new machines 'was careless, and put himself in the way of receiving a blow to the head, which killed him on the spot'.[112] The witnesses, who are determined to make the new invention 'bear the blame for everything [...] took advantage of the occasion to work upon the feelings of the discontented'.[113] The narrator is clear, however, that '[t]here was no more reason to complain of the new machinery than the old on account of the accident'.[114] It is the boy's 'carelessness' that is at fault, rather than the machine.[115] To blame the machine for his death is just part of the general irrationality of blaming the machines for their general plight.

The machine which performs its operations regardless of those who happen to come into collision with it was a perfect symbol for unswerving natural law. The political economists took on the role of convincing the British population that what might have seemed a puzzling and traumatic state of disorder to the ignorant like Mr Tulliver was actually an orderly and inevitably process of commercialisation and industrialisation

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[111] See Elaine Freedgood's chapter 'Banishing Panic: J.R. McCulloch, Harriet Martineau and the Popularization of Political Economy' in her *Victorian Writing about Risk: Imagining a Safe England in a Dangerous World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 13-41.
[112] Harriet Martineau, 'The Hill and the Valley', *Illustrations of Political Economy*, 9 vols (London: Leonard Charles Fox, 1834), I, pp. 1-137 (p. 92).
[113] Ibid.
[114] Ibid.
[115] Ibid.

regulated by fixed general laws.[116] Although these laws might lead incidentally to the temporary immiseration of sections of the population, their overall purpose and effect was to secure the good of mankind as a whole.[117] Daniel Cottom has argued that an 'abstract idea of society' which conflated 'nature' and 'economic law' came to be 'promoted by the governing classes as a moral idea opposed in its abstract nature to the daily experience, desires, and needs of individuals'.[118] The introduction of machinery and the other changes which were affecting the poor were part of this inevitable progress, but as the political economist J. R. McCulloch argued in his *Principles of Political Economy* (1833) the distress thereby occasioned 'cannot be of permanent duration: It is not, in fact, possible that the improvement of machinery should be in the end other than beneficial to all classes'.[119] In the meantime, as the narrator in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849) bitterly noted, those adversely affected by the new industrial and commercial system 'were left to suffer on, perhaps inevitably left; it would not do to stop the progress of invention'.[120]

Political economists considered the discontented poor to be mistaken in thinking that their distress and hunger was owing to anything other than the natural course of beneficent general laws. The Swing riots were followed by a surge of publications attempting to educate the ignorant about 'the natural operations by which [their] Industry, as well as every other exchangeable property, must be governed'.[121] As Richard Whately observed, the working classes could no longer safely be left ignorant of the laws of political science.[122] According to the *Edinburgh Review*, a knowledge of political

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[116] J. R. McCulloch thus defined Political Economy as 'the science of the laws which regulate the production, accumulation, distribution, and consumption of those articles or products that are necessary, useful or agreeable to man, and which at the same time possess exchangeable value' (*Principles of Political Economy* (Edinburgh: Adam & Charles Black; London: Longman & Co., 1849), p.1).
[117] Nassau William Senior, *An Introductory Lecture on Political Economy* (London: John Murray, 1826), pp. 58-9; Sir Robert Wilmot Horten, *Lectures on Statistics and Political Economy as Affecting the Condition of the Operative and Labouring Classes Delivered at the London Mechanics Institute in 1830 and 1831* (London: Edmund Lloyd, 1832), p. 5.
[118] Cottom, *Social Figures*, p. 134.
[119] McCulloch, *Principles of Political Economy*, p. 211.
[120] Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley*, p. 27.
[121] Charles Knight, *The Rights of Industry: Addressed to the Working-Men of the United Kingdom* (London: Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, 1831), p. 8.
[122] Richard Whately, *Introductory Lectures on Political Economy* (London: John Parker, 1847), p. 186.

economy, 'always useful, becomes eminently useful among the people in times of distress and emergency'.[123] The people needed 'above all' to be instructed in 'the plain and elementary doctrines respecting population and wages, in the advantages derived from the institution of private property, and the introduction and improvement of machinery; and in the causes which give rise to that gradation of ranks, and inequality of fortunes, that are as natural to society, as heat to fire and cold to ice'.[124]

This emphasis on the naturalness of the distresses being experienced would show the discontented how irrational they were to take out their anger on property or to demand higher wages. Under this condition of 'enlightenment', George Porter observed, 'if evils should then arise to disturb the general prosperity, the last thing which would enter into the minds of the sufferers would be to proceed to measures of violence'.[125] Social order and the security of property could only be achieved by bringing the poor in line with the political-economical interpretation of these 'evils'.

One notable populariser of political economy, Charles Knight, fittingly prefaced a chapter in his 1859 defence of political economical education with a quote from William Wordsworth's *The Excursion* (1814), which describes a figure with 'a soul perplex'd /And finding in herself no steady power/To draw the line of comfort that divides Calamity,/ the chastisement of Heaven,/ From the injustice of our brother men'.[126] The implication of Knight's handling of Wordsworth's lines was that those in ignorance of political economy were likewise dangerously confused about where to draw the line between calamity over which men have no control and 'injustice' caused by human action. William Ellis likewise argued that '[w]ithout [a knowledge of political economy], the causes of the privation and suffering by which he is surrounded and to which he is exposed must ever remain a

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[123] Anon., 'Principles of Political Economy', *Edinburgh Review,* p. 338.
[124] Anon., 'Causes and Cure of Disturbances and Pauperism', *Edinburgh Review* (March 1831), pp. 43-63 (p. 63).
[125] Porter, *The Progress of the Nation* (1843), V-VIII, p. 257.
[126] Charles Knight, *Knowledge is Power: A View of the Productive Forces of Modern Society and the Results of Labor, Capital and Skill* (London: John Murray, 1859), p. 398.

mystery to [the labouring man]; and he will never be able to discriminate between what he ought to bear with resignation, and what he may successfully struggle and secure himself against'.[127] Those inexorable general laws, which were held to govern social and economic development, clearly fell into the first category.

Ellis, moreover, drew an analogy between failure to adapt to modern economic conditions and being physically injured by a machine:

> An intelligent and watchful people, alive to all the symptoms of change in this ever-moving world, would readily contrive so as to participate in the abundance, without entangling themselves in the works of the improved machinery which produces it.[128]

Similarly, we can see how in both Martineau's text and the passage from *The Mill on the Floss*, the image of the person being violently mangled by a machine might act as synecdoche for the shared experience of suffering caused by the operations of economical laws which function with machine-like regularity and which therefore have no personal vendetta against those whose who happen to suffer in consequence. When *The Mill on the Floss*'s narrator states that Tulliver is prone to interpret 'chance-shots' as intentional attacks, she depersonalises and empties of intentionality the evils he experiences, just as the political economists did when defending the general natural laws which, incidentally, victimised the labouring poor.

That Eliot shared the belief of the political economists that progress and industrial innovation were governed by natural laws and were consequently impossible to resist, is evident from a passage from *Middlemarch* (1871-2) concerning the introduction of the railways. A bunch of uncouth farm labourers, having been persuaded by the agitator Mr Solomon that the railways are not in their interests, try to attack the railway company surveyors. Mr Garth, one of the moral centres of the novel, reasons with them thus:

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[127] Ellis, *Outlines of Social Economy*, p. 116.
[128] Ibid., p. 90.

'[s]omebody told you the railroad was a bad thing. That was a lie. It may do a bit of harm here and there, to this and to that; *and so does the sun in heaven.* But the railway's a good thing'.[129] What's interesting here is that neither narrator nor Garth disagree with the men that the changes of the time have made their lots worse: the narrator in fact directly concedes that 'the social benefit' of industrial advance is one which the poor men 'do *not* feel'.[130] But the point is that industrialisation will proceed inexorably whether they like it or not and that it is in any case a 'good thing' on the whole. Thus the cunning of Mr Solomon's dissenting arguments, according to the narrator, bears 'about the same relation to the course of railways as the cunning of a diplomatist bears to the general chill or catarrh of the solar system'.[131] By likening industrial progress to the workings of the solar system, the worsening lot of the poor is reified and made to appear irresistible. This being the case, Mr Garth observes, in the same vein as those who pointed out the folly of incendiarists destroying the very source of their own food, '[t]he cattle may have a heavy load, but it won't help 'em to throw it over into the roadside pit, when it's partly their own fodder'.[132]

The Mill on the Floss's image of the 'ingenious machine which performs its work with much regularity' seems to owe something to this emphasis on undeviating law. The novel suggests that the world is puzzling to Tulliver because he is ignorant of the laws governing it. The narrator's final word on him is that in death 'poor Tulliver's dimly-lighted soul had for ever ceased to be vexed with the painful riddle of this world' [p. 359]. Tulliver's confusion about naturalistic causes betrays his lack of enlightenment. One of the first things we learn about him is that he attributes phenomena that thwart him, like lawyers and weevils, to the devil [p. 15]. In the same chapter, Maggie recalls historical belief in the devil and how it went hand-in-hand with the belief in witchcraft and persecution of perceived witches: 'That old woman in the water's a witch — they've put

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[129] George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (Oxford, Oxford World Classics, 1988), p. 456. My emphasis.
[130] Ibid., p. 457.
[131] Ibid., p. 452.
[132] Ibid., p. 457.

her in to find out whether she's a witch or no' [p. 18]. This points to the backwardness of Tulliver's belief in the supernatural, given that witches were blamed for the same untoward natural phenomena that he also assigns to supernatural agency. Maggie's words also raise the idea of scapegoating. As a child in school, Tom is described as being in 'a state of as blank unimaginativeness concerning the cause and tendency of his sufferings, as if he had been an innocent shrewmouse imprisoned in the split trunk of an ash-tree in order to cure lameness in cattle' [p. 140]. It is an image which conjures up a highly primitive superstitious way of coping with evil. The analogy reminds us that in their immature unenlightened state, people tend to misattribute grievances caused by complex causes beyond their comprehension to an embodied nearby agency — just as little Maggie keeps a 'Fetish which she punished for all her misfortunes' [p. 28] and as Tulliver blames Wakem for all his troubles.

An article published in the *Westminster Review* in 1859 had suggested that the mindset that believed in witches was the same one that had trouble comprehending modern industrial advances. The author referred to an anecdote then in circulation about a 'Lincolnshire boor' who expired in a fit of puzzlement with the words: 'Wut wi' faith, and wut wi' the earth a turning round the sun, and wut wi' the railroads a fuzzin' and a whuzzin', I'm clean muddled, stonied and bet'.[133] While this story had been taken up as a sign that the poor had been overwhelmed by 'new phenomena and discoveries' and were better off in total ignorance, this author disagrees, seeing the poor man's confusion as a sign that popular instruction had not advanced enough. A lack of enlightenment means that each new phenomenon, instead of being understood as part of a 'necessary order', is instead felt as an 'oppressive puzzle'.[134] And being thus puzzled, the ignorant turn to supernatural explanations like witchcraft: '[t]he assumed extent of the supernatural

[133] Anon., 'Recent Cases of Witchcraft', *Westminster Review* (January 1859), pp. 209-49 (p. 213).
[134] Ibid., p. 214. My previous chapter considered *Bleak House*'s very different explanation for the perplexity of the masses (pp. 121-185). Dickens's novel suggests that their confusion over the causes of their ills was induced by the mystifications of the ruling class.

depends on an ignorance of the natural'.[135] '[C]ompelled to hypothecate a cause' for 'sin and evil,' they have recourse to 'a capricious demonology' rather than to 'intelligible law'.[136] Because the social and economic changes that combine to dispossess Tulliver were being rewritten as naturalistic causes by the enlightened, it makes sense that his puzzled belief in the devil is given as the context for his vindictive blaming of Wakem. If the superstitious and ignorant of centuries past had blamed witches for wholly natural and inevitable phenomena that were to them unfathomable, then their nineteenth-century counterparts were blaming machines and individual property-owners for what were the natural and inevitable stages of industrial progress. As the reviewer of J. R. McCulloch's *Principles of Political Economy* observed in the *Edinburgh Review*, '[i]f the effects of machinery were generally well understood, even by the middle classes of society, it might be affirmed that mobs to destroy machines would be as impossible at this time of day as mobs to burn witches'.[137]

The Mill on the Floss, then, implicitly defends industrialisation and commercial progress by invalidating Mr Tulliver's opposition to it. Nevertheless, the narrator retains an obvious sympathy with 'poor Tulliver' and his suffering family. The jarring image of Tulliver as a man being converted into mince-meat and the nonchalant tone of the phrase 'caught up in some flywheel or other' actually admits a certain irony at the expense of writers like Martineau, whose optimistic glosses on the suffering of the poor could seem ill-fitting to the extremity of the circumstances. Eliot's novel is deeply divided between a need to validate the suffering of the Tullivers and acknowledge the erosion of traditional rural life and the need to believe that society was progressing. These two imperatives inform the extended analogy drawn in the novel between social and geological forces. Whereas many political economists and Comtean positivists had simply asserted that

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[135] Anon., 'Recent Cases of Witchcraft', p. 213.
[136] Ibid.
[137] Anon., 'Principles of Political Economy', *Edinburgh Review*, p. 339. His reference to the middle classes also being ignorant is due to the fact that many farmers had given into the demands of the Swing rioters to destroy their machinery or had destroyed it themselves in advance.

human society was subject to the same laws as the natural world, *The Mill on the Floss* fully pursues the implications of this claim by using geology, the science of 'perpetual destruction, followed by continual renovation'[138] as a way of making sense of the traumatic changes wrought by industrialisation. By applying the geological models of William Buckland and other geologists to the economic and social changes that had transformed British rural life during the Industrial Revolution, *The Mill on the Floss* is able to naturalise those changes, making them seem irresistible and irreversible and yet at the same to give due dimension to the social losses, dislocations and erosions involved.

3.2 'Changes that Widen the Years': Geological Theodicy

It is fitting that it is Stephen Guest, the wealthy and fashionable heir of the new commercial order, its mouthpiece at anniversary dinners [p. 396] and planned representative in Parliament [p. 380], who should introduce Maggie Tulliver to the new science of geology. Inclined at first to dismiss this seemingly shallow and conceited young man, Maggie is won over by his account of William Buckland's Bridgewater Treatise (1836) 'which he had just been reading' [p. 380]. Maggie soon becomes 'absorbed in the wonderful geological story,' which is clearly wholly novel to her. Buckland's text enters the novel as something radically innovative, something which would 'startle the ladies of St Oggs', who are more accustomed to Evangelical fare like Southey's *Life of Cowper* [p. 380]. The discipline of geology was peculiarly a product of the early nineteenth century.[139]

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[138] William Buckland, *Geology and Mineralogy considered with reference to Natural Theology*, 2 vols (London: William Pickering, 1836), I, p. 129.

[139] Until then, the science had been mired in questions of Cosmogony, which was interested in the origins of the earth, rather than in the physical processes that had led to its current condition. See Charles Lyell, *Principles of Geology: Being an Attempt to Explain the Former Changes of the Earth's Surface by Reference to Causes now in Operation*, 2vols (London: John Murray, 1830) I, p. 3; Anon. 'The Future of Geology', *Westminster Review* (July 1852), p. 67-94 (pp. 67-69).

It was defined by its pioneers as a science concerned with tracing the stages of the earth's history.[140] The arguments made by early geologists for the great antiquity of the earth and the existence of Pre-Adamic death contradicted the Genesis accounts and therefore brought the nascent science into disrepute among some Christians.[141] In his inaugural lecture at the University of Oxford in 1819, William Buckland had already endeavoured to ease the minds of such Christians by showing how actually reconcilable were geological accounts with the Christian faith.[142] He was therefore the perfect candidate to write a work of natural theology on the science.

The *Bridgewater Treatises* were provided for by the last will and testament of the Earl of Bridgewater, who left a bequest to be awarded to the writer or writers of a work or works which illustrated how the 'Power, Wisdom and Goodness of God' was 'manifested in the Creation'.[143] While most of the treatises found only a limited readership, Buckland's contribution, *Geology and Mineralogy Considered with Reference to Natural Theology* (1836) immediately became a fashionable text, as is borne out by how it is represented in *The Mill on the Floss*. 'The Future of Geology,' an article that appeared in *The Westminster Review* when Marian Evans was acting editor in 1852, described how it won the 'applause of magnates and the smiles of fine ladies'.[144] The treatise's welcome reception among commercial 'magnates' and the beneficiaries of commerce like Stephen Guest can be partly accounted for by the fact that Buckland's work argued that the development of industry had long been foreseen as part of God's great plan for the human race. Aeons before the appearance of mankind on earth, the arrangement of the earth's

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[140] Lyell, *Principles of Geology*, I, p. 1; Buckland, *Geology and Minerology*, I, p. 37.
[141] Anon., 'The Future of Geology', p. 76.
[142] William Buckland, *Vindiciae Geologicae; or, the Connexion of Geology with Religion Explained in an Inaugural Lecture Delivered before the University of Oxford, May 15th 1819* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1820).
[143] The exact remit, reproduced on the first page of every treatise, was as follows: 'On the Power, Wisdom and Goodness of God as manifested in the Creation illustrating such work by all reasonable arguments as, for instance, the variety and formation of God's creatures, in the animal, vegetable and mineral kingdoms; the effect of digestion and thereby of conversion; the construction of the hand of man and an infinite variety of other arguments; as also by discoveries ancient and modern in arts, sciences, and the whole extent of modern literature'.
[144] Anon., 'The Future of Geology', p. 68.

mineral deposits had prepared for human industrialization. Buckland traced back 'the production of the Coal that supplies with fuel the Metropolis of England' to 'remote and wonderful Events in the economy of our planet'.[145] Geology, moreover, taking for its subject matter the succession of epochs, surely recommended itself to the inheritors of the new self-made commercial order by its naturalisation of change. As James A. Secord observes, geological texts were bound to a progressive narrative insofar as they had to explain how the earth from its original condition of fluidity became habitable.[146] As such, '[p]rogress became central to geology'.[147] It was a form of progress, however, which accommodated, indeed which depended on, periods of turbulent and violent change and supersession. 'The Geologist's inquiry', Buckland argued in his defence of the value of the science, 'is the Globe itself, [...] his study the monuments of the mighty revolutions and convulsions it has suffered, convulsions of which the most terrible catastrophes presented by the actual state of things [...] afford only a faint image'.[148] Neither did Buckland shy away from what this meant for the history of all the species that had once populated the earth, describing the plains and mountains of the modern world as 'the great charnel houses of preceding generations'.[149] Geology then, provided both a way of expressing catastrophic change and a blueprint for understanding this change as an inevitable (and therefore unavoidable) part of progress.

The ruin of the Tullivers in *The Mill on the Floss* is depicted in similar terms of a traumatic change, displacement and dispossession. Mrs Tulliver, 'bewildered' by the loss of those household goods which 'had made the world quite comprehensible to her for a quarter of a century,' becomes stuck in a 'perpetual ruminating comparison of the present with the past' [p. 277]. Entering the parlour after their possessions have been sold, Maggie

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[145] Buckland, *Geology and Mineralogy*, I, p. 481.
[146] James A. Secord, *Victorian Sensation: The Extraordinary Publication, Reception, and Secret Authorship of 'Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation'* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 56.
[147] Ibid., p. 57.
[148] Buckland, *Vindicae*, p. 47.
[149] Ibid.

is shocked to see how 'altered' it is. '[E]verything is going away from us', she sobs, 'the end of our lives will have nothing in it like the beginning!' [p. 239]. Discontinuity between past and present is traumatic for the Tullivers independently of the new poverty it signifies. Such discontinuity geologists had discerned in the very constitution of nature. Works like Buckland's showed that absolutely no condition or form was permanent, that

> the surface of the globe has not existed in its actual state from eternity but has advanced through a series of creative operations, succeeding one another at long and definite intervals of time [and] that all the actual combinations of matter have had a prior existence in some other state. [150]

One poignant sign of how the Tulliver family has floundered on the transition from one state to another is the moment when Tom awakens to a painful sense of his own unfitness to make a living in the modern world. A notable evil of modern economic life was that every advance created its myriads of unemployed. As George Porter observed, '[i]n every country which is making any considerable progress in the arts of life, changes will from time to time occur in the sources of employment for particular classes of the people.' While these changes, he went on, 'must be felt as a hardship by individuals [...] to the country at large they are productive of great and permanent good'.[151] Tom is the victim of a similar type of economic supersession. Although his father had meant to educate Tom as one of the rising class of professional men, he has actually been given a traditional humanistic education, which the man of business, Mr. Deane, regards with contempt. Deane's perspective is wholly commercial, judging Tom's list of obsolete school subjects as so many 'commodities', which are not 'good for anything' [p. 228]. Tom, he observes, is one of many young men whose unpreparedness for trade makes them redundant in the new economy: 'There's heaps of your sort, like so many pebbles, made to fit in nowhere' [p. 231]. His use of the image of pebbles perfectly expresses Tom's position as the product

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[150] Buckland, *Geology and Mineralogy*, I, p. 11.
[151] Porter, *The Progress of the Nation*, I, p. 124.

of turbulent and erosive change. In his *Bridgewater Treatise*, Buckland had seized upon and reformulated William Paley's image of a stone in his *Natural Theology*. In order to make his argument that an object displaying contrivance like a watch must have had an origin and design, Paley opened his famous work with the contrasting image of a stone, asking if '[i]n crossing the heath, I pitched my foot against a *stone*, and were asked how the stone came to be there, I might possibly answer, that for anything I knew to the contrary, it had lain there forever'.[152] Paley's use of the stone as a signifier of duration Buckland completely reversed:

> Nay, says the Geologist, for if the stone were a pebble, the adventures of this pebble may have been many and various, and fraught with records of physical events, that produced important changes on the surface of our planet.[153]

Its 'rolled condition', moreover, 'implies that it has undergone considerable locomotion by the action of water'. In Buckland's account, the pebble is a 'fraught' token of change and dislocation.

It is telling, then, that Eliot chose this image to figure Tom as a victim of social and economic change. The idea of him as a pebble, subject to the erosive power of moving water, foreshadows his death in the rushing, overflowing waters of the river Floss. Knoepflmacher notes that the river serves in the novel as 'an emblem for the stream of change, the permanence of impermanence'.[154] According to Darryl Jones, the flood which closes the *Mill on the Floss* carries Christian apocalyptic overtones, a sign of the persistence of theological motifs in the novel's apparently scientific apprehension of the world.[155] There are indications, however, that the flood is meant to symbolise above all the world-altering agency and momentum of industrialisation. Industry, like the natural forces

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[152] Paley, *Natural Theology*, p. 1.
[153] Buckland, *Geology and Mineralogy*, I, p. 572.
[154] Knoepflmacher, *George Eliot's Early Novels*, p. 168.
[155] Darryl Jones, ''As if the Waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth': The Flood in Victorian Fiction', *Literature and Theology*, 26.4 (December 2012), pp. 439-58 (pp. 453-4).

studied by geologists, was a force that had shown itself capable, in the words of Eliot's narrator, of 'chang[ing] the face of the world' [p. 39].[156] If geology was the study of how the face of that world has been changed by natural forces, then water was, along with fire, one of the two agents of this change. The movement of water caused both erosion, as in the case of the pebble, and the displacement of organic and inorganic matter. Buckland described the 'forces of rains, torrents and inundations' sweeping the carcasses of animals to 'great distances', with the result that the 'strata of aqueous formation have become the common repository not only of the Remains of aquatic, but also of terrestrial animals and vegetables'.[157] The influence of such imagery on Eliot's novel is evident in the narrator's description of the floods on the Rhone river 'sweeping down the feeble generations' [p. 271], which she then translates into the generalisation that most of human life 'will be swept into the same oblivion with the generations of ants and beavers' [p. 272]. As a force representing the extinction and succession of past races, the flood is an apt symbol of economic and social change. The narrator accordingly conflates this tool of geological reshaping with the economic and social transformations affecting the characters in her novel.

A chapter in the first book, 'Mr and Mrs Glegg at Home' shows the inhabitants of the town to be on the verge of a commercial revolution that will wholly change their way of life but to which they are perfectly oblivious. 'In Mrs Glegg's day', the narrator observes, 'there was no incongruous new-fashioned smartness, no plate-glass in shop-windows'; [...] Ah! even Mrs Glegg's day seems far back in the past now, separated from us by changes that widen the years' [p. 118]. The context implies that these changes are larger commercial, and by extension, social ones. They are are unanticipated by the old-fashioned inhabitants of St. Oggs, who believe that they have 'done with change' [p. 118].

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[156] 'It is a wonderful subduer, this need of love — this hunger of the heart — as peremptory as that other hunger by which Nature forces us to submit to the yoke, and change the face of the world' (*Mill on the Floss*, pp. 38-9).

[157] Buckland, *Geology and Mineralogy*, I, p. 128.

The narrator describes this oblivion to their impending fate in terms clearly borrowed from the geologists: 'the present time was like the level plane where men lose their belief in volcanoes and earthquakes, thinking to-morrow will be as yesterday, and the giant forces that used to shake the earth are forever laid to sleep' [p. 118]. This is explicitly an analogy (*like* the level plane); and the context reveals it is an analogy that compares revolutionary economic and social change to earth-shaking forces of nature like volcanoes and earthquakes. It prepares us to interpret the catastrophic flood, which apparently takes everyone but Maggie by surprise, in these same terms [pp. 511, 515]. Such an analogy is very similar to Buckland's assertion that '[i]n the state of tranquil equilibrium which our planet has attained in the region we inhabit, we are apt to regard the foundation of the solid earth, as an emblem of duration and stability'.[158] Those who live on the edge of volcanoes, however, know differently.[159]

Sally Shuttleworth has argued that the novel's concluding flood 'does not conform to theories of organic evolution but rather to the historical schema of catastrophism, a geological theory discredited by the 1860s'.[160] In place of the catastrophist version of the earth's being shaped by a series of violent revolutions within a conceivable timeframe, Charles Lyell had in the 1830s popularised the earlier Scottish geologist James Hutton's uniformitarian concept that 'all past changes on the globe had been brought about by the slow agency of existing causes'.[161] It is easy to overstate the distinction between these perspectives, however, perceiving catastrophism wherever a text allows for the persistence of earth-shaking forces. Buckland's Bridgewater treatise both insists on the Huttonian lesson that the constituents of the earth 'have been at all times regulated by the self-same system of fixed and universal laws, which still maintains the mechanism of the material

[158] Ibid., pp. 46.
[159] Ibid.
[160] Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science*, p. 53,
[161] Lyell, *Principles of Geology*, I, p. 63.

world',[162] and allowed for the existence of 'disturbing forces' operating within the remit of those laws. *The Mill on the Floss* refers to this idea, giving it a non-geological application, when Philip Wakem accuses Stephen of being a hypocrite for pretending that he fails to please Maggie. Stephen responds, 'What! because experience must have told me that I'm universally pleasing? I admit the law, but there's some disturbing force here' [p. 433]. Buckland had devoted a chapter to 'Proofs of Design in the Effects of Disturbing Forces on the Strata of the Earth'.[163] These forces, which 'appear to a certain degree to have acted at random and fortuitously', were the causes of the most seemingly irregular and disordered of the earth's features: '[e]levations and subsidences, inclinations and contortions, fractures and dislocations'.[164] They existed alongside the more gradual operations that have insensibly changed the earth. Thus, the incessant movement of water could gradually erode a mountain, but 'violent irruptions of water' caused what Buckland termed 'geological revolutions'.[165]

Such revolutionary physical 'irruptions' into the gradual operations of geological agency provided a model for Eliot's novel to make sense of the violence and sheer momentum of the economic and social changes that had transformed British society during the Industrial Revolution. Charles Lyell had already hinted at this potential parallel in the ways of ordering the history of the earth and the history of human society, observing that both 'the present condition of nations' and the state of the natural world are 'the result of many antecedent changes, some extremely remote and others recent, some gradual, others sudden and violent'.[166] In his *Method of the Divine Government*, James McCosh likewise likened the laws by which '*society is made to move forward*' to the co-existence of two distinctive geological forces.[167] The 'uniform laws' according to which society changed

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[162] Buckland, *Geology and Mineralogy*, I, p. 577.
[163] Ibid., p. 539.
[164] Ibid.
[165] Ibid., p. 95n.
[166] Lyell, *Principles of Geology*, I, p. 1.
[167] McCosh, *Divine Government*, p. 171.

gradually he compared to 'the orderly strata produced in the ancient geological world throughout long ages'; while the unpredictable 'contingencies' which transform society all at once 'may be compared to those upheavals which have been produced by boiling igneous matter pouring itself from the bowels of the earth'.[168] When Eliot's narrator refers to industrial and commercial advances as 'changes that widen the years' [p. 118], she indicates that these transformations outpaced the gradual temporal progress characterised by the ordinary lapse of years. This view of industrial progress accords with Mr Deane's notion, cited above, of the accelerated wheel of fortune under industrialisation. The new commercial regime heralded a wholly new conception of the relationship between time and social and economic advancement. Whereas men like Mr Deane's brothers-in-law Mr Glegg, Mr Pullet and Deane in his early years could only advance gradually [p. 396], Tom, he observes, has been able to skip over these steps and advance rapidly through the ranks of Guest & Co. This advancement, too, is enabled by his making use of the new commercial venture of speculation, which his old-fashioned father regards with suspicion [p. 312]. As Friedrich Engels's reference to the ruin of most 'industrial Micawbers and speculators' suggests, the practice of speculation well expressed the precariousness, instability and dizzying changefulness of social and economic existence under industrialisation. While, according to the narrator, 'the industrious men of a former generation [...] made their fortunes slowly' through saving [p. 121], speculation offers Tom the change to 'change the slow process of addition into multiplication' [p. 311].

This idea of addition being converted into multiplication indicates the impossibility of accommodating the changes of industrialisation within a gradualist timeframe alone. Those who saw human society as evolving according to developmental laws, such as G. H. Lewes, claimed that this took place 'through the slow additions of thousands upon thousands of years'.[169] The compression of changes under the industrial revolution,

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[168] Ibid.
[169] Lewes, *Comte's Philosophy of the Sciences*, p. 20.

however, required a different model of transformation, one based on multiplication rather than linear addition. Herbert Spencer was exhilarated by 'the multitudinous changes' consequent upon all industrial progress. 'To trace the effects of steam-power, ' he wrote, in terms similar to those of *The Mill on the Floss*' Mr Deane, 'in its manifold applications to mining, navigation and manufactures of all kind, would carry us into unmanageable detail'.[170] To prove his point, however, he focuses on the effects of just one form of steam-power, the railway locomotive, showing how in a few years it had 'changed the face of the country, the course of trade and the habits of the people'.[171]

Mr Tulliver is uneasy, he tells Tom, unless he can see his money in front of him. Speculation, however, was like nineteenth-century geology in that it depended on taking a long perspective and a dynamic one. In his essay on 'The Development Hypothesis', which made the case for the transmutation of species, Herbert Spencer had observed it was only possible to conceive of development over time by considering phenomena not in their 'statical' (that is, their current state) but in their 'dynamical aspect'.[172] While a saver who wants his money in front of him is trapped in a statical perspective, the speculator is more interested in the prolonged process by which value is accrued. The value of his investment is not constant —at any given point it might appear to be lower or higher —but its actual value is always held in suspension, meaning he must take the long, dynamical perspective. As the political economist J. R. McCulloch observed, the successful speculator is he who 'has outstripped his competitors in the judgement with which he has looked into futurity, and appreciated the operations of causes producing distant effects'.[173] Likewise, nineteenth-century geology necessarily took the long view, focussing on the process by which the earth had developed according to natural laws rather than a narrow view of the earth at any given moment. It was by means of this privileging of the long dynamic view

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[170] Herbert Spencer, 'Progress: Its law and Cause', *Essays: Scientific, Political, Speculative*, 2 vols (London: Longman & Co., 1858), I, pp. 1-54 (p. 48).
[171] Ibid.
[172] Herbert Spencer, 'The Development Hypothesis', *Essays*, I, pp. 389-95 (p. 392).
[173] J. R. McCulloch, *The Principles of Political Economy*, p. 338.

that geologists were able to put an optimistic gloss on what might seem an intractably bleak version of natural history.

As J. K. I. Klaver has shown, the peculiar challenge for geologists in this period was to find 'order and origin in the seemingly chaotic state of nature'.[174] The front cover of Lyell's *Principles of Geology* included an epigraph taken from John Playfair's *Illustrations of the Huttonion Theory of the Earth* (1802): 'Amid all the revolutions of the globe, the economy of Nature has been uniform, and her laws are the only thing that has resisted the general movement'. Buckland likewise insisted that 'the ultimate atoms of the material elements, through whatever changes they may have passed, are and ever have been governed by laws as regular and uniform as those which hold the planets in their course'.[175] The regularity of these laws he took as proof of the designing agency of God, for whose 'greatness and goodness' Buckland therefore saw geology as providing evidence.[176] But to see the beneficent purposes of these general laws required a rather enlarged perspective. As one authority cited by Buckland observed, '[s]ources of apparent derangement in the system appear, when their operation throughout a series of ages is brought into one view, to have produced a great preponderance of good'.[177] Evident here is the influence of the optimist's mantra, following Pope's *Essay on Man* (1734), that evil is only *apparent* because it is all eventually resolved into the good of the whole.[178] The geologists of the nineteenth century had the advantage of an enormously expanded timeframe to give force to this claim. As the publisher and geologist Robert Chambers observed in his anonymously authored *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (1844), '[i]n the scheme of Providence, thousands of years of frequent warfare, all the so-called

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[174] J. K. I. Klaver, *Geology and Religious Sentiment: The Effect of Geological Discoveries on English Society and Literature between 1829 and 1859* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill, 1997), p. 89.
[175] Buckland, *Geology and Mineralogy*, I, p. 11.
[176] Ibid.
[177] Ibid, p. 540n.
[178] 'All partial Evil, universal Good'. See Alexander Pope, *Essay on Man*, p. 515.

glories which fill history, may be an exception to the general rule'.[179] Buckland was able to find evidence of 'Order and Method and Design even in the operations of the most turbulent among the mighty physical forces which have affected the terraqueous globe'.[180] Disturbing forces had both converted into habitable land strata that had once been beneath the ocean and had so arranged the earth's strata as to make mineral deposits both ultimately accessible to mankind and yet sufficiently difficult of access as to helpfully stimulate his ingenuity.[181] One of Buckland's subheadings for his chapter on disturbing forces was therefore 'Order Amidst Apparent Confusion'.

Clearly those who subscribed to the long, dynamical perspective recommended by geologists, one which suggested that the beneficent purpose of violent catastrophe might only be revealed aeons after its occurrence, would hesitate before announcing anything to be an absolute evil. Such a worldview certainly permeates *The Mill on the Floss.* Having described the afflictions winter visits on the poor and hungry, for instance, the narrator comments that if the season 'has not yet learned to bless men impartially, it is because his father Time, with ever-unrelenting purpose, still hides that secret in his own mighty, slow-beating heart' [p. 153]. An expansive temporal awareness allows current evil to be both acknowledged and justified by the implication that its secret purpose will only be revealed with the gradual passage of time. The acceptance of immediate evil as only a provisional stage in the progress towards good is also a concomitant of the novel's focus on young people, in the process of growing. The narrator observes that it is 'the strangely perspectiveless conception of life that gives the bitterness [of children's grief] its intensity' [p. 66], which implies that this pain might be alleviated if only they could enter into a broader perspective. This is the perspective the ever-pardoning narrator brings to bear on the events of the novel. Thus she is able to partly justify Philip Wakem's desperate and selfish risking of Maggie's reputation by referring to his youth. The 'good force' has rarely

[179] Chamber, *Vestiges*, p. 367.
[180] Buckland, *Geology and Mineralogy*, I, p. 540.
[181] Ibid., pp. 548, 554n, 555.

'had time to triumph [...] at two-and-twenty. The force was present in Philip in much strength, but the sun itself looks feeble through the morning mists' [p. 331]. Philip is still at the dawn of his life but that goodness will prevail in him is as certain as that the sun will get brighter as the day advances. Philip himself shares this enlarged perspective, making use of a geological metaphor when he tells Maggie that he thinks 'there are stores laid up in our human nature that our understandings can make no complete inventory of' [p. 305]. This image of valuable treasures having accreted, like mineral deposits, over time depends on a dynamical view of human nature, seeing it as a work-in-progress.

The developmental view relativises the evils of successive epochs so that it becomes impossible to judge anything as an absolute evil. Eliot's tolerance towards the past can easily be mistaken for a repudiation of the modern industrial world. Joseph W. Childers, for instance, asserts that 'Eliot's novels, with only a few exceptions, are layered upon a quiet but insistent nostalgia for times that are not infused by 'the spirit of industry'.[182] The opening of *The Mill on the Floss*, in particular, where the narrator dreams of the distant past, has been seen to be coloured by a 'melancholy nostalgia',[183] which recurs in later passages reflecting on childhood.[184] It would be a mistake, however, to view this as Eliot extolling the superiority of the pre-industrial past to the industrial present. Her nostalgia can in fact be read as a characteristically liberal insistence on the inevitability of succession and supersession in the modern world. As Kenneth M. R. Mason observes, 'the romanticised ideal portrayed here provides us, whether consciously or no, a clear notion of what will be supplanted—what will *have* to be supplanted'.[185]

Once again, William Buckland's *Bridgewater Treatise* on geology is a key text for understanding the complex way in which Eliot's novel actually handles the tragedy of

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[182] Joseph W. Childers, 'Industrial Culture and the Victorian Novel', in Deirdre David, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 77-96 (p. 91).
[183] George Levine, *The Realistic Imagination: English Fiction from Frankenstein to Lady Chatterley* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 44.
[184] Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science*, p. 70; Hardy, *The Novels of George Eliot*, p. 156.
[185] Mundhenk, 'Patterns of Irresolution', pp. 178-9.

social supersession. Buckland was interested not only in the geological changes that had shaped the earth but also in the modes of existence of the various species that had successively inhabited the earth in the course of those changes. Geology, he wrote,

> not only comprehends the entire range of the mineral kingdom, but includes also the history of innumerable extinct races of animals and vegetables; in each of which it exhibits evidences of design and contrivance, and of adaptations to the varying condition of the lands and waters on which they were placed.[186]

The two perennial aspects of terrestrial life that geology thus discloses, extinction and adaptation, are, in fact, mutually dependent. The perfect adaptation to the 'condition of the land' is what dooms species to extinction because, as readers of geological texts knew all too well, that condition is drastically 'varying'. This meant that while past ways of existence were to be admired as demonstrating the optimum adaptation to prevailing conditions, their ultimate disappearance was only to be expected. Considering the 'Saurian reptiles', for instance, Buckland wrote that these 'extinct forms' showed the same evidence of 'method and design' in their 'adaptation' to 'the varied circumstances and conditions of the earth's progressive stages of advancement' as those then traceable in 'the structure of living animals and vegetable bodies'.[187] Buckland's is the language of inevitable progress favoured by Whig and other liberal thinkers. But this does not entail a contemptuous attitude towards the past.[188] Rather, it involves a relativistic understanding of ways of life over time, with each being ideally suited to 'its own peculiar place and state of life'.[189] Buckland explicitly argues for a relativistic understanding of organisms over time, writing that '[a]ll perfection has relation to the object proposed to be attained by each form of organization that occurs in nature'.[190]

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[186] Buckland, *Geology and Mineralogy*, I, p. 7.
[187] Ibid., p. 76.
[188] This attitude towards the past is exemplified by Charles Dickens's labeling of some of his false books on his bookshelf at Gad's Hill as a series on 'The Wisdom of our Ancestors', which included titles apparently on 'Ignorance', 'Superstition', 'The Block', The Stake', 'The Rack', 'Dirt' and 'Disease'. See Raymond Chapman, *The Sense of the Past in Victorian Literature* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), p. 176.
[189] Buckland, *Geology and Mineralogy*, I, p. 96.
[190] Ibid., p. 107 n.

By applying Buckland's model to human history, Eliot's novel is able to steer a path between the total repudiation of the past demonstrated by some liberal thinkers and the desire to reinstall a pre-industrial order expressed in the actions of the rural rioters of the 1830s. 'The object of [the rural rebellion] was not revolutionary', according to Eric Hobsbawn and George Rudé:

> [T]here was a wider objective: the defence of the customary rights of the rural poor as freeborn Englishmen, and the restoration of a stable social order which had—at least it seemed so in retrospect—guaranteed them. This was an objective which the labourers shared with other strata of rural society, and it gave to the rising of 1830 in some counties something of the air of a general manifesto of county against town, or past against future.[191]

For some, the misery brought about by industrialisation seemed a sign that society had been better off before. As George R. Porter observed of those thrown out of work by industrial advances, 'their wretchedness is made a theme for declaimers, who would fain persuade mankind that the sacrifices necessary for the onward progress of society are too great for the advantage'.[192] Yet for those who insisted that this progress was governed by inexorable natural laws, to resist economic and social change was like expecting time to stand still. The relativist understanding of human history which *The Mill on the Floss* applies to the lives it considers makes the notion of clinging to custom or stability for their own sakes absurd. The behaviour of the inhabitants of St. Oggs is to be understood solely in relation to the 'vast sum of conditions' surrounding them [p. 273]. Rather than condemn their inevitable ignorance and reliance on custom to the exclusion of any loftier impulses, the narrator acknowledges its adaptive value *in their circumstances*: '[t]heir theory of life had its core of soundness, as all theories must on which decent and prosperous families have been reared and flourished' [p. 273]. The narrator likewise offers a wholly adaptive account of religion. Describing the harsh conditions of deprivation in which most of the

[191] Hobsbawm & Rudé, *Captain Swing*, p. 16.
[192] Porter, *The Progress of the Nation*, I, p. 125.

masses live their lives, she observes that religious thought has thriven on 'such circumstances' [p. 292]. The comfortable do not need religious enthusiasm to survive and thrive and therefore they do not develop it. But for the poor, it has had useful functions which have helped them tolerate their lot [p. 292]. This perspective excludes the option of evaluating religious enthusiasm on its own merits. It is enough that it has performed a necessary function in, to use Buckland's phrase, 'the peculiar place and state of life' of the poor. As Eliot's constant use of the past tense in these passages makes clear, the conditions in which such behaviour made sense are rapidly disappearing from the world of her novel. To resent all innovation and cling to custom in such circumstances is to be like Mrs Glegg, bitterly inveighing against the gradual extinction of the 'true Dodson spirit' [p. 206].

Eliot shared this relativistic understanding of human phenomena with Herbert Spencer, who, in an essay on 'The Use of Anthropomorphism' (1851), argued that 'modes of human thought and action subserve, in the times and places in which they occur, some useful function, that though bad in the abstract, they are relatively good—are the best which the then existing conditions admit of'.[193] The complementary point of Spencer's essay, however, was that such modes of thought and action inevitably dwindle and die out whenever circumstances render them obsolete.[194] *The Mill on the Floss*'s emphasis on the adaptive nature of the traditional way of life of the Tullivers and Dodsons before the onset of industrialisation likewise paves the way for its disappearance. The narrator refers to Mr Pullet, for instance, as belonging 'to that extinct class of British yeoman' [p. 70], whose ignorance was no barrier to them 'under favouring circumstances'. Given that the narrator repeatedly refers to herself and her readers as living in more 'instructed' times [pp. 137, 263], we are left to infer that the change of circumstances doomed this class to extinction.

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[193] Herbert Spencer, 'The Uses of Anthropomorphism', *Essays*, I, pp. 430-5 (p. 430). Fellow liberal-minded writers Harriet Martineau and George Atkinson made the same point in terms which reveal the insistent optimism of this outlook: '[n]or must we forget that all conditions of things and opinions are right, and the best they can be in the time in which they exist—having their place in the plan of nature's progressive development'. See their *Letters on the Laws of Man's Nature* and Development, p. 290.
[194] Spencer, 'The Uses of Anthropomorphism', p. 433.

Indeed, her general insistence that the ways of the Tullivers and Dodsons are only to be understood in the complicated circumstances of their time, combined with the premise that those circumstances have now lapsed, underscores the obsolescence of those ways. Eliot at one point considered entitling the novel *The House of Tulliver, or Life on the Floss*; and the anthropological eye her narrator casts over this bygone order lends that word 'Life' a biological flavour, as though, like Buckland, she is reconstructing for her readers a unique biosphere, now irrecoverable.[195] Eliot fully understands and has compassion for these denizens of a former world but it is insistently a *former* world her novel describes, her use of the geological metaphors I considered earlier underscoring how remote from her readers these 'antiquated times' were [p. 294].

The Mill on the Floss underscores the obsolescence of past ways of life and the naturalness of succession by making recurrent reference to the idea of haunting, which is striking in a realist novel. The narrator says that the 'shadow' of the Saxon king still walks the ancient streets of St. Oggs, where he is met by 'the gloomier shadow of the dreadful heathen Dane' [p. 116]. Similarly, the 'ghostly boatman' St. Ogg himself is said to haunt the river Floss [p. 459]. The ghost is a clear symbol of the obsolete. The novel's ghosts also operate as reminders of the passage of bygone epochs, first the ancient Pagan era, then the medieval one and finally — in the novel's closing suggestion that Philip feels Maggie's presence in the Red Deeps 'like a revisiting spirit', —the pre-industrial one. The Red Deeps, significantly, is the site of an 'exhausted stone-quarry—so long exhausted that its mounds and hollows were now clothed with brambles and trees' [p. 298]. Its 'rock and ravine' symbolise the successive ages of geological time as described by writers like Buckland. By quartering the spirit of her heroine there, Eliot effectively inters her in the irrecoverable past.

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[195] *Letter from George Eliot to John Blackwood, 3rd January 1860, Letters, II*, p. 248. It may be relevant on this note that it was G. H Lewes who proposed the provisional title. In 1858, Lewes had published a biological work considering different organisms in their respective marine environments, *Sea-Side Studies at Ilfracombe, Tenby, The Scilly Isles, & Jersey* (Edinburgh & London: Blackwood & Sons, 1858).

3.3 Maggie Tulliver and the Greater Good

In order to grasp the ideological significance to the contemporary problem of evil of Maggie's sacrifice in the flood and relegation to a bygone epoch, it is necessary to recognise the similarities between father and daughter, as well as where they differ. Maggie most closely resembles her father when she is still a child. As we have seen, one of the novel's earliest chapters, in which Mr Tulliver seeks Mr Riley's advice about Tom's education, describes the miller's 'rampant Manichaeism' [p. 15], reflected in his belief that lawyers, rats and weevils (all phenomena likely to be troublesome for millers in particular) were created by 'Old Harry' [p. 15]. This crude conception of the world places him on a par with his nine-year-old daughter, who in the same chapter talks freely and with evident belief about the devil, about whom she has read in Daniel Defoe's *History of the Devil* (1726) and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) [pp. 18-9]. At this stage in her development, Maggie displays that preponderance of the imaginative over the rational faculties that Comtean Positivists like Lewes and Spencer saw as being peculiar to both the child and mankind in its earlier stages. In his account of Comte's system, Lewes explained that in the theological and metaphysical stages that preceded the positivist stage in the evolution of society, imagination, the projection of human meaning onto the external world, takes precedence over pure observation.[196] This accounts for the prevalence in savage societies of fetishism, defined by Lewes as 'our primitive tendency to conceive all exterior bodies as animated with a *life* essentially analogous to our own'.[197] James McLaverty has already considered the vital role afforded fetishism in *Silas Marner* (1861),

[196] Lewes, *Comte's Philosophy of the Sciences*, p. 249.
[197] Ibid., p. 273.

the novel which Eliot wrote after *The Mill on the Floss.*[198] The depiction of the young Maggie Tulliver suggests that the author had already begun to formulate some of her ideas in relation to the subject. Maggie is described as having in the attic 'a Fetish which she punished for all her misfortunes' [p. 28]. The description of the 'long career of vicarious suffering' to which Maggie subjects this fetish, a wooden doll, would have encouraged Eliot's first readers to associate the child's behaviour with the religious practices of less advanced societies, perhaps even bringing to mind the Christian Vicarious Atonement. As Gillian Beer observes, the belief that the 'phases of the individual life cycle' recapitulated the 'phases of species development' was one widely held amongst scientifically minded Victorians.[199] Lewes remarked that although 'we are now sufficiently removed from Fetichism to have some difficulty in conceiving it, each of us has but to retrace his own individual history to find in it a faithful representation of such an initial state'.[200]

The behaviour of a child like Maggie would thus be seen as encapsulating in miniature a less evolved state of human development. When Maggie takes her rage and sorrow out on her doll, making it bear the brunt of 'nine years of earthly struggle' [p. 28], we are in no doubt as to the immaturity and irrationality of her actions. Only an immature brain could make the link between her diverse 'misfortunes' and the need to 'punish' the doll. However, this is very similar to the suggestion elsewhere in the novel that her father is scapegoating Mr Wakem for his own struggles. If, according to the narrator, Tulliver's hatred of Wakem is comparable to holding a heedless machine to be 'guilty' for the suffering it unintentionally inflicts, then Tulliver too would fall under Lewes' account of the fetishistic impulse, which colours the external world with benign or malign intentionality. From a certain perspective — that of the capitalist's daughter, Lucy Deane

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[198] James McLaverty, 'Comtean Fetishism in Silas Marner', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 36. 3 (December 1981), pp. 318-36.

[199] Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 90; '[t]he childhood of man enables us to retrace the infancy of nations' (Lewes, *Comte's Philosophy of the Sciences,* p. 19)

[200] Lewes, *Comte's Philosophy of the Sciences*, p. 273.

— the link in the miller's mind between his sufferings and Wakem is as unfathomable as that between the young Maggie's sufferings and her doll: 'My uncle Tulliver was unfortunate and lost all his property and I think he considered Mr Wakem was somehow the cause of it' is Lucy's explanation to Stephen Guest [p. 365].

Given the social evolutionary view of children as offering a window into less evolved stages of society, it is unsurprising that the young Maggie distils into cruder form the primitive response to evil of her old-fashioned father. Tulliver is understood as belonging to an earlier stage of social existence, which economic and social changes had rendered antiquated by the time Eliot was writing. Although as a young adult Maggie is appalled by her father's violent revenge on Wakem and the disgrace it entails, as a child she had also vindictively taken out her pain not only on her doll but on Lucy, whom she furiously pushes into the mud, even though she has only a hazy sense of her cousin's role in her sufferings [p. 101]. This 'rash deed' is typical of Maggie, who is, like her father, driven by impulse to acts of 'wrong-doing or absurdity' [p. 393]. As Dinah Birch observes, Maggie is 'commonly a source of disruption and disorder'.[201] Like her father in ruin, she possesses the same vengeful incendiary potential that the Swing riots had shown to lie latent in the rural masses. Noting the analogy drawn between 'women and workers in mid-Victorian social theory', Sally Shuttleworth writes that the 'plight of both [Maggie and the novel's imagined masses] is related to the stratification of society'.[202] As she matures, 'Miss Spitfire', as her brother calls her [pp. 86, 64, 34], grows alarmed by her own dangerous propensity for 'discontent' [p. 327], her tendency to 'rebel against her lot' [p. 287], and her anger at the sight of those more fortunate than her [p. 373]. Her subjectivity is construed in terms of oppression and resistance, a resistance that takes the form of fire. The uneasiness one feels in looking at her, according to the narrator, is due to the sense she gives of 'opposing elements, of which a fierce collision is imminent [...]', her 'hushed

[201] Birch, 'Introduction', p. xii.
[202] Shuttleworth, *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science*, pp. 65, 129.

expression [...] out of keeping with that resistant youth, which one expects to flash out in a sudden, passionate glance, that will dissipate all the quietude, like a damp fire leaping out again when all seemed safe' [p. 299]. The precise phrasing makes it clear that Maggie's fire is a destructive and dangerous one, which needs to be doused in the interests of safety. Maggie's incendiary potential is bound up with her habitual discontent. The 'quietude' overlaying Maggie's fire is owing to her determination at that point in her life to give up 'being discontented' [p. 302]. Even so, she continues to have bouts of feeling 'angry and discontented', which accounts for the narrator's sense of the persistent fire lying beneath.

We can discern a political component in Maggie's angry discontent when we realize how much she is invested with the dangerous force of hunger. Constantly 'unsatisfied' [p. 178], she is prey to a 'peremptory hunger' [p. 276], a 'soul's hunger' [p. 287], which Philip warns her could become, if too long unrelieved, a 'savage appetite' [p. 329]. The 'satisfaction' [p. 276] that Maggie seeks usually consists of spiritual, intellectual or emotional goods rather than food. Nevertheless, her 'craving' [p. 291] is so consistently described in terms of hunger that a number of critics have sought to account for it. Drawing our attention to the almost vampiric 'rapacity' of Maggie's hunger, Nina Auerbach interprets it as part of the heroine's subversive demonic potential, belonging more to a Gothic or sensational novel than to a realist text.[203] Deanna Kreisel, similarly interested in the way Maggie 'foreground[s] questions of demand, appetite and renunciation', offers a very different analysis, reading this in the context of Victorian anxieties about economic consumption.[204] Because the burgeoning capitalist system was seen to depend upon the 'multiplication of desires,' in the creation of a sufficient demand to stave off market stagnation, under-consumption, whether due to parsimony or sheer indolence, became a threat.[205] This capitalist narrative, however, co-existed alongside

[203] Auerbach, 'The Power of Hunger', pp. 154, 157, 161.
[204] Deanna Kreisel, 'Superfluity and Suction: The Problem with Saving in *The Mill on the Floss*', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 35. 1 (Autumn 2001), pp. 69-103 (p. 82).
[205] Ibid., pp. 74, 79.

another more optimistic one, most associated with David Ricardo and Herbert Spencer, which foresaw unlimited economic growth.[206] Both economic narratives were interrelated because it was the focus in the optimistic account on the unalloyed benefits of capital accumulation which raised for writers like Malthus the spectre of surplus and therefore of ineffective demand. Although the Ricardian optimistic version has been seen as the dominant capitalist narrative by the mid-nineteenth-century, Kreisel reads Maggie's narrative of immoderate appetites and 'attempts to *deny* desires' as reflecting continuing anxieties about surplus and a catastrophic failure of demand. [207]

While agreeing with Kreisel that the novel reflects the 'economic unconscious of mid-century England',[208] I argue that the text requires we consider Maggie's wants not as potentially legitimate ones —were she only to have read her Ricardo right—but precisely as illegitimate ones. That is, Maggie, as we shall see, is figured not as a potential consumer but as a potential thief, a snatcher of goods that are not hers. Kreisel's reading also elides the distinction between economic demand, which is more properly represented by Mrs Deane's desires for smarter furniture, and the sort of desperate reckless hunger with which Maggie is associated. Rather than desire merely, Maggie is described as feeling the effects of a 'starved life' [p. 414]. Her heart-hunger is equivalent not to the consumer's demand but the hunger of the starving masses. The alarming 'destructive powers'[209] Auerbach discerns in Maggie's appetite reflect a common construction of the hunger of the poor as a threat to civilization and industrial and commercial progress. Maggie's final act of renunciation depends on her being able to forego the claims of hunger for the sake of the common welfare — dubiously represented by the petted capitalist's daughter Lucy Deane being able to keep what Maggie concedes is legitimately hers. For this sacrifice Maggie is

[206] Ibid., pp. 72-3.
[207] Ibid., pp. 77, 82, 89-91.
[208] Ibid., p. 79.
[209] Auerbach, 'The Power of Hunger', p. 156.

glorified in the closing flood, a willing martyr to the advancement of commercial interests that Victorian liberals conflated with progress.

Early in *The Mill on the Floss* the narrator makes an overt comparison between Maggie's spiritual hunger and physical hunger. '[T]his need of love' in the heroine, 'this hunger of the heart' is 'as peremptory as that other hunger by which Nature forces us to submit to the yoke, and change the face of the world' [p. 39]. Maggie is constituted here as symbolically equivalent to those poor whose ever-pressing want was the source of the transformations of industrialisation. This is the Malthusian understanding of hunger, by which constant scarcity among most of the population was justified as providing a necessary impetus to exertion. By compelling the masses to 'submit to the yoke', hunger, according to this construction, actually drove industrial progress. Eliot's capitalised reference to 'Nature' is consistent with Malthus's designation of hunger as a beneficent force arising inevitably from natural circumstances. This positive construction of hunger is echoed in Mr Deane's claim that the increase in population has driven industrial invention [p. 396] and in the narrator's vision of the 'want' of the labouring mass of national life urging them into the industrial activity that creates the wealth of fashionable life [p. 292]. This narrative enlists physical hunger on the side of industrial progress and civilization.

Eliot's novel, however, is also conscious of a darker, appalling type of hunger, not the 'wonderful subduer' [p. 39] of the masses but one that might actually instigate them to irrational self-defeating behaviour or even savage destruction. One of the novel's first references to the force of hunger occurs during the narrator's reflections on Mr Riley's possible motivations for recommending Mr Stelling as a tutor for Tom on very flimsy grounds. While the reader might assume that Riley has some devious self-interested 'end' in mind, the narrator suggests that he is impulsively acting to serve the immediately pressing needs of his ego: '[w]e live hand to mouth, most of us, with a small family of immediate desires—we do little else than snatch a morsel to satisfy the hungry brood,

rarely thinking of seed-corn or next year's crop' [p.25]. In this scenario, the hunger of the very poor, those who live hand-to-mouth, is presented as almost incompatible with long-term planning and productivity. The concern with satisfying the immediate hunger of one's family recalls contemporary accounts of the type of subsistence cultivation held to be inimical to long-term agricultural growth and prosperity. In his *Progress of the Nation*, Porter observed that '[i]n countries where the labour of a man, applied to the cultivation of the soil, was capable of producing only a bare subsistence for himself, it is plain that society could never advance in the scale of civilization'.[210] It was this 'scratch-as-scratch-can subsistence economy of the poor' that enclosure had been intended to destroy.[211] Progress is possible, according to Porter, only when 'improved implements or better methods of culture' enable a surplus to be grown, which can then be sold.[212] It is this increased productivity and commercialisation of the land, we have already seen, which Mr Deane situates as central to the industrial advancement of the country and which undermines Mr Tulliver's customary claim to the river. Taking the anxieties around subsistence farming to an extreme, Eliot's analogy raises the prospect of a form of hunger so desperate that, far from driving progress as in Malthus's vision, it devours the very conditions of future existence — 'the seed-corn' necessary to 'next year's crop'. This hunger is made even more problematic by the suggestion that it is relieved by impulsive and illegitimate means, the morsel being '*snatch*[ed]'. This hint of trespass makes sense given that the context for this analogy is the narrator's reflections on the ways in which hungry egos such as that of Riley prompt us to 'spoil the lives of our neighbours' [p. 25]. Considered in this sense, the description could also be applied to the group of gypsies

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[210] Porter, *The Progress of the Nation*, I, p. 59. The political economist Nassau William Senior likewise saw the movement from subsistence to commercial farming as inevitable and necessary: '[t]he most laborious population, inhabiting the most fertile territory, if they devoted all their labour to the production of immediate results, and consumed its produce as it arose, would soon find their utmost exertions insufficient to produce even the necessaries of existence'. See his *An Outline of the Science of Political Economy* (London: W. Clowes & Sons, 1836), p. 157.

[211] Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 217.

[212] Ibid.

Maggie tries to join, with their hungry children described as 'snatch[ing]' the scraps of food on offer [p. 110], and others among them 'snatch[ing]' Maggie's things [p. 108].

The novel's darkest allusion to the destructiveness of hunger, however, consists of its reference to the Hunger Tower from Dante's *Inferno*. In this instance, it is Philip's desire for Maggie that is being considered. Despite his wealth, Philip serves as another model of deprivation in the novel because his deformity means that he has 'not his full share in the common good of men' [p. 330]. The narrator explains that his dubious decision to persuade Maggie to spend time with him in secret is owing to the intensity of his longing, which includes a 'savage impulse to snatch an offered joy' [p. 330]. Philip is suffering, according to the narrator, from one of the 'temptations that assail the desperation of hunger' [p. 331]. 'Does not the Hunger Tower stand as the type of the utmost trial to what is human in us?' she asks. Dante's *Inferno* describes the imprisonment of Count Ugolino and his children in the Tower of Hunger. Starving to death along with his children, the temptations assailing the Count are firstly to eat his children alive, which he resists, and then to eat their remains, to which he succumbs. His act of cannibalism is the potential extreme to which Philip's hunger might lead him—and indeed, Maggie, whose appetite is also said to be potentially 'savage' [p.329]. Cannibalism represents the force of hunger at its most opposed to civilization. For Herbert Spencer, it exemplified the difference between anti-social early societies and the liberal society he espoused. While the latter requires that each person's desires are limited by the imperative that he not diminish the welfare of another, man's 'primitive circumstances required that he should sacrifice the welfare of other beings to his own', behaviour demonstrated — we might say epitomized — in the act of cannibalism, among other barbarities.[213]

Anxieties about the threat immoderate hunger posed to civilization inevitably settled upon the most deprived segment of the population, the rural poor. In the first place,

[213] Spencer, *Social Statics*, pp. 62-3.

the desperation of hunger was seen as brutalising and dehumanising what had once been a contented peasantry, leading to the outrages committed during the Swing riots. William Howitt's description of 'The English Peasant' (1840) suggests the destructive powers with which hunger was invested. Rhetorically asking what has 'demonized' the peasantry, making them 'sullen and desperate' and turning them into 'poachers and incendiaries', Howitt answered:

> What makes the wolves herd together and descend from the Alps and the Pyrenees? What makes them desperate and voracious, blind with fury and revelling in vengeance? Hunger and hardship![214]

While Howitt's might seem a sympathetic account of the discontented rural poor, it still configures their actions as monstrous and deems those involved in attacks on property 'a walking pestilence'. The problem is precisely that hunger has rendered them 'blind', 'dimly-lighted' like Tulliver, and therefore inaccessible to reason. As Eliot's narrator observes in *The Mill on the Floss* '[t]he leap of natural longing from under the pressure of pain is so strong, that all less immediate motives are likely to be forgotten' [p. 514]. Just as the subsistence farmer's need to assuage immediate hunger makes him indifferent to long-term productivity, the hunger of the rural poor was represented in responses to the Swing riots as confining them to a limited perspective that was blind to the long-term benefits to be achieved by agricultural modernization. In his *An Outline of the Science of Political Economy* (1836), the influential political economist and lawyer Nassau William Senior argued that objections to the introduction of machinery arose from

> the habit of attending only to what is temporary and partial, and neglecting what is permanent and general; of dwelling on the evil that is concentrated, and being insensible to the benefit that is diffused.[215]

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[214] William Howitt, 'The English Peasant', in Kenny Meadows' *Heads of the People: Portraits of the English* (London: Robert Tyas, 1840), pp. 257-64 (p. 264). This passage was reprinted in Howitt's *The Yearbook of the Country; or The Field, the Forest, and the Fireside* (London: Henry Colburn, 1850), p. 382; and also made other appearances such as prefacing an intallment of the serialized story 'The Gaol Chaplain' in *Bentley's Miscellany*, (1844), XVI, pp. 173-179 (p. 173).

[215] Senior, *An Outline of the Science of Political Economy,* p. 199.

Since the immediate evil in question was the unemployment and immiseration of many labourers, Senior in effect justified their suffering by saying that protests against it represented an overly narrow view that disregarded the greater good. Senior, in fact, saw the acceptance of immediate deprivation for the sake of long-term gains as essential to the productivity of the nation.

In the same work, Senior argued that human labour and nature alone were not sufficient to sustain productivity so long as the attention was on 'immediate results'.[216] A third principle was required, which he called '*abstinence*: a term by which we express the conduct of a person who either abstains from the unproductive use of what he can command, or designedly prefers the production of remote to that of immediate results'. It is this element of abstinence, the ability to forego immediate satisfaction for deferred benefit, which he insisted distinguishes civilized societies from both crude societies and 'the least educated' members of advanced nations.[217] Clearly the poorest members of society, those driven to eat their own seed-corn, were incapable of being abstinent, their voracious hunger opposed to the best interests of civilized society. Senior was elsewhere explicit that industrial and commercial progress depended on not giving in to the hunger of the rural poor. In a preface addressing the Swing riots which was added to the 1831 edition of his *Three Lectures on the Rate of Wages*, he observed that the riots had convinced him of the necessity of clearing up certain 'fallacies' attached to the subject of wages.[218] The immediate aim of most of the Swing rioters was an increase in wages and they were mostly successful, with local magistrates or individual farmers agreeing to higher wages either due to intimidation or because they genuinely felt the labourers should have a living wage.[219]

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[216] Ibid., p. 153.
[217] Ibid.
[218] Nassau William Senior, *Three Lectures on the Rate of Wages Delivered Before the University of Oxford in Easter Term 1830 with a Preface on the Causes and Remedies of the Present Disturbances* (London: John Murray, 1831), p. iii.
[219] Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 228.

For political economists, however, this concession was outrageous. Clearly it was not just the labourers but also those immediately above them on the social scale who needed to be educated in the principles of political economy. Senior's response was to show that the rate of wages depended upon the overall capital available divided by the number of labourers. Wages rose in accordance with an increase in labour productivity, which would be brought about by the very modernizing practices and mechanisation that the labourers foolishly opposed.[220] It would also be secured by the fact that the individual labourer could only hope for an increase in wages by being more productive. Where the local responses to the demands of the Swing rioters had erred was in conceding to the dangerous principle, already sown in some labourers' minds by the corrosive Poor Laws, that the labourer must be paid 'not according to his *value* but to his *wants*'.[221] The labourers will now feel that they have a '*right* to wages', irrespective of their productivity.[222]

The problem with paying according to need rather than productive value, for Senior, is that it disrupts the self-regulating 'natural state of the relation between the capitalist and labourer' which had allegedly ensured that both their interests were advanced in tandem, the labourer's increased productivity enriching the capitalist which then raised the labourer's wages.[223] In such a state, the labourer will acknowledge that fluctuations in wage rates are beyond the control of his employer; and thus, although 'he must feel any fall in the price of his labour to be an evil, he is not likely to complain of it as an injustice'.[224] A system regulated by the *wants* of the labourers, however, can only end in 'common ruin'[225] because those wants are potentially boundless:

> [W]ho can doubt that he will measure his rights by his wishes, or that his wishes will extend with the prospect of their gratification? ... Next year, perhaps, the labourer will think it *unjust* that he should have less than 4*s.* a day

[220] Senior, *Three Lectures*, p. iii.
[221] Ibid., p. x.
[222] Ibid., p. xi.
[223] Ibid., pp. viii-xii.
[224] Ibid.,p. x.
[225] Ibid., p. xi.

> in winter, and 5.*s* in summer;--and woe to the tyrants who deny him his *right*![226]

The *Edinburgh Review* was inclined to agree, condemning the local decisions to raise wages and asking, 'is it to be supposed that the labourers will rest satisfied with what they have already gained?'.[227] In such accounts, the want of the labourers, directed into short-sighted demands for higher wages, imperils the prosperity and progress of the whole nation. It is significant that political economists like Senior were far from denying that the commercial system was experienced as an 'evil' by those whom it cast into want and deprivation. Their concern was to ensure that this evil was recognised as an inevitable temporary component of a self-regulating system that would lead to greater, permanent good — so long as it wasn't derailed by the blinding hunger of the sufferers.

Eliot's novel advances the same view on the immediate evils of long-term progress as that promulgated by political economists like Nassau William Senior. This stance is evident in her treatment of Maggie as one of the hungry dispossessed poor. The hunger of Maggie Tulliver is figured as potentially and threateningly boundless. Maggie is subject to 'illimitable wants,' to which she fears succumbing [p. 325]. Faced with the temptations offered by both Philip and Stephen, her anxiety is that she should 'want too much' [p. 307]: 'I was never satisfied with a little of anything' [p. 328]. The narrator is clear that far from being initially made up of 'unalloyed devotedness', Maggie expects her emotional rewards to be commensurate with what she feels she is owed: she 'put forth large claims for herself where she loved strongly' [p. 205]. The term 'claim' is notable here given that the hungry poor were most alarming to political economists when imagined as beseeching 'claimants' on an economic system which had no place for them. Robert Malthus notoriously included in the 1803 edition of his *Essay* on population a passage arguing that those whose labour society does not want (the situation of Tom Tulliver when he first goes to Mr Deane's office) have no natural 'claim of *right* on society for the smallest portion of

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[226] Ibid.
[227] Anon., 'Causes and Cure of Disturbances and Pauperism', *Edinburgh Review*, p. 54.

food'.[228] He warned that if the misguided compassion of the more fortunate guests at 'nature's mighty feast' nevertheless make room for them, the feast will soon be besieged by 'numerous claimants' who will destroy all order and harmony and reduce *everyone* to scarcity—a version of the 'common ruin' Nassau William Senior later predicted would be the consequence of giving into the claims of the rioting rural labourers.[229] When Maggie's claims are not met, she too is liable to 'burst out in an agitated, almost violent' way [p. 205]. As a little girl, Maggie's hunger for love and anger when it is withheld cause her to shove her brother and stamp her feet in angry tears when he laughs at her [p. 64], to reduce Tom's carefully build house of cards to 'scattered ruins' in a flurry of anger [p. 86], and to jealously push her cousin in the mud after deciding she would like to make her cry by slapping or pinching her [pp. 99, 101]. The narrator considers this to be little Maggie at her most demonic [p. 98], 'like a small Medusa'. As an adult, it is also in relation to Lucy Deane, unmistakably a favoured guest at Nature's feast, that the deprived Maggie risks yielding to what she considers the 'worst evil' in her nature — the temptation to steal Lucy's de facto *fiancé* and make her cousin suffer [p. 458].

It is while she is staying in the Deane household that Maggie undergoes her 'Great Temptation'. We have already seen that the Deanes are the beneficiaries of industrial and commercial change, just as Maggie, taking a break from her lowly teaching and governessing work, is one of its victims. Before Maggie arrives on the scene, Lucy and Stephen Guest, both enriched by the prosperity of Guest & Co., are imagined as living together in a sort of 'Paradise', spending their days duetting at the grand piano in Lucy's 'well-furnished drawing-room', when not pleasure-boating [p. 363]. 'We are Adam and Eve, unfallen, in Paradise', Stephen tells Lucy [p. 367]. Maggie arrives from her dismal 'situation' with a keen 'sense of privation', sighing and unhappy in shabby clothes, and confesses to Lucy that she fears her own selfishness because she 'often get[s] angry at the

[228] Robert Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, ed. by Donald Winch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 249. This is based on the 1803 edition of the essay.
[229] Ibid.

sight of happy people' [pp. 365, 374-5]. In this context, to take Stephen from Lucy would satisfy both Maggie's voracious hunger for love and her vindictiveness against those spoiled with love. The novel, moreover, encourages us to consider this in the broadest terms as the temptation felt by the angrily deprived to take to themselves the goods of the better off. Maggie's hunger for love, I mentioned above, is equated early in the novel with the hunger for subsistence that presses on the masses [pp. 38-9]. Her overwhelming desire to take Stephen to herself is, she implies to Philip, 'the effect of her starved life' [p. 414]. She pretends to Philip that it is her eagerness for the 'luxuries' at Lucy's that worries her, when really it is her eagerness for Stephen, a pretence that suggests an equivalence between Stephen himself and those fruits of capitalism from which Maggie is ordinarily debarred [p. 414].

The dandy-ish Stephen, who has himself 'seen nothing of business' [p. 396], is an attractive product of the commercial system rather than an active participant in it. The narrator introduces him as

> Mr Stephen Guest, whose diamond ring, attar of roses, and air of nonchalant leisure, at twelve o'clock in the day, are the graceful and odoriferous result of the largest oil-mill and the most extensive wharf in St. Oggs. [p. 365]

Stephen's perfumed attractions are the counterpoint of the narrator's earlier image of the mass of industrious national life, of which Maggie was considered a constituent, being cramped into 'unfragrant' mills and factories to produce all the goods of fashionable life [p.292]. The novel lays peculiar emphasis on how desirable and 'handsome' Stephen is [p. 372], with all the ladies of St. Oggs seemingly once feeling 'hypothetic claims' on his admiration, which they have now 'ceded' to Lucy [p. 431]. Stephen is the ultimate version of those goods to which the Deanes' newly-created wealth has given Lucy access. Lucy, knowing Maggie is 'so fond of pretty things!', lavishes her own 'best prints and drawings' on her cousin during her stay [p. 370]. This 'riotous feast' [p. 374] Lucy provides her with,

far from satisfying Maggie's 'desire and longing' unfortunately [p. 374], seems only to stimulate it. However, the novel is clear that no matter how legitimate Maggie's sense of privation and how desperate her hunger, it is better for her to continue in want than to take Stephen, the most desirable of Lucy's things. The happiness she finds with him can only be violently 'snatched' from another [p. 457]. Yet Maggie is brought by her hunger to the very brink of committing what for her amounts to a 'deliberate crime' [p. 459]. Stephen represents for Maggie 'all that her nature craved', and when such 'fullness of existence' is 'brought within her reach, why was she to forego it, that another might have it, —another, who perhaps needed it less?' [p. 458]. When it comes to sheer *need*, there is no doubt that Maggie's claim on Stephen is greater than that of Lucy. She is in a state of spiritual starvation when she encounters him. The title of the book describing her trial is 'the Great Temptation' which reminds us of the narrator's earlier description, in the Hunger Tower passage, of the 'temptations that assail the desperation of hunger' [p. 331]. However, it is also clear that for Maggie to give in to her feelings for Stephen would be a 'cruel selfishness', which shows that she shares the narrator's fear of the potential savagery of hunger [p. 458].

The Hunger Tower passage also confers a glory on Maggie's ultimate resistance of her hunger. In her decision to sacrifice herself rather than the happiness of others ('I cannot take a good for myself that has been wrung out of their misery' [p. 478]), she is the redemptive opposite of the cannibalistic savage. At stake in Maggie's struggle with her desire for Stephen is the whole question of who should legitimately bear the burden of suffering and sacrifice. 'Why should not Lucy—why should not Philip suffer?' she asks herself, '*She* had had to suffer through many years of her life; and who had renounced anything for her?' [p. 248]. Although Lucy has been kind to Maggie, this has not required any sacrifice or renunciation on her part because she has more than enough to spare. The relationship between Lucy and Maggie is structured as that between a rich lady and her

economic inferior. Maggie's mother has already been reduced to being a pseudo-housekeeper at the Deanes' — 'she manages the house beautifully — much better than any stranger would', is Lucy's comment [p. 366]. When Maggie arrives she is treated as the object of Lucy's charity. Lucy is known for her 'benevolence', evident in her organisation of the St. Ogg's charity bazaar [p. 404]. Similarly, she wants to spoil Maggie during her visit in order to make up to her for her deprived life, which is 'very sweet and angelic' of her, according to her suitor [p. 366]. The narrator's recognition of this element of class inequality in the relation between the cousins is signalled by presence of Lucy's dog Minny while she is indulging in her benevolent schemes. For instance, after she has decided to confer a new cap on 'poor Aunt Tulliver' and to treat Maggie 'as well as the grandest lady-visitor', she is described as being about to leave the room before remembering the needy Minny and scooping him up to pet him and take him with her to feed her horse. Here the narrator rather heavy-handedly comments, '[she] was fond of feeding dependent creatures' [p. 370]. With his usual perspicuity, Philip tells Maggie '[y]ou must be better than a whole menagerie of pets to [Lucy]' [p. 412]. Lucy's role is to feed the dependent Maggie, who must then be grateful, as indeed she is. A part of the reason she refuses to marry Stephen is that it would clash with her sense of 'gratitude' [p. 459]: 'she was so good to me' [p. 476].

Lucy's charitable power and her father's capitalist status are clearly interrelated. She 'coax[es his] sovereigns' out of him in order to perform her good offices, while at the same time exerting a beneficent influence on his business decisions [pp. 370, 420]. It is because of her open pity for her 'poor cousins' that Mr Deane is so prompt to find work for Tom [p. 244] and she is also behind Guest &.Co.'s purchase of the Mill, which she hopes will both benefit Tom and restore the relationship between the Tullivers and Wakems, thus smoothing the way for Maggie's marriage to Philip [pp. 421-2]. Evident in the depiction of Lucy is the Victorian ideal of the softening and soothing female influence, nature's balm

for capitalism's moral corrosions. As the narrator observes of the good influence Lucy's 'tears' and pitying anxiety for her cousins have on her father, '[t]hese fair slim daughters keep up a tender spot in the heart of many a respectable partner in a respectable firm' [p. 244].

As well as taking in Mrs Tulliver and indulging Maggie, Lucy's benevolence is thus able to preserve the Tullivers from the much harsher fate they would have experienced had their sole male breadwinner, educated for a bygone era, been left to try his chances in the incipient capitalist market alone. The depiction of Lucy is consequently in line with early nineteenth-century constructions of benevolence as a natural compensatory mechanism built into the self-regulating economy in order to make up for its partial evil effects. This view of benevolence was a concomitant of the defence of poverty on the grounds that it incited the charitable virtues. Only in an unequal society exhibiting 'contrast of condition', wrote the future archbishop John Bird Sumner, would there be room for the exercise of benevolence, a fact that 'was undoubtedly in the contemplation of the Creator'.[230] Although the general laws that secured ultimate human progress and happiness inevitably occasioned some temporary and local distress, this was redressed by the natural charitableness arising spontaneously in the better off. According to Malthus, human beings were invested with the 'impulse of benevolence' in order to 'mitigate the partial evil arising from general laws'.[231] Robert Chambers likewise remarked that 'the benevolence planted in our nature' was an 'arrangement' intended 'to remedy the evils unavoidably suffered by our fellow-creatures in the course of the operation of the other natural laws'.[232]

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[230] John Bird Sumner, *Records*, II, p. 359
[231] Malthus, *Essay on Population*, ed. by Donald Winch (1992), pp. 280-1.
[232] Chambers, *Vestiges*, p. 379.

The important point here was that benevolence was seen to arise naturally in the hearts of the rich.[233] It was a compensation for evil already inscribed into the beneficent natural laws that governed progress. The dyad of Mr Deane and his daughter replicate the natural operations of this system: he represents and celebrates the economic and social changes that advance humankind and she assuages the pains felt by the representative victims of that change, the Tullivers. The force of benevolence in the novel is literally an organic growth, the offspring of capitalism, as Lucy is Mr Deane's daughter. This understanding of benevolence holds out the promise that the needs of the hungry masses will be met within the terms of capitalism, rather than the commercial system being thrown off course by those needs. If her father's ruin has made Maggie's lot one of 'privation', it is reassuring that Lucy's fondness for 'feeding dependent creatures' will partly meet her needs and leave her with a sense of gratitude to prevent her from letting her hunger drive her to take what is not legitimately hers.

In his response to the Swing riots, Nassau William Senior had held up as ideal the type of relationship we see between Lucy and Maggie. Even functioning at its best, the capitalist commercial and agricultural system would inevitably involve periods of hunger and hardship for the labouring classes. In a 'natural' state of things, however, one undistorted by poor rates or fixed higher wages, the distressed labourer first has recourse to greater exertion and stricter economy: 'and what they cannot supply, he receives with gratitude from the benevolent'.[234] Conversely, were Maggie to take Stephen from Lucy, no matter how warranted by the acknowledged depths of her need and Lucy's superabundance, this would represent the sort of situation dreaded by Senior and other political economists, where the short-sighted dictates of the hunger of the poor gain ascendency over the long-term imperatives of economic progress and civilization.

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[233] All those who linked benevolence with the mitigation of partial evil made much of the contrast between this natural remedial force and the detrimental effects of constrained charity secured through legislation such as the poor laws.

[234] Senior, *Three Lectures*, p. x.

Maggie's decision not to marry Stephen is represented as an act of 'self-sacrifice' [p. 469]. She chooses, after a long struggle with temptation, to continue in a state of want and deprivation. This 'renunciation' for her means martyrdom, 'the thorns forever pressing against its brow' [p. 471]. The narrator had already suggested that Maggie would ultimately be a martyr to the 'historical advance of mankind' [p. 273], thus raising the question of in what way Maggie's sacrifice of Stephen can be understood as contributing to that progress. It is in fact only on the politically symbolic level, taking place in what Kreisel calls the novel's 'economic unconscious', that this makes sense. The defenders of what was insisted were the temporary and partial evils of industrialisation and the incipient market economy placed the burden of sacrifice for the greater good of civilisation squarely on the shoulders of those rural poor most affected by the changes. The anxiety was that they would fail to see the value of what was to be gained through their patient suffering and that their demands would derail the whole system. This alarm infuses the depiction of Mr Tulliver in the first half of the novel. The unenlightened Tulliver fails to acquiesce in the naturalness of his sufferings and instead seeks 'vengeance' on the person he misguidedly holds accountable. After his death, it is his daughter who takes up the role as representative of the hungry rural masses, dispossessed and deprived by the advance of industrialisation and the market economy. We have seen that Maggie is potentially every bit as dangerously discontented and recklessly vindictive as her father. Ultimately, however, she chooses the self-denying role assigned her by the apologists for progress. By the novel's end, she has been relegated to the strata of bygone eras, while the heirs of commerce, Stephen and Lucy, are reunited, with nothing now to stop Stephen's anticipated rise to Parliament and the triumph of the new era.

Maggie's death in the flood so soon after her decision to resign Stephen to Lucy encourages us to conflate the two sacrifices, viewing the latter as a symbolic re-enactment of the former. This naturalises the forces of progress to which Maggie has been sacrificed,

equating them with the physical agents of change, such as the movement of water, studied by geologists. As a number of critics have observed, it is surely significant that the Tulliver siblings are destroyed by the swift advance down the river of some machinery from the wharf of Guest & Co. [p. 521].[235] When we consider that the narrator had earlier likened Mr Tulliver's downfall to being destroyed by an unheeding machine, we realize that it is, in fact, the fate of the Tulliver race to be destroyed by machinery, the symbol of industrialisation and of undeviating natural law. What distinguishes Maggie's death from that of her father is that it is something partly chosen, hence while he is a mere victim, she is a martyr. Her death in the midst of sublime natural forces aggrandizes the fate of her family as casualties of industrialisation and the market economy. Mr Tulliver's demand for justice and what is 'fair', his conviction that the changes to the rural moral economy, far from being natural and inevitable, are the work of rogues who have 'twisted' the world from its original state, are effaced by the geological imagery which naturalizes the extinction of the Tulliver family. While Tulliver dies resisting his plight and blaming Wakem to the last, Maggie, who hates blame [p. 205], dies a death wholly removed from questions of human responsibility, one which makes the moral problems of justice and rights which preoccupy her father seem irrelevant. The relation her sacrifice bears to the preceding portions of the novel resides precisely in the fact that it is, as Barbara Hardy critically terms it, a *deus ex machina.*[236] Undeniably beyond human control, the flood symbolically elevates the ruin of the Tullivers into a similarly natural and irresistible evil. The Tullivers are now become, like the extinct races studied by William Buckland, part of the earth's series of previous 'tenants'.[237] We are allowed to feel their passing as an evil, even a brutal one, but are compelled to acknowledge it as inevitable and irreversible. In this way, *The Mill on the Floss* constructed a secular theodicy that both validated the pains

[235] Knoepflmacher, *George Eliot's Early Novels*, p. 169.
[236] Hardy, *Novels of George Eliot*, p. 57.
[237] See Buckland, *Geology and Mineralogy*, I, p. 109.

of those 'treading with bleeding feet on the stones' [p. 291] and positioned those pains within a legitimising *telos*.

CONCLUSION

'Ever the Solution of the Last Era has Become Obsolete': Historicising the Problem of Evil

While still writing *The Mill on the Floss* in November 1859, George Eliot read Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, which had just been published that same month. [1] Darwin's book, she wrote to Charles Bray, 'makes an epoch' because it amassed the necessary evidence in favour of the 'Development Theory', which had long been brewing in her intellectual circle.[2] *On the Origin of Species* makes an epoch, too, in the history of the problem of evil. Debuting at the very end of the decade during which the novels I have analysed made their contributions to the problem of evil discussion, evolutionary theory was to have a significant impact on the shape of that discussion. Indeed, *The Mill on the Floss* shows signs that, to so perceptive a reader as Eliot, the bearing of Darwin's claims on interpretations of evil were already evident. In its third chapter, for instance, Mr Riley recommends Mr Stelling as a tutor for Tom on entirely flimsy grounds. The narrator observes that while possibly harming the Tullivers, Riley is also benefitting Mr Stelling:

> a man with the milk of human kindness in him can scarcely abstain from doing a good-natured action, and one cannot be good-natured all round. Nature herself occasionally quarters an inconvenient parasite on an animal toward whom she has otherwise no ill will. What then? We admire her care for the parasite. [p. 27]

This passage conflates a social evil, the fact that for one man to profit, another has to lose, with a natural evil, the fact that an unavoidable part of the natural economy is the predation of animals upon one another. Eliot would have read about the parasite in the *Origin of Species*, where Darwin noted these creatures seem to be 'disproportionately favoured' in

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[1] See *Letter from George Eliot to Charles Bray, November 25th 1859* in *Letters*, II, p. 214.
[2] Ibid.

the struggle for existence.[3] Darwin extolled the 'beautiful co-adaptations' that allowed the parasite to thrive, albeit to the cost of other beings.[4] Nevertheless, he also repeatedly reminded his readers of the evils his theory construed as the engine of the natural economy. Behind the 'face of nature bright with gladness', he wrote, 'we do not see, or we forget, that the birds which are idly singing round us mostly live on insects or seeds, and are thus constantly destroying life; or we forget how largely these songsters, or their eggs, or their nestlings, are destroyed by birds and beasts of prey'.[5] As the passage from the *Mill on the Floss* indicates, such a version of nature was difficult to reconcile with the notion of a beneficent teleology. The flourishing of the parasite is 'inconvenient' not only to the animal it preys upon, but also to those committed to a reading of nature as 'good-natured', given that to be allowed to so flourish at the expense of others bespeaks a highly partial type of 'kindness.' Laced with irony, Eliot's passage suggests that readers who celebrate the 'care' of nature with regard to the parasite must, if they are being consistent, allow that her treatment of the parasite's prey indicates an 'ill will' towards that animal. What is hinted at here is the fact that all such attempts to infer a benign intentionality from the proceedings of the natural world are ill-founded. The reference to 'Nature herself' recalls the habit of vindicating social evils by naturalising them. "Even nature, about whose goodness there is no doubt, displays the same partiality as Mr. Riley", is the implied justification of Riley's behaviour. Yet by bringing that very goodness into doubt, the passage undermines its own vindication of social evil. Its irony represents a breach in the rest of the novel's naturalisation of the partial evils occasioned by industrial and social change. As such, these few lines from *The Mill on the Floss* gives us an insight into the challenge Darwin's work presented to established and emerging mid-Victorian theodicies.

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[3] Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species, by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (London: John Murray, 1859), p. 70. It is interesting that Darwin chose the existence of the parasitic Ichneumon as one of the reasons he felt that there was 'too much misery' in the world for it to have been designed by a 'beneficent & omnipotent God' (See *Letter to Asa Gray, 22 May, 1860*, Darwin Correspondence Database, http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/entry-2814 accessed on Sep 02 2014)

[4] Ibid., p. 60.

[5] Ibid., p. 62.

When many people think of the problem of evil in the nineteenth century, it probably first presents itself to them along the lines sketched by Eliot's narrator in the above passage. That is, evolutionary theory, with its vision of nature as a bloody battlefield, is seen as shattering the mid-Victorian generation's comfortable belief in the goodness of the natural world, and by extension, of God. Historical accounts of the impact of Darwin's work, however, tend to exaggerate the security and stability of belief in a benevolent Providence up until the publication of *On the Origin of Species*. James Moore, who in 1979 wrote the first comprehensive study of the impact of evolutionary theory on religious culture in late nineteenth-century Britain and America, asserted that Darwin's work precipitated a 'crisis of belief in creation, providence, and design, of belief in the reality of the divine purposes in nature and the omnipotence and beneficence of the divine character which they reveal'.[6] More recently, James Livingston, in his *Religious Thought in the Victorian Age* (2007), chose the 1860s as the starting point for his chapter on theodicy in Victorian culture, on the grounds that before then, there existed a 'broad consensus' on the problem of evil.[7] There is no doubt, of course, that, as these histories show, evolutionary theory profoundly changed the way in which people thought about the relationship between evil and a beneficent teleology. One response, as Eliot's narrator implies and as any reader of Thomas Hardy's writings is aware,[8] was the growing perception of the incongruity between Darwin's vision of the world and the idea of a beneficent order. Another common one, however, was to devise a fresh solution to the problem of evil based on the instrumentality of evil in the operations of evolution. Thus Livingston observes that Darwin gave a 'new rationale' to experiences of pain and struggle

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[6] James R. Moore, *The Post-Darwinian Controversies: A Study of the Protestant Struggle to come to terms with Darwin in Great Britain and America, 1870-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 14.

[7] James C. Livingston, *Religious Thought in the Victorian Age: Challenges and Reconceptions* (NewYork; London: Continuum, 2007), p. 70.

[8] James Kucich, for instance, describes Hardy's dramatization of the loss of providential faith as a result of scientific developments in his 'Intellectual Debate in the Victorian Novel', pp. 224-5.

as vital elements in the process of development.[9] This form of 'secular theodicy' as David Kohn calls it, took the form of a celebration of the adaptability and complexity of biological life, which is 'sustained by a sublime struggle incessantly but imperceptibly going on beneath the surface'.[10]

Because, then, the gradual acceptance of evolutionary theory inaugurated new ways of thinking about the problem of evil, it can easily be assumed that this problem only became a subject of active controversy after the publication of Darwin's work. My thesis has shown, not only that the problem of evil was already a highly contested discourse in Victorian culture before the publication of *On the Origin of Species*, but that in the 1840s and 1850s, it tended to be the suffering and disorder of the social world, rather than the natural one, which raised questions about the goodness of God. The three novels I have considered all reflect a culture in turmoil about the origins of evil and all three dramatize the conflict between different ways of making sense of that evil. As novels, they are able to make a uniquely textured contribution to the problem of evil debate that would not be possible for more discursive forms of writing. Thus, *Villette* embodies alternative views of evil in characters like Miss Marchmont and Vashti. It also invokes tantalising visions of, and metaphors for the Parousia, all the while implying their hopelessness. Finally, by means of a dense tapestry of figurative images of dormancy and life, radiating out from the hero Paul Emanuel, the novel elliptically justifies suffering as a needful stimulus. In a similar way, *Bleak House* expresses the moral offensiveness of laissez-faire theodicy by embodying it in the reprehensible character of Harold Skimpole; it uses the interpretive quandary presented by Krook's spontaneous combustion as an analogy for the contemporary dispute over the meaning of the cholera epidemic; and it treats the Court of Chancery as a symbol for the corrosive effects of supernaturalist, mystifying theodicy.

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[9] Livingston, *Religious Thought*, pp. 69-75.
[10] David Kohn, 'Darwin's Ambiguity: The Secularization of Biological Meaning', *The British Journal for the History of Science*, 22 (July 1989), pp. 215-39 (p. 236).

Likewise, *The Mill on the Floss* makes an imaginative connection between young Maggie Tulliver's fetishism, Mr Tulliver's Manichaeism and his paranoia about the advances of modern life; it converts William Buckland's theory of geological development into a theodicy to be applied to social development; and it invests Maggie's death by drowning with emblematic significance.

Such creative ways of handling the problem of evil attest to the truth of John Kucich's observation that interventions by Victorian novels in contemporary speculative debates 'often took place beneath the surface' of the text.[11] Because of this 'veiling' and 'sublimation of ideas,' he writes, we need to work to decode the ways in which Victorian novels both engaged in intellectual life and 'helped to shape [ideas] in particular ways'.[12] In this spirit, this thesis has sought to decode the complex symbols and analogies by means of which mid-Victorian novels contributed to the problem of evil discussion. In so doing, I hope to contribute to the growing recognition of the diverse range of theological and philosophical work performed by Victorian novels.

As Rebecca Styler comments, the narrative form of the Victorian novel enabled it not only to communicate religious ideas but also to 'construct them', 'its patterns embodying meanings that cannot be reduced to statement'.[13] Michael Wheeler has similarly objected to the tendency to see literature as merely reflecting theology; he argues instead that theologians and literary writers participated in the same theological projects and responded to the same challenges.[14] The same point could, of course, be made about the relation between literature and philosophical defences of evil in the novels of George Eliot. A unique contribution novels make to the problem of evil question derives from their capacity to contextualise and flesh out concepts that might otherwise remain divorced from the material and social realities in which evil occurs. Again, John Kucich has made a

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[11] Kucich, 'Intellectual Debate in the Victorian Novel', p. 107.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Styler, *Literary Theology*, pp. 5-6.
[14] Michael Wheeler, *Death and the Future Life in Victorian Literature and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. xii.

salient observation: 'the novel, given its natural tendency to embody ideas within a social drama, could reveal the dynamics of power entwined with supposedly disinterested speculation'.[15] Kucich's point is very similar to one made by the 1853 *Prospective Review* article on 'Recent Works of Fiction', which I mentioned in my introduction. One advantage of novels, the writer of this piece remarked, is that they are able to take 'abstract' ideas and 'embody[...] them in concrete form'.[16]

The novels this thesis considers all emphasise the embodied, situational quality of theodicies, the formulation and expression of which they show to be shaped by a wider context. *Villette*'s Lucy Snowe, for instance, is well aware of the ways in which her own attitude towards her plight is at times at odds with alternative publically sanctioned stances toward evil: 'Religious reader, you will preach to me a long sermon about what I have just written, and so will you, moralist; and you, stern sage: you, stoic, will frown; you, cynic, sneer; you, epicure, laugh' [p. 157]. Her rejoinder to such readers, however, is 'perhaps you are all right: and perhaps, circumstanced like me, you would have been, like me, wrong'. Here Lucy implies that the creeds of such readers have been insufficiently tested against the experience of actual evils; her own views, however 'wrong' in abstract terms, have at least the advantage of having been shaped by lived circumstances. *Bleak House* and *The Mill on the Floss* are similarly interested in the point of contact between theodicy and the experience of specific evils. Both novels show the reconfiguration of the problem of evil under the pressure of contemporary social and economic crises. Dickens's novel repudiates "superstitious" interpretations of evil on the basis that they disable concrete action to overcome catastrophes like the cholera epidemic. Instead, *Bleak House* favours a naturalistic theodicy that invests human beings with responsibility over evil. *The Mill on the Floss*, conversely, downplays the extent to which individual human beings can be held liable for evils occasioned by social and economic change. Eliot's novel instead responds

[15] Kucich, 'Intellectual Debate in the Victorian Novel', pp. 107-8.
[16] Anon., 'Recent Works of Fiction', p. 86.

to the widespread rural suffering produced by such traumatic changes by constructing a theodicy that both validates such suffering and represents it as inevitable. Such a theodicy, unlike the religious tracts 'written on velvet cushions' [p. 291] which the narrator repudiates, was highly attuned to nineteenth-century social requirements.

A due appreciation of the contextual understanding of the problem of evil present in these novels equips us with the means to ascertain what was socially and politically at stake in their approach to this question. Because, moreover, mid-Victorian theodicies were challenged to take account of 'the sheer particularity' of evil, as Kenneth Surin puts it,[17] they were open to intervention not only from those within the religious establishment, but from all people with the capacity to systematically reflect upon and express the meaning of adversity. Indeed, in his 'Introduction' to the *Blackwell Companion to Nineteenth-Century Theology* (2010), David Ferguson points out that nineteenth-century theology in general, as the product of a culture which predated the specialisation of knowledge, was the preserve of 'not merely those within a narrowly confined guild but also philosophers, historians, natural scientists and literary theorists.'[18] I would expand this claim to argue that the problem of evil, in particular, proved itself to be hospitable to a broader range of cultural arbiters, including novelists and periodical writers. The result of this widespread engagement was a plurality of competing theodicies, which were often constituted as much in relation to each other as they were in relation to the evils they were intended to legitimate.

Nevertheless, despite the varied forms that the problem of evil assumes in the three novels this thesis has examined, there are also some important commonalities. The texts all, in their different ways, distance themselves from Augustinian and Trinitarian solutions to evil. *Villette*'s narrator repudiates the very notion of a supernatural interventionist God, upon which the Trinitarian scheme of redemption is premised. *Bleak House*, as well as

[17] Kenneth Surin, 'Theodicy?', *The Harvard Theological Review*, 76. 2 (April, 1983), pp. 225-47 (p.232).
[18] David Ferguson, 'Introduction', in *The Blackwell Companion to Nineteenth-Century Theology*, ed. by David Ferguson (Sussex: Blackwell, 2010), pp. xi-xii.

rejecting the idea of original sin, also condemns those who would read the cholera epidemic as an inscrutable divine judgement. *The Mill on the Floss* refutes Mr Tulliver's judgement of the world as being in a state of postlapsarian chaos (while also, it is worth noting, representing its heroine's Evangelical fervour as a delusion which she inevitably outgrows as she matures). These attitudes are consistent with scholarly assertions that the mid-Victorian period witnessed a revulsion against the prevailing Evangelical ethos. According to Boyd Hilton, both the Irish Famine and the cholera epidemic played a part in the 'rejection of evangelical attitudes' at the beginning of the second half of the century.[19] David Newsome likewise suggests the waning influence of Evangelical theodicy when he observes that the challenge to mid-Victorian belief arose largely from 'a very widespread rebellion of conscience against everything in the current religious teaching which described the action of God as tyrannical, arbitrary and cruel'.[20] The reaction against Evangelical attitudes, according to such views, marks the liberatlib beginning of the real "crisis of faith" in the nineteenth-century.[21] The writers I have studied, however, both fictional and non-fictional, demonstrate the robustness and versatility of faith in the nineteenth century as writers formulated new theodicies that were better able to accommodate contemporary needs than was the Evangelical outlook. In Eliot's case, of course, that faith was non-theistic, yet her vision too testifies to the buoyancy of the theodicy project, as her novel interweaves William Buckland's natural theology, Christian notions of self-sacrifice and political economical justifications of partial evil into a teleology by which the sufferings of the present might be endured. Her work can be seen as contributing to the development of those 'progressive secular theodicies that envisioned

[19] Hilton, *The Age of* Atonement, pp. 112-3; See also Boyd Hilton 'Moral Disciplines' in *Liberty and Authority in Victorian Britain*, ed. by Peter Mandler (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 237.
[20] Newsome, *Victorian World Picture*, p. 201.
[21] Hilton, 'Moral Disciplines', p. 237.

progressive human improvement' which Frank Miller Turner has traced to the latter decades of the century.[22]

It would, nevertheless, be a mistake to take Eliot's vision as representative of the fate of theodicy in the Victorian period. The novels I have considered by Brontë and Dickens are both sympathetic, like Eliot, to what John Hick would term an "Iraenian" type of theodicy, that which holds evil to be part of an educative process productive of future good.[23] Impatient with supernaturalist understandings of evil, they present theodicies more compatible with human development and reform. Yet they do so in terms that in the nineteenth century were perfectly reconcilable with belief in God. My chapter on *Villette* has shown that the pain-as-stimulus narrative the novel features was used by both deists like Charles Bray and Evangelical Christians like John Bird Sumner in their respective vindications of the goodness of God. Indeed, it was the Church of England clergyman Robert Malthus who most thoroughly worked out this theodicy in response to the misery his *Essay on Population* had shown to be a fixture of human life. Pain and deprivation, in his account, were provided by the Creator to 'urge man to further the gracious designs of Providence'.[24] In *Villette*, likewise, Lucy Snowe is, by the 'decree' of 'Providence', 'goaded, driven, stung, forced to energy' [p. 38]. I have similarly shown *Bleak House*'s eschewal of the pursuit of a final cause behind evils like the cholera epidemic to be a position shared by other reform-minded Christians writing in the late 1840s and 50s. Those who argued, like the clergyman Charles Kingsley, for a more naturalistic cause-and-effect interpretation of God's ways did so on the grounds that such an interpretation did more honour to God than the superstitious mystifying one they imputed to their opponents. They enlisted God on the side of reform and maintained that his benevolence resided in the very fact that his laws were fixed and constant, enabling human beings to learn to overcome and prevent evil. *Bleak House* implicitly condemns contemporary society's high priests, who

[22] Turner, *Contesting Cultural Authority*, p. 110.
[23] Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, pp. 213-4.
[24] Malthus, *Essay*, p. 361.

mediate between the supposedly incomprehensible will of God and a bewildered public. A role is nonetheless reserved for Providence in ensuring that, by the fixity of the divine laws, the hotbeds of 'unjustice' meet the same messy end as Mr Krook [p. 479] while those who sow good, like Esther, also reap it.

A contextual analysis of the problem of evil in these three novels, then, allows us to modify scholarly claims that, once Evangelical theodicy had lost purchase, it was inevitably replaced by secular interpretations of evil. *The Mill on the Floss* might justify such a reading, but *Villette* and *Bleak House* resist it. Peter Berger has remarked that as Christian theodicy began to lose plausibility in the nineteenth-century, it was replaced by a secular theodicy that gave momentum to the "age of revolution".[25] I hope this thesis has shown the limitations of an umbrella term like 'Christian theodicy' when a multitude of competing solutions to the problem of evil in the nineteenth century might be so categorised. If I had confined my research to the fate of a supernatural, Augustinian form of theodicy during the period, it is likely I would have come to a conclusion similar to Berger's. However, as Timothy Larsen has argued, in order to begin to do justice to the full range of theological inquiry and expression in nineteenth-century culture, we need to expand our ideas of what theology looked like during this period. Larsen accordingly asks that we move beyond the habitual focus on an 'organized, traditional, orthodox, trinitarian, and supernatural version of Christianity'.[26] His point is especially pertinent to the analysis of the problem of evil in Victorian culture, given that the most innovative theodicies were constructed outside of orthodox religious culture. Another way to think about this issue is in terms of the two 'ontological and epistemological models' Michael Wheeler sees at work in Victorian thought, one 'horizontal (anthropocentric, experiential, historical and gradualist)' and the other 'vertical (theocentric, eschatological, scriptural and

[25] Berger, *Sacred Canopy*, p. 86.
[26] Timothy Larsen, 'The Regaining of Faith: Reconversions among Popular Radicals in Mid-Victorian England', *Church History*, 70.3 (September 2001), pp. 527-43 (p. 527).

catastrophist)'.[27] Those theodicies which saw evil as furthering God's beneficent designs for human improvement may have abandoned the "horizontal" model yet they accommodated the "vertical" model within a theistic framework. An awareness of these "horizontal" solutions to evil enlivens even those texts that express the largely "vertical" Evangelical ethos. Such an awareness enables us to recognise that when, for instance, the Evangelical Baptist Charles Spurgeon chose the scriptural text 'Hear the rod, and him who hath appointed it' as the basis for his sermon on the National Day of Humiliation in October 1857, he did so partly to counter those who 'are apt to deny altogether the doctrine of judgements'.[28] Furnished with an awareness of the alternative theological arguments offered by those Spurgeon had in mind, we can view his text as part of rich dialogue on the problem of evil in mid-Victorian culture.

There were, of course, many threads to that dialogue which I have been unable to pursue in this thesis. I did not, to note just the most obvious omission, take account of the question of gender. No doubt my claims about the ways in which responses to the problem of evil were formed by extra-theological contexts might be usefully qualified by inquiring how such responses were further refracted through gender positions. It is highly likely that gender played a part in shaping and modifying interpretations of evil. In *The Mill on the Floss*, for instance, Eliot's narrator makes an explicit distinction between a masculine and feminine response to adversity, claiming that 'no boy' would feel sorrow to be a liberating release of pent-up affection as Maggie does: 'he would rather go and slay the Nemean lion, or perform any round of heroic labours, than endure perpetual appeals to his pity, for evils over which he can make no conquest' [pp. 259-60]. A question then arises about whether a belief in the softening effects of suffering was adaptive for women for whom 'heroic labours' were not an option. To draw attention to this passage is just to point out one way in which we might begin to conceive of the relationship between gender and the problem

[27] Wheeler, *Death and the Future Life*, p. xiii.
[28] Rev. C. H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon's Fast-Day Sermon, Fast-Day Service held at the Crystal Palace, Sydenham, on Wednesday October 7th 1857* (New York: Sheldon, Blakeman & Company, 1857), p. 22.

of evil. As Ivone Gebara observes, '[s]tudies on the question of evil from the perspective of gender are few, especially in theology'.[29] As the traditional preserve of privileged men, it is unsurprising that mainstream theology has overlooked the relationship between theodicy and gender. However, as Rebecca Styler has convincingly shown in her *Literary Theology by Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century* (2013), if we expand our ideas about what types of writing can be classified as theological, we can see that women contributed to theological inquiry in diverse if covert ways. It is in such non-traditional theological articulations that future scholarship is likely to find indications of how the problem of evil and the question of gender interanimated each other during the Victorian period.

Indeed, bringing such fresh interpretive categories as that of gender to bear on the problem of evil might be one way to reinvigorate scholarship on the topic. As 'old as a certain reading of the Bible',[30] the problem of evil can seem so outmoded as to be irrelevant to modern critical concerns. Outside of theology, the problem is largely the preserve of Holocaust Studies, in which the dominant view seems to be that theodicy as a project died in the concentration camps, when, as Emmanuel Levinas wrote, all 'balance' was lost between the suffering experienced and the explicit and implicit forms of Western theodicy that might be brought to bear upon it.[31] Terry Eagleton suggests in his 2010 book *On Evil* that the concept of evil has little purchase in the modern world amongst either 'softhearted liberals' or 'tough-minded Marxists.'[32] 'On the whole', he writes, 'postmodern cultures, despite their fascination with ghouls and vampires, have little to say of evil'.[33] Nevertheless, as he reminds us, every natural disaster brings people onto the streets with placards asking 'why?'; and evil remains a fixture in the rhetoric of Britain's best-selling

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[29] Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation*, transl. by Ann Patrick Ware (Minneapolis: Augsberg Fortress, 2002), p. 65.
[30] Emmanuel Levinas, "Useless Suffering" in *The Provocation of Levinas*, ed. by R. Bernasconi and D. Woods, transl. by Richard A Cohen (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 161
[31] Ibid.
[32] Terry Eagleton, *On Evil*, p. 13.
[33] Ibid., p. 15.

newspapers.[34] Eagleton's book goes some way to redressing this gap between academic and popular culture by taking seriously the concept of evil and how it has shaped such diverse twentieth-century phenomena as Freudian psychopathology and libertarian ideology.[35]

For Eagleton, then, evil and how it is interpreted remain animating forces in the modern world. To appreciate the persistent presence of the problem of evil, however, we must be willing to stray outside the confines of the theological canon in order to find alternative genealogies, such as that which links Robert Malthus and Charlotte Brontë. A historicist approach to the problem of evil, moreover, such as I have taken, enables us to identify when a text engages with this problem in covert or elliptical ways. In taking such an approach, I was inspired first and foremost by the words of Thomas Carlyle's Professor Teufelsdröckh in a work that looms over the Victorian period, *Sartor Resartus:*

> A vain interminable controversy [...] touching what is at present called Origin of Evil, or some such thing, arises in every soul, since the beginning of the world; and in every soul, that would pass from idle Suffering into actual Endeavouring, must first be put an end to. The most, in our time, have to go content with a simple, incomplete enough Suppression of this controversy; to a few some Solution of it is indispensable. In every new era, too, such Solution comes out in different terms; and ever the Solution of the last era has become obsolete, and is found unserviceable. For it is man's nature to change his Dialect from century to century; he cannot help it though he would.[36]

This thesis has examined the shared efforts of mid-Victorian writers to compose just such a solution to the problem of evil that would be serviceable to the needs of a generation that found itself confronting the ills of a deeply disordered society. Having learned to decode at least part of the 'Dialect' in which they articulated dissent from different solutions and their commitment to others, I have gained renewed appreciation for how seriously they

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[34] Ibid., p.10, p. 131.
[35] Ibid., p. 17, p. 148.
[36] Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus: The Life and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1831), p. 131.

took both the pains of existence in their time and the basic human requirement that such pains be made endurable.

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