Narrating Life: Biopolitics, Population, and the Victorian Novel

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Literature and Biopolitics

In his 2003 review essay, "Recent Studies in the Nineteenth Century," Andrew H. Miller expresses his dissatisfaction with the production of that year's research on 19th-century culture, which he thinks consists of a remarkably large number of Foucault-inspired studies. They are, according to Miller, "confidently immured within an orthodox, loosely new-historical set of historiographical assumptions, devoted to understanding and judging individual texts by appeal to historical contexts sometimes richly—but often poorly-conceived" (960). Such is "the reigning contextual mode of critical study of the Victorian period," he contends, and it "relies on the fluid translation of a (social, economic, intellectual) environment into fictional discourse" (966). Miller is not mild in his verdict, as he states: "At their least successful, such books display a kind of strangled ambition, narrowing their contextual field but making hyperbolic claims within that field" (967).

The works that Miller criticizes in his essay are examples of a highly influential strand of research that married Foucauldian criticism to Victorian studies, starting off in the late 1980s with the publication of foundational texts such as Nancy Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987), D.A. Miller's *The Novel and the Police* (1988), and Mary Poovey's *Uneven Developments* (1988). What surprises Miller is that "the limits of this mode of criticism, as commonly practiced, are familiar and much discussed," hence making "their persistence all the more intriguing" (967). Indeed, as Anna Maria Jones points out, Miller is not the first to take on this critical stance (2). In his 2001 "Recent Studies in the Nineteenth Century" essay, James Eli Adams notes: "Many recent accounts of Victorian domesticity have restaged versions of what one might call Foucauldian melodrama: the familiar story of the many-headed Hydra of 'surveillance' violating the sanctity of domestic privacy" (858-59). Likewise, Caroline Levine notes in *The Serious Pleasures of Suspense* (2003): "In the wake of Barthes, Belsey and [D.A.] Miller, it has become something of a commonplace to presume that suspense fiction reinforces stability, activating anxiety about the social world only in order to repress that anxiety in favor of unambiguous disclosures and soothing restorations" (2). And in a 2004 book review, Caroline Reitz, whose own "*Detecting the Nation* (2004) attempts "to challenge the us-them model of panopticism" (xv), praises Simon Joyce's *Capital Offenses* as part of

> [a] recent crop of very welcome books that takes another look at the question of
> crime and punishment in Victorian culture, a question that since the late 1980s has

come to be dominated by Foucauldian readings of power […] Joyce's book joins works […] which ask the reader to challenge the 'containment thesis' of a certain kind of Foucauldian reading of culture and to explore more complicated, less 'unidirectional' ideas about power. (100)

As another example of such post-Foucauldian approach she mentions Lauren Goodlad's 2003 *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State*, which received similar praise. Jennifer Ruth, for instance, writes: "For many of its readers, the value of Lauren Goodlad's new book […] will be determined by its success in offering a paradigm that can move us, as the title of its first chapter puts it, 'Beyond the Panopticon'" (121). And finally, in their 2002 collection, *Disciplinarity at the Fin de Siècle,* editors Amanda Anderson and Joseph Valente use similar words: "In key respects, the present volume looks to a post-Foucauldian dispensation, keeping its distance from approaches that too easily assimilate bodies of knowledge to techniques of management—whether of the social body, the intellectual field, or the individual person" (8).

Before discussing this critical turn and its aim to move beyond Foucault in more detail, it might be worthwhile to briefly consider the kind of approach these critics are arguing against. Foucault's idea of "discourse" as being the articulation of some larger system of cultural order, knowledge or power structure, entailed, as James Eli Adams writes, that representation itself now "became a locus of power, which was understood to produce subjects shaped by ideology or other structures […] of domination and control" ("History of criticism" 72). This line of thinking had a few strong implications for the study of literature. According to Foucault-inspired critics such as D.A. Miller, Poovey, and Armstrong, the literary text does not exist outside of these power structures, but instead serves as an effective medium. Therefore, the critic's task was an inherently political project that sought to elicit from a novel or novelistic convention their participation in these structures. At the same time, Foucault's work incited critics to situate the novel in relation to a variety of discourses—of the law, of sexuality, of medicine, and others; in short, those systems dedicated to enforcing conceptual and social order (Adams 72-73). This formed the foundation for the movement known as "New Historicism" whose emphasis on the constitutive power of "representation" shifted critical focus to a great variety of cultural texts or artifacts. These objects of study were linked to a Foucauldian notion of "discourse" in which representation was seen as "the articulation of a system of knowledge" (Adams 73). Typical for this approach was the apparent dissolution of the boundary between the literary and the non-literary, placing the novel alongside sanitary reports, parliamentary proceedings, advertisements,

among other forms of representation that were believed to participate in "a single cultural formation" (73).

The work that perhaps had the most vivid impact on Victorian studies was Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (translated in 1976), which argues that state power from the late 18th century onwards was exercised less and less through formal judicial proceedings and more through a regime of what he terms power/knowledge, where institutions (the prison, the hospital, schools) exerted control over individual bodies by certain observational practices (surveillance, examination) and normalized judgment. Ultimately, individuals internalized these mechanisms as self-discipline. Many critics saw the idea of an omniscient surveillance, which Foucault found exemplified by Bentham's model prison, the "Panopticon," operative in the narrative work of Victorian novels, especially through the omniscient narrator. The primary example of this approach was D.A. Miller's *The Novel and the Police*, which argues that the novel, "far from being a space of imaginative freedom, is in fact a mechanism of discipline, all the more effective for operating under the sign of a radical privacy" (Adams 73). Miller analyzes a range of works by novelists such as Anthony Trollope and Charles Dickens to show how the Victorian novel operates as an often unconscious agent of a disciplinary culture, as it draws the reader into its "carceral" space. It is this logic of containment that the aforementioned critics have been frustrated with: all texts and contexts are read into a giant uniform Foucauldian power/knowledge edifice, erasing all difference. Or as Jones aptly puts it, "the tools with which the master narratives of Enlightenment rationality and psychological "repression" were dismantled have instated a new master narrative—one in which surveillance, discursive knowledge, and discipline invariably produce "docile bodies" (3). Departing from such view, critics such as Lauren Goodlad have produced excellent research on Victorian literature and culture in which bodies of knowledge are not directly linked to technologies of control, and an idea of less monolithic social and political order is put forward, promising more or less, as Jones writes, "the return of liberal agency" (3).

The reason why I have included this somewhat lengthy overview of Foucault-inspired research in Victorian studies as well as the fair amount of criticism it has received over the last decade, is that it poses evident challenges to a project titled *Biopolitics and the Victorian Novel*. In taking Foucault's concept of biopower/biopolitics and exploring its relation to the Victorian novel, which is the aim of this study, one runs the risk of reproducing the kind of argument in which the question of the novel's relation to power is posed only in terms of its analogy with certain technologies of control, like we have seen in D.A. Miller. To put it differently, how does one do a Foucault-inspired study of the Victorian novel while at the same time trying to move

beyond Foucault? In the following paragraphs I will expand on Foucault's concept of biopolitics and its relevance to the study of the Victorian novel, suggesting that we might not necessarily have to look beyond Foucault to comply with the very valid demands of the critical turn I have just described.

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Despite the obvious differences between the Foucauldian and post-Foucauldian strands within Victorian studies, it should be noted that their basic unit of study is in fact the same, namely: the individual. Both historically align the emergence of the novel with the emergence of the modern individuated subject—a view that, as Emily Steinlight points out, has been overwhelmingly assumed by critics since Ian Watt's influential 1957 book *The Rise of the Novel* (233). A clear example of a Foucauldian perspective on the novel and its relation to subject-formation is Nancy Armstrong's *How Novels Think: The Limits of Individualism from 1719-1900*, in which she argues that "the history of the novel and the history of the modern subject are, quite literally, one and the same" (3). She emphasizes the role that the novel played in actively producing the modern individual, allowing the image to spread across discourses. Once it was formulated in fiction, she argues, "this subject proved uniquely capable of reproducing itself not only in authors but also in readers, in other novels, and across British culture in law, medicine, moral and political philosophy, biography, history, and other forms of writing that took the individual as their most basic unit" (3). In other words, novels helped produce the idea of the pre-given liberal subject that Enlightenment thinkers had envisioned, and so they had to "think as if there already were one, that such an individual was not only the narrating subject and source of writing but also the object of narration and referent of writing" (3). Furthermore, as Armstrong argues in her book, disruptions to an individualistic normative reality were incorporated in the novel, only to naturalize those elements as components "in an all-encompassing narrative of [individual] growth and development" (22). As such, the novel participated in promoting the normative vision of the liberal, self-enclosed and self-governing subject, which according to D.A. Miller was analogous to the act of policing typical of disciplinary society.

Whereas Armstrong and D.A. Miller view the nineteenth-century novel's investment in the liberal project from an ideological angle, self-proclaimed post-Foucauldian critics such as Anderson, Goodlad, and Pam Morris take on a more sympathetic stance towards liberalism in their readings of Victorian fiction, and instead of stressing the fantasy of liberal agency, they

emphasize its historical reality.[12] What these different approaches implicitly or explicitly share then, is the basic understanding that the novel, as Armstrong puts it, "was not made to think beyond the individual" (*How Novels Think* 25). Historically, it simply seems too much ingrained in the idea of society as consisting of autonomous individuals (whether this was a reality or an illusion that had to be maintained by the novel).

However, without disputing the novel genre's embeddedness in a sociopolitical environment of individualism, I would like to suggest in this thesis that the novel did struggle with a new figure of epistemological and political concern that emerged during the nineteenth century, and that was signaled by Foucault in his work on biopolitics: the figure of the population. In 1976 Foucault published the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* which expanded on his ideas on power and knowledge developed in *Discipline and Punish*. In its last chapter, he introduces the concept of biopolitics to describe a new technology of power, emerging around 1800, that did not have as its basic unit of knowledge and control the individual body, but the population at large or "man-as-living-being" (*Society Must Be Defended* 242).[3] Taking this population as a "global mass, affected by overall processes characteristic of birth, death, production, illness" (243) it seeks to know these processes inherent to population life through new techniques such as statistics, forecasts, and general measurements. Based on this knowledge, certain regulatory interventions were done such as public health campaigns and birth-control policy, to be able to optimize the population's vital potential. In the first chapter of this thesis I will discuss Foucault's concept of biopolitics in more detail. For now, I would like to stress that alongside a mode of individualizing power, a technology of power emerges in the nineteenth century that is instead massifying, directed at the figure of the population whose large-scale biological processes could not be made visible by looking at the individual body. This, I believe, posed serious challenges to the idea of society as a collection of self-enclosed individuals, and, as I will argue in this thesis, became a problem for Victorian fiction as well, forcing it to "think beyond the individual," or at least a particular notion of it.

To get a grasp of the way in which this new figure of mass-man manifested itself in the Victorian novel, I suggest we look at that distinctive group of large-scale novels that were

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[1]This is not to say that Armstrong's book can be easily compared to D.A. Miller's. On the contrary: whereas Armstrong sees an important role for gothic novels such as Bram Stoker's *Dracula* in challenging fantasies of liberal subjectivity, D.A. Miller is less interested in how novels might undermine hegemonic ideas of selfhood, and more in its operation within existing power structures.

[2] See Goodlad, *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State*; Morris, *Imagining Inclusive Society in Nineteenth-Century Novels*; Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment*.

[3] Since Giorgio Agamben's discussion of biopolitics in *Homo Sacer* (1995) the term has gained renewed attention, leading to what some call a "vital turn" in continental philosophy and critical theory. Related works are Judith Butler's *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2009) and Roberto Esposito's *Bíos: Politics and Philosophy* (2008). My focus will be solely on Foucault's analysis for reasons I will briefly touch upon in the first chapter.

published during the 19th century, often in serialized form, including Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847-48), Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* (1864-66), Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* (1875), and the two novels that I will be discussing in this thesis, Dickens's *Bleak House* (1852-53), and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-72).[4] Their main features, as Doreen Roberts writes, are a totalizing, panoramic sweep, to the aristocratic and patrician to the poor and vagabond, a set of interwoven plots which connect a variety of socially diverse figures, a keen interest in the subtleties and balances of class relations, a concern with social history, and an omniscient narration "which combines a critically evaluative overview with intensive focus on selected individual lives" (vii). Placing *Bleak House* and *Middlemarch* in the context of the epistemological and political context described by Foucault, I will argue that both Eliot and Dickens undertake a literary attempt at managing a population, and in doing so, they actively participate in the imagination of this new mass-figure.[5]

In view of the post-Foucauldian claims that I have mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, a few things need to be said about the approach to the Victorian novels I am offering here. When I speak of these novels as aiming at "managing a population," I do not mean to say that they function as a regulatory mechanism in a way similar to D.A. Miller's claim about the novel's disciplinary function. Such an argument would be hard to sustain, for one would have to prove how the novel as a discursive practice joins certain governmental technologies directed at controlling the life-processes governing the population. Literature, as Birgit Kaiser rightly notes, does not have a direct, nor physical, nor biological effect on the population (121). How then, if not through the shared enterprise of regulating populations, are the novel and biopower related? To be able to begin to understand this relation, I believe we first need to arrive at a different conception of Foucault's notion of modern power, or, to be more specific, different

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[4] A related, non-British example would be *La Comédie Humaine* by the French novelist Honoré de Balzac, a series of novels published between 1829 to 1851, in which Balzac sought to paint a complete picture of French society.

[5] When I started writing this thesis, only a few studies had been undertaken to discuss the relationship between the Victorian novel and biopolitics. In 2012 Nancy Armstrong published "Where gender meets sexuality in the Victorian Novel," in which she explores how novelists, writing, as we have seen, "in a form that had traditionally aimed at forming a household that would in turn reproduce self-governing individuals" (170), were struggling to incorporate new ideas of the collective body—ideas that necessarily challenged Enlightenment models of individuality to which the novel form gave expression. Armstrong argues that instead of thinking beyond the individual, the Victorian novel anxiously sought to maintain the individuals viability, mainly by staging the conflict between the individual and species as a conflict between gender and sexuality. Furthermore, Emily Steinlight has recently published several articles on the topic which will be turned into chapters for her upcoming book on the Victorian novel and biopolitics, which will appear later this year. I will deal with her findings in more details in my second chapter. Shortly after I finished this thesis, I found out that Duke University had hosted a conference titled "The Biological Turn in Literary Studies" in February this year. Here, Robert Mitchell offered an approach very similar to mine in a talk titled "Biopolitics, Population, and the Nineteenth-Century Novel." I will shortly expand on Mitchell's take on the topic in the conclusion to this thesis. A notable recent biopolitical approach to the novel that discusses not Victorian novels but contemporary works is Arne Boever's *Narrative Care: Biopolitics and the Novel*. Boever considers the history of the novel genre in terms of a continuous struggle with its biopolitical origins—its relation to pastoral care, the camps, and the modern welfare state. This leads him into a discussion of several contemporary novels to see if they offer a critical aesthetics of existence, a term taken from Foucault.

from the versions rehearsed by the critics I have discussed so far. For both the Foucauldian critics of Victorian culture that I have mentioned above *and* those so eagerly in want of moving beyond Foucault, have tended to focus almost exclusively on *Discipline and Punish*, which as they have correctly assumed, offers a characterization of modern power as totalizing or reified power/knowledge edifice. This totalizing perspective is also present in Foucault's early writings on biopower/biopolitics that directly followed his work on discipline, and it has therefore been read by Foucauldian scholars as a completion of his theory of modern power, having now provided for both the individualizing *and* massifying effects of a all-encompassing power structure he called normative society. Although I won't dispute the correctness of these readings, critics do seem to ignore the subtle shifts in methodology that mark Foucault's later writings on power, especially the lectures he gave at the Collège de France.

In the first chapter, "Biopolitical Government and the Birth of the Population," I will explore these alternative approaches to power in Foucault's later works. The totalizing framework that is typical of *Discipline and Punish* makes way for a much more loose constellation in which the different bodies of knowledge and governmental technologies, rather than forming a stable power/knowledge structure, are instead fissured, elastic, and insistently mobile, often marked by incoherencies and ideological inconsistencies. The emphasis, I will show, is not so much on how they form a unified whole assimilated to techniques of control but more on how they all start off from the same epistemological concern, offering instead a wide arrange of answers to a shared problem: the population and its life processes. It is in this "field of problematization"—named after Foucault's concept of *problématisation*—that the Victorian novel operates as a particular, literary form of knowing, alongside and in relation to other bodies of knowledge and biopolitical governmental practices. This is to say that Victorian novels provide their own "answers" to the problem of population, rationalizing it on its own literary terms. As I will show in my readings of Dickens and Eliot, their novels offer crucial thought-experiments, test-scenarios, and imaginations within this contested field. And in doing so, they closely engage with the philosophical, economical, sociological, and political theories departing from the same problem-zone.

In the second chapter, "The Novel and the Vital: The Power of Contagion in Dicken's *Bleak House*," I look at the way *Bleak House* engages with the idea of the urban population as a social body, whose health needed to be secured through biopolitical techniques, most notably sanitation. New theories of infection and contagion stressed the permeability of bodily boundaries, and contributed to the growing understanding of society as a physically, biologically connected whole. This, I argue, has implications for the way Dickens organizes the large numbers

of characters in the novel. Besides expressing the characters' interrelations by way of the typically literary modes of analogy and metaphor, Dickens stages a literal economy of disease and filth that cuts through all layers of society, linking together seemingly distanced characters and spaces, while undermining assumptions of a self-enclosed individual and domestic sphere. The novel's characters emerge against the background of a large nameless mass, a distinction that is infinitely threatened by the possibility of contagion—an uncontainable vital, impersonal power, that marks the biological continuum within which each urban inhabitant necessarily exists.

In the third chapter, "'A Study of Provincial Life': Population-Thinking and Organicism in Eliot's *Middlemarch*," I will read *Middlemarch* in the context of the emerging biological and social sciences in George Eliot's time. The understanding of life as organic that was developed during the 19th century changed the way natural and social scientists conceived of the relationship between individual and whole. Individual elements could no longer be studied separately from their position within the whole, and simultaneously the whole, previously considered to be a mere artificial assemblage, took on a vital reality of its own, establishing its position as an object of knowledge. I will show how this new emphasis on organization and relationality not only presupposes a different scientific approach, but also leads to a different mode of literary realism that is no longer aimed at merely transcribing a given reality, but instead at illuminating the subtle moving complex of relations that make up a society, understood as social organism. As we will see, through metaphors of the stream and particularly the web Eliot seeks to shed a totalizing light on Middlemarch's population as a neatly woven fabric. At the same time, however, Eliot employs meta-fictional comments to problematize her own position as an omniscient narrator, undermining the very possibility of ever achieving an organic unity of vision, nor in literature, nor in science. Given the seemingly endless formation of new relations in time, the consequence for both novelist and scientist is that, at best, they will achieve a readable focus.

Hopefully, what these readings will bring to the fore, is that we do not necessarily need to move beyond Foucault to form an analytical approach to Victorian literature and culture that does not, as Anderson and Valente, "too easily assimilate bodies of knowledge to techniques of management—whether of the social body, the intellectual field, or the individual person" (8). Instead, with Foucault, we should move beyond a particular Foucauldian analysis of modern power that considers a great variety of discursive practices and technologies as part of a general containment strategy. This does not mean that the works I discuss are by no means guided by the presence of certain social norms, determining interest, or dominant cultural motives. I do challenge, however, with the late Foucault, that they function as a part of a consistent and monolithic socio-political framework. Starting off from a field of problematization, my readings

show how these Victorian novels operate in a relation of exchange with other discourses and practices within this field, borrowing and playing with social, political, and scientific ideas. But instead of dissolving the boundary between the literary and the non-literary, text and context— which, as we have seen, has been an ongoing critique of Foucauldian criticism in Victorian studies—I wish to sustain this difference in my readings, stressing instead their singular, literary enterprise of thinking beyond the individual, into the imaginative territory of the population.

Chapter 1
Biopolitics and the Birth of the Population

As a theorist of power, Foucault is best known for his highly influential account of disciplinary power in *Discipline and Punish* (1975)*,* and for his understanding of the productive power analyzed in connection with sexuality in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1* (1976). These works mark a transition from his earlier "archeological" period, in which he articulated a theoretical approach to problems that took discursive structures as its analytical framework, to what has become known as his "genealogical" period, where the analysis was no longer exclusively framed by discourse but instead by the power relations embedded in both discursive and non-discursive relations and within which those discursive and non-discursive relations are immersed.[6] What is crucial to this shift is that Foucault radically recasts our understanding of the basic modes of how modern power is exercised (Lynch 158). For him, power should not be taken as a property possessed by an individual or group that dominates over others. It does not exist in things or persons but in relations, and not only in the relation between citizen and state, classes, and superiors and subordinates, but as operating at all levels of society. As such, Foucault moves away from a centralist understanding of modern power as we know it from Hobbes's *Leviathan* in which power is something that can be localized in the spirit of sovereignty. Instead, as Foucault points out, "[power] is never localized here or there" (*P/K* 8-9). And so, a new set of questions and problems emerge regarding the exercise of power, a field of inquiry that would form the core of Foucault's work through much of the 1970s.

This reconceptualization came as a response to a historical transformation of power whose starting point Foucault signaled at the verge of modernity. The first stage of this change was the creation of the modern system of disciplinary power that began to develop in the 18th century. In *Discipline and Punishment* Foucault asks the question why the prison around 1800 had become the dominant form of punishment. What set of beliefs engendered this development in the penal system? And what characterizes the prison as a site for punishment? As Foucault points out, in the prison the criminal becomes an object of knowledge who can be disciplined through different techniques of correction. As such, this disciplinary power seeks to produce bodies that are *docile*, "that may be subjected, transformed and improved" (136). Different from monarchical power or juridical power then, that are exercised *over* subjects, disciplinary power invests itself in the body through a variety of techniques (distribution of individuals in space, managing individuals' activities, etc.) that discipline the individual physically. These mechanisms of discipline, Foucault

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[6] For a detailed explanation of archeological and genealogical analysis, see Foucault "What is Critique".

contends, have been crucial in the "making" of the modern subject. Through various procedures of examination that rank, hierarchize, judge, select or exclude, the modern individual is no longer merely called upon as a subject required to obey the law but is produced instead as an individual who is required to conform to the norm. This power of normalization is crucial to understand the pervasiveness of the transformation of power that Foucault wants to lay bare, as it does not merely exist within the prison but extends into other institutions such as the school, the military, the hospital, or the factory, where it works through the various examinations that operate within these disciplines. What Foucault concludes from his analysis of the normalizing function of the various mechanisms of disciplinary power in the construction of the modern subject, is that we must acknowledge the productivity of power in addition to the negative terms with which it has traditionally been described: "[power] produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production" (DP 194). In other words, the modern individual borrows its individuality from its conformation to, or differentiation from, the norm, while this very individuality is produced through the disciplinary power that examines and judges it. Here, the individual is not the *vis-à-vis* of power; they are inextricably bound up with each other. As Foucault puts it, "the individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle" (P/K 98).[7]

This is by all means a rather concise rendition of Foucault's reading of power, but we do get a clear sense of how his influential power-knowledge framework is constructed. For Foucault—as of DP—discipline is the characteristic form of modern power, and the various techniques by which it invests power in the body form what Foucault calls "a 'new micro-physics' of power" (139). In contrast to sovereign power, discipline does not flow out and down from a central point but circulates through the whole of society. Furthermore, it is not a repressive but a productive form of power—not operating against knowledge but through knowledge, shaping the conditions of possibility for certain modes of acting and thinking. Overall, it is hard to miss the rather totalizing claims Foucault makes about modern power, sketching a disciplinary society in which all individuals are "the effect and instrument of complex power relations, bodies and forces subjected to multiple mechanisms of 'incarceration'" (*DP* 308). This image, as I will show in this chapter, has been of much influence on interpretations of Foucault's concept of biopolitics, which he introduced in the final chapter of HS1, and later elaborated on in his series of lectures at the Collège de France, *Society Must be Defended* (1976), *Security, Territory, Population* (1978), and *Birth of Biopolitics* (1979). The conventional reading of biopolitics holds that Foucault logically extended his analysis of power on the level of specialized institutions and the individual body, to

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[7] Foucault famously introduced Bentham's Panopticon as the architectural model of the disciplinary society Foucault sketches, indicating the way subjects internalize the disciplinary "eye" of power.

also include the more general levels of state, economy, and population.[8] The "micro-physics of power" that discipline invests in the individual body is then covered over by a "macro-physics" of power relations,[9] the "biopolitics of population." Central to these interpretations is that Foucault redirects his attention to the level of the state, while staying true to the analytical grid laid down in *DP*. Although this might seem the case for the two earliest and often considered definitive texts on biopolitics, his later lecture series, as we will see, show subtle shifts in his analysis of power, and offer a reformulation of those earlier definitions of biopolitics.

The first part of this chapter will consist of tracing this development in Foucault's thinking on biopolitical government. The totalizing terms of control and systematicity that are associated with Foucault's power-knowledge approach in his early discussions of discipline and biopolitics—in which a heterogeneous grouping of discourses, institutions, architectural arrangements, policy decisions, scientific statements, etc. form a dominating and stable regime of power-knowledge— make way for a less rigid perspective in the 1978-79 lectures. Here, as we will see, these heterogeneous elements are not so much understood as functionally operating within a pre-established constellation of power-knowledge, but as responding to historically situated problems, constituting a space of "problematization" instead. I will call this new analysis of power—which undermines the idea that a combination of elements is reducible to a single form of power-knowledge—topological.[10] The reformulation of biopolitics that logically follows from this analytical shift, will enable me to return to the larger purpose of this project in the second part of the chapter, that is, to propose an alternative way of thinking about the relation between biopolitics and literature in general, and the Victorian novel in particular.

The Birth of Biopolitics

Let us first look at those texts that introduced the concept of biopolitics. The main emphasis here will be on the last lecture of *Society Must Be Defended*, as it is a less rough, and more extensive version of the discussion presented in *The History of Sexuality*. The lecture opens with a repetition of the central claim made in the latter. "It seems to me," Foucault notes, "that one of the basic phenomena of the nineteenth century was what might be called power's hold over life. What I mean is the acquisition of power over man insofar as man is a living being, that the biological came under State control, that there was at least a certain tendency that leads to what might be termed State control of the biological" (239-40). Just like he did in *DP* in order to emphasize the

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[8] See for example Gordon and Lemke.

[9] I am aware that Foucault himself never used the word "macro" when speaking of biopolitics.

[10] To be able to situate literary research within the context of biopolitical analysis, I will rely heavily on Stephen Collier's analysis of the changing methodological stakes in Foucault's later writings on biopolitics.

novelty of disciplinary power, Foucault illustrates this new shift in power by setting it off against "the classical theory of sovereignty" (240). He points out that the sovereign's right over a subject's life was paradoxically defined by his right to kill. The relation between the sovereign and the subject's life is thus expressed negatively: it is the sovereign's "right to take life or let live" (241). In the nineteenth century, Foucault argues, this old right came to be complemented by a new right that instead defined power's relation to life in an essentially positive way: "the right to make live and to let die" (241). But we soon learn that Foucault is not exactly talking about "rights" here, when describing this new power-life relation. For Foucault, the theory of right does not actually offer a comprehensive perspective for discerning this transformation of power. Instead, following the approach introduced in *DP,* Foucault will trace the "State control of the biological" not at the level of political theory, "but rather at the level of the mechanisms, techniques, and technologies of power" (241).

Foucault then introduces the distinction between the "micro" and what Colin Gordon terms the "macro" levels of "power's hold over life." On the one hand, Foucault argues, "we saw the emergence of techniques of power that were essentially centered on the body, on the individual body" (242). Here he evidently refers to the disciplinary techniques of power that I mentioned above—to what he called the "micro-physics of power" in *History of Sexuality.* On the other hand, the end of the 18th century saw the emerging of a new technology of power that was no longer applied to bodies, but to "man-as-living-being" (242). It does not "rule a multiplicity of men to the extent that their multiplicity can and must be dissolved into individual bodies that can be kept under surveillance, trained, used, and, if need be, punished" (242). The emerging technology of power is instead applied to the multiplicity of man as forming a "global mass, affected by overall processes characteristic of birth, death, production, illness" (243). So in addition to the individualizing mode of power over the body, Foucault traces a technology of power that is "massifying," directed at "man-as-species," and he calls it biopower (243). It should be noted that this technology of biopower, like disciplinary power, is a technology of the body, but as Foucault points out, "one [discipline] is a technology in which the body is individualized as an organism endowed with capacities, while the other is a technology I which bodies are replaced by general biological processes" (249). Their techniques and mechanisms then, are applied to different registers of society.

In what follows, Foucault describes some of the features of the biopolitics in domains such as urban planning and the management of disease. Among the "first objects of knowledge and the targets it seeks to control," he argues, are the processes inherent to species-life, such as "the birth rate, the mortality rate, longevity," but also to "a whole series of related economic and political

problems" (243).[11] At the end of the 18th century these large-scale phenomena are being measured for the first time through new techniques such as "forecasts, statistical estimates, and overall measures," and this knowledge forms the basis for a diverse set of biopolitical interventions, including birth-control practices, natalist policy, public hygiene campaigns, and urban planning that takes into account the effects the environment has on the life of the population (243-245). And so, Foucault argues, the population arises as a "problem that is at once scientific and political, as a biological problem and as power's problem" (245). What is crucial here is that these collective phenomena only become visible at the mass level. Taken at the level of the individual they are "aleatory" and "unpredictable" but when observed at the collective level over a period of time certain constants can be established. This level of generality, then, is where biopolitics intervenes, and it does so through techniques and mechanisms whose logic is not disciplinary but regulatory. Thus, "the mortality rate has to be modified or lowered; life expectancy has to be increased; the birth rate has to be stimulated" (246). Like disciplinary power, these interventions aim to "maximize and extract forces"—but rather than working at the level of the individual body itself, the regulatory mechanisms "must be established to establish an equilibrium, maintain an average, establish a sort of homeostasis, and compensate for variations within this general population and its aleatory field" (246).

Although it seems that both technologies of power operate autonomously at a different level, Foucault then goes on to situate them within a larger power constellation. While discussing the "birth" of biopolitics as a response to certain long-term demographic and economic transformations that posed great challenges to sovereign power, he notes:

> It is as though power, which used to have sovereignty as its modality or organizing schema, found itself unable to govern the economic and political body of a society that was undergoing both a demographic explosion and industrialization. So much so that far too many things were escaping the old mechanism of the power of sovereignty, both at the top and at the bottom, both at the level of detail and at the mass level. (249).

Thus, the birth of biopolitics took shape as a double adjustment. "A first adjustment," Foucault states, "was made to take care of the details." Starting as early as the seventeenth century, this was, Foucault continues "the easier and more convenient thing to adjust," because it could emerge in "the restricted framework of institutions such as schools, hospitals, barracks,

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[11] As such, biopolitics does not merely relate to biological life, but also to social life: the "biosociological processes" of population (*SMD* 250).

workshops, and so on" (250). The "second adjustment," pertaining to the regulatory mechanisms adjusted to the "phenomena of population," was more difficult because "it implied complex systems of coordination and centralization" (250).

Separated as they may seem, then, these disciplinary and regulatory mechanisms are intimately related, operating, as Stephen Collier rightly points out, within a larger architecture of power (84). What is more, the way these mechanisms are configured within this larger constellation, is done in a remarkably "epochal, functionalist, and even totalizing analysis" (84), Collier poignantly notes. Indeed, what the aforementioned quotes suggest, is that disciplinary power and the regulatory power of biopolitics in fact formed a historically aligned strategic unity that logically emerged to replace the no longer sufficient modalities of sovereign power. So when Foucault discusses the intimate relation between the two technologies of power, he notes that biopolitics does not "exclude disciplinary technology, but it does dovetail into it … and above all, use it by sort of infiltrating it, embedding itself in existing disciplinary techniques" (242). Though this infiltration does not receive much elaboration, it is illustrated by the examples of the town and sexuality. The Victorian model town, Foucault points out, shows signs of both disciplinary mechanisms (assigning one family to one house, individuals to rooms), and regulatory mechanisms ("patterns of saving related to housing, public hygiene). Sexuality, on the other hand, became of such "vital strategic importance in the nineteenth century," because it "exists at the point where body and population meet. And so it is a matter for discipline, but also a matter for regulation" (251-51).[12]

For Foucault, the essential element of these "privileged" sites of convergence between disciplinary and regulatory mechanisms is the norm. Circulating between the two registers of power, the norm makes it "possible to control both the disciplinary order of the body and the aleatory events that occur in the biological multiplicity" (251). As we have seen, normalization played an essential part in Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power, and here it appears as a common factor of both discipline and the regulatory mechanisms of biopolitics that together constitute what he terms "the normalizing society" (253).[13] Foucault thus feels forced to revise

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[12] Foucault also explains why medicine became such an important power-knowledge in the nineteenth-century, since can be applied to the body as well as the population. He states: "Given these conditions, you can understand how and why a technical knowledge such as medicine, or rather the combination of medicine and hygiene, is in the nineteenth century, if not the most important element, an element of considerable importance because of the link it establishes between scientific knowledge of both biological and organic processes (or in other words, the population and the body), and because, at the same time, medicine becomes a political intervention-technique with specific power-effects" (*SMD* 252).

[13] For a detailed analysis of the norm in relation to disciplinary power and biopolitics, see Muhle: *Eine Genealogie der Biopolitik*; "A Genealogy of Biopolitics: The Notion of Life in Canguilhem and Foucault"; "From the Vital to the Social. Canguilhem and Foucault—Reflections on Vital and Social Norms." Offering a genealogy of biopolitics, Muhle draws a logical line between Foucault's early writings on biopolitics and his rethinking of the themes in the later lectures. My reading will be different, emphasizing the analytical difference between those approaches.

his earlier notion of the normalizing society as a "generalized disciplinary society whose disciplinary institutions have swarmed and finally taken over everything" (253). Instead, "[t]he normalizing society is a society in which the norm of discipline and the norm of regulation intersect along an orthogonal articulation" (253). Additionally:

> To say that power took possession of life in the nineteenth century, or to say that power at least takes life under its care in the nineteenth century, is to say that it has, thanks to the play of technologies of discipline on the one hand and technologies of regulation on the other, succeeded n covering the whole surface that lies between the organic and the biological, between body and population. (253)

All in all, the two technologies of disciplinary and regulatory power operate on different levels. But as Collier rightly points out, "they are fundamentally isomorphic and functionally complementary." They are, he continues, "two dimensions of a general process of normalization that operates to extract, mobilize, optimize, control and possess biological life" (85).[14]

What I would like to point out here, is that although Foucault shifts his attention from the micro-political level of the body to the "biopolitics of population," we can see that his analysis belongs, methodologically and conceptually, to the period of *DP*. He maintains an epochal approach, and while the central temporal indicators may have changed, we still seem to be dealing with a shift from the "classical" age of sovereignty to a "modern age" of normalization (Collier 85). What is more, Foucault's approach takes on a functionalist form: A previously dominant form of power (sovereign) is confronted with its own limits in the face of demographic changes, the growth of markets, urbanization, etc., basically the markers of the emerging reality of industrial capitalism. Inevitably, then, a set of new technologies of power emerges, offering a functional resolution to these problems. Hence, the idea of biopolitics we can derive from these early works is that of a dominating strategic apparatus that aims to control the biological and social "life" of both individual and population, and in this way includes both disciplinary mechanisms (directed at the body) and regulatory mechanisms (directed at the population), operating according to central the principle of normalization. As we will momentarily see, however, is that in the later lectures the relation between those heterogeneous elements that

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[14] As such, Fontana and Bertani write: "These two powers therefore do not, as has sometimes been said, constitute two separate 'theories' within Foucault's thought. One does not preclude the other; one is not independent of the other. One does not derive from the other; they are, rather knowledge/power's two conjoint modes of functioning, though it is true that they do have their own specific foci, points of application, finalities, and *enjeux*: the training of bodies on the one hand, and the regulation of the population on the other" (279).

constitute this apparatus does not work within such a rigid architecture of power. Subtle shifts in Foucault's methodology will enable us to reformulate the concept of biopolitics, and open up new forms of inquiry.

Reconfiguring Biopolitics

In many ways, *Security, Territory, Population* and *The Birth of Biopolitics* are a continuation of the discussions of biopolitics in *SMD* and *HOS*. As Michel Senellart notes, they "form a diptych unified by the problematic of bio-power that was first introduced in 1976" (477). Indeed, the major themes and phenomena that Foucault identified as exemplary of biopolitics return—the population, the aleatory, and the examples of the town and illness—to be further elaborated. Although biopower remains the horizon of the two courses, its central features undergo a revision within a new framework of the "problematic of government" (127).[15] Within this new problematic, whose genesis Foucault locates as early as the 16th century, we can understand biopolitics as a specific transformation of government taking place at the end of the 18th century. What is new in the way he analyzes this shift, is that instead of vaguely situating the birth of biopolitics within the broad developments of the late 18th century, as in *SMBD* and *HOS*, Foucault analyzes the exemplary figurations of illness, the town, and scarcity in a more precise manner here, referring to historically specific texts and problems.[16]

In addition to these more detailed analyses, there is also a shift in vocabulary. In 1976 Foucault characterized biopolitics as the regulatory control over the population, biological life, and productive processes. In *STP* this power that operates at the register of the population is referred to as apparatus of security, existing alongside the already familiar mechanisms of the legal code and discipline (20). Although it seems like simple change of names, there are some significant differences. First, with the introduction of "security" the notions of "control" and "possession" associated with regulatory power disappear.[17] Second, security's relationship to discipline is not, as in *SMD*, expressed through the idea that they are bound by an inherent logic, molded together to establish and maintain a "normalizing society." On the contrary: when Foucault returns to his discussion of the norm in *STP*, security and discipline are said to each deal

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[15] And so, Sellenart argues, what initially seems to be a mere expansion on the hypothesis laid down in 1976, "leads him to some detours that apparently take him away from his initial objective and reorient the lectures in a new direction. Actually it is as if the hypothesis of biopower had to be placed in a broader framework in order to become really operational" (477).

[16] For example, Vigne de Vigny's plan for the city of Nantes (1755), that sought to manage population growth and expanded trade; Emmanuel-Éttienne Duvillard's study that used population statistics to determine the distribution of smallpox risks (1806); and Louis-Paul Abeille's proposals for regulating grain trade (1763).

[17] As a matter of fact, security stands in stark contrast to control. In its liberal configuration, the primary governmental rationality in the 19th century, the former is much more about letting things happen (*laissez-passer*) than controlling every detail of the population.

"differently with what we call normalization" (56). Additionally, Foucault's discussion of the town as a site of convergence between disciplinary and regulatory power in *SMD*, gives way to an analysis where the town emerges in three different formations: the town of sovereignty, the town of discipline, and the town of security. This pattern is also found in Foucault's examinations of disease, famine and criminality. So contrary to the rigid architectonic of power posited in *SMD,* Foucault shows different figurations of the town, normalization, illness, etc., without articulating them within a larger or "global" grid of power.

These shifts pertain to a larger development in Foucault's approach in which the series sovereignty-discipline-security does no longer provide "the bare bones .. of a kind of historical schema" (21). When discussing the penal system, he notes that although we are inclined to distinguish between an archaic period (juridico-legal), a modern period (discipline) and a contemporary period (security), describing "things in this way, as the archaic, ancient, modern and contemporary, misses the most important thing" (21). One of the things missing, Foucault continues, is that those modalities he spoke of as ancient "involve those that appear as newer" (21). The same goes for discipline and security: they are in fact old mechanisms that did not replace the juridico-legal mechanism of sovereign power but were "reactivated and transformed" within a new historical context. And so, Foucault argues:

> There is not a series of successive elements, the appearance of the new causing
> the earlier ones to disappear. There is not the legal age, the disciplinary age, and
> then the age of security. Mechanisms of security do not replace disciplinary
> mechanisms, which would have replaced juridico-legal mechanisms. In reality you
> have a series of complex edifices in which, of course, the techniques themselves
> change and are perfected, or anyway become more complicated, but in which
> what above all changes is the dominant characteristic, or more exactly, the *system of*
> *correlation* between juridico-legal mechanisms, disciplinary mechanisms, and
> mechanisms of security. (22, emphasis mine)

I believe this passage points us to a number of crucial alterations in Foucault's approach to power. Firstly, he explicitly moves away from his earlier epochal claims concerning the transition from a society of sovereignty to a disciplinary society (*DP*) or normalization (*SMD*). Secondly, instead of speaking of diverse modalities of power operating together within a coherent and dominating power structure, Foucault argues that we are dealing with patterns of *correlation* among different technologies and techniques of power. As Collier points out, "one technology of power

may provide guiding norms and an orienting *telos*. But it does not saturate all power relations" (89). What this means in terms of methodology with regard the analysis of biopolitics, is that Foucault no longer discusses biopolitics as an all-encompassing, global regime of power, but rather looks at the way in which it takes shape through a configuration of a set of heterogeneous elements, emerging "at a given moment, in a given society, in a given country" in relation to certain historically situated problems (23). These systems of correlation are what Collier adequately names "topologies of power," and they are central to Foucault's analysis in the 1978-79 lectures. While previously analyzing shifts in power relations in terms of "vaguely defined and anonymous functional imperatives ('the capitalist economy gave rise to … disciplinary power') or in terms of broad shifts in discursivities," Foucault now sets out to zoom in to examine how diverse elements are taken up and (re)combined (Collier 90).

The Birth of the Population

And so we are no longer dealing with a global biopolitical logic of the modern, whose hidden matrix or *nomos*, as Giorgio Agamben more recently has argued, should be sought in the limit experience of the camp.[18] In these later lectures biopolitics is not so much a governmental logic, as a problem space, that can be assessed by analyzing these topologies or *assemblages* of power that come into being at a given moment in response to historically given problems. This new emphasis on problems is central to Foucault's revised notion of biopolitics, and it marks a clear departure from the theoretical framework of *DP*, to a style of analysis that is more typical of Foucault's later work. As we will momentarily see, this new approach will enable me to propose new ways of understanding and studying the relation between biopolitics and the nineteenth century novel.

Most of the explicit uses of the concept of *problématisation* are found in Foucault's late work, the most direct and specific in a series of lectures he gave at Berkeley in 1983. Here Foucault reformulates his project as the history of thought, which is the

> analysis of the way an unproblematic field of experience, or a set of practices, which
> were accepted without question … becomes a problem, raises discussion and debate,
> incites new reactions, and induces a crisis in the previously silent behaviors, habits,
> practices and institutions. ("Fearless Speech" 74)

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[18] See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer,* and *State of Exception*.

The analytical field is here defined as a site of problematization, which, as Paul Rabinow points out, is a historical space that "is constituted by and through economic conditions, scientific knowledges, political actors, and other related vectors" (19). A number of difficulties emerge at a given period in time that make a certain manner of acting questionable and thus turns them into objects of thought. As Rabinow states, "historical conjunctures (especially those produced by the introduction of technological interventions and their countereffects) can be turned into conceptual and practical problems" (47). What is crucial here is that taking a domain of problematization as a historical site of analysis, means acknowledging the possibility that many different responses can be given within such a domain. Foucault notes:

> To the same set [*ensemble*] of difficulties several responses can be given. And most times, diverse responses are proposed. That which one needs to understand is that which makes these diverse responses simultaneously possible … This elaboration of a given situation into a question, this transformation of a set of difficulties and troubles into problems to which diverse solutions are proposed as responses, is the point of problematization, the specific work of thought. (Dits et Ecrits, 597-98).

Here we can see how the concept of problematization is implicit in Foucault's reformulated approach to biopolitics offered in the 1978-79 lectures. The concept allows him to analyze the emergence of biopolitical techniques of government not in terms of a coherent set of inevitable *solutions* to historical problems, but as a more or less contingent set of *responses* that exist in correlation with(in) a historically given domain of problematization. This explains why Foucault in *STP* and *BB* no longer speaks of the inherent unity of biopolitics, but instead focuses on the heterogeneity of the different elements that make up biopolitics as a problem-space, as a topology of power. It is as if he takes a step back, refocusing on the historical field of problematization as "the basis on which something like biopolitics could be formed" (*BB* 21). As such, by discussing a great variety of thinkers and texts in *STP* and *BB*, Foucault analyzes the ways in which different governmental rationalities, such as the Physiocrats, liberalism, neo-liberalism, developed in relation to the problematic of the "life of the population" and created different techniques of government in response.[19]

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[19] I am more interested in the methodological transformation Foucault provides for in *STP* and *BB*, than in going into the depths of his discussions. The reason for this is that Foucault, as the title of the second work suggests, is interested in the early stages of biopolitics and its relation to other modes of government, while my focus will be on the specific biopolitical realities of the Victorian era.

This brings us back to the central theme of Foucault's earlier discussions of biopolitics, that is, the notion of the population, which, as he states in the beginning of *BB* "the central core of all the problems [Foucault is] trying to identify" (21). But his use of the term "problem" signifies the change of framework that I have described above. Here population does not figure as an object that needed to be specified first in order to be controlled, but as an important problem emerging in a given historical moment and whose correlation with certain political techniques and mechanisms Foucault seeks to investigate. In *STP* he emphasizes that "population" as such is not a new notion in governmental thought. But the way it is understood and acted upon politically changes by the end of the eighteenth century. In addition to, and much in line with his earlier discussions of the theme, Foucault notes that by that time the population comes to be considered "as a set of processes to be managed at the level and on the basis of what is natural in these processes" (104). It is not "a collection of juridical subjects in an individual or collective relationship with a sovereign will," Foucault notes, but instead "[I]t is a set of elements in which we can note constants and regularities even in accidents" and it can be governed through the means of calculation, analysis, and reflection. It is at this level of the population-as-living-being, as we have seen, that a certain set of biopolitical mechanisms and techniques act, such as birth control or public health policies. To illustrate this, Foucault points to the usage of the word "human species" in the 18th century (rather than "human kind") indicating the new position of "mankind as a species, within a field of the definition of all living species" (105).

Importantly, the field of problematization that I am trying to describe here does not merely consist of patterns of correlation between the population and techniques of power (juridical, political, technical). Even though this governmental component has Foucault's attention throughout the lectures, he makes a pivotal side note in the third lecture of *STP*, when he mentions that there is also an important epistemological aspect to it. In other words, the problem of population appears in a whole series of domains of knowledge (*savoirs*). As such, Foucault goes on to put the three large epistemic domains that he described in *The Order of Things* into a new perspective. First, he wonders if the development of the analysis of wealth into political economy (economic government) can be understood in terms of the introduction of the population as subject-object and its disruptive effects in the field of economic reflection and practice. The second example Foucault gives is the transformation of natural history into biology. The essential role of natural history was to identify the classificatory characteristics of living beings, but, "in the eighteenth and nineteenth century," Foucault argues, "a whole series of transformations take place that take us from the identification of classificatory characteristics to the internal organization of the organism, and then from the organism to the anatomical-functional

coherence to the constitutive or regulatory relationship with the milieu in which it lives" (108). Scientists such as Lamarck and Cuvier contributed to this development, and of course Darwin, who "found that population was the medium between the milieu and the organism, with all the specific effects of population" (109). The third domain is the transition from general grammar to historical philology, which happened when a series of investigations in different countries identified a relationship between language and population, and instigated questions about how the population, as a subject, could transform a language collectively (109). And thus, Foucault argues, the problem of the population works as an "operator" of epistemological transformations (109).

We can now see that the field of problematization that has the population as its central problem should be understood as a broad historical site where political, juridical, economic, scientific, artistic, literary, and philosophical elements stand in relation to each other. Indeed, Foucault ironically notes, the ruling classes did not set naturalists to work on the area of population so that they "mutated into biologists as a result" (109). Instead, he states:

> A constant interplay between techniques of power and their object gradually carves out in reality, as a field of reality, population and its specific phenomena. A whole series of objects were made visible for possible forms of knowledge on the basis of the constitution of the population as the correlate of techniques of power. In turn, because these forms of knowledge constantly carve out new objects, the population could be formed, continue, and remain as the privileged correlate of modern mechanisms of power. (109)

Thus, the variety of responses that arise within the problem-space of biopower, that is, the whole set of discourses, scientific statements, techniques, institutions, policy decisions, philosophical ideas that take up the issue of the life of the population, interact, enter subtle power relations that produce the population not merely as a notion, but also as a reality. So here we come back to the essential characteristic of Foucault's idea of power relations as having reality effects. But as we have seen, the way in which this power works is quite different in these late lectures. We are no longer dealing with a coherent and stable regime of power-knowledge that offers a tailor-made solution to the problem of population. Instead, Foucault takes on the broader perspective of problematization, to define biopolitical government as a problem-space, as a historical field of inquiry into modes of thinking and acting that emerge in response to the central problem of the life of the population. What is more, such an approach allows us to discern the heterogeneity of

all the elements involved, the "tension, frictions, mutual incompatibilities, successful or failed adjustments, unstable mixtures" within this larger historical field of problematization (*BB* 21). And in light of my project, it permits me to examine the Victorian novel as one site where such frictions play out.

Biopolitics and the Victorian novel

At last, having drawn out the crucial nuances in Foucault's understanding of modern power and biopolitics in particular, we can now return to what is essential to my project: the relationship between biopolitics and the Victorian novel in particular. As we have seen in the introductory chapter, Foucauldian criticism of the Victorian novel has traditionally aligned the novel's form to the modern mechanisms of disciplinary power. I have mentioned D.A. Miller's classical study *The Novel and the Police*, in which he argues that the novel genre operates within disciplinary society by mimicking its incarceration strategies, producing self-policing individuals. The novel's form, in this sense, is complicit in modern technologies of control. Miller's study, as we have seen, belongs to a strand of Foucauldian criticism that relies heavily on the formulation of modern power set out in *Discipline and Punish*. This approach to culture and literature, assimilating bodies of knowledge to technologies of control, has received a fair amount of criticism lately, suggesting we move beyond the Panopticon to allow for post-Foucauldian take on Victorian culture. Although I support much of the criticism by these self-proclaimed post-Foucauldians, my argument is that moving beyond the Panopticon does not necessarily have to mean that we move beyond Foucault. As I have attempted in this chapter, Foucault subtly moves away from the totalizing claims of power/knowledge in his later works, presenting a more diffusive take on the relation between knowledge production and technologies of management. The emphasis shifts from coherent systems of control, as in *Discipline and Punish* and his early works on biopolitics, to fields of problematization: a heterogeneous set of discourses, techniques, practices, etc., that depart from the same problem, but do not form a closely-knit, uniform constellation of totalizing power. This subtle methodological shift provides for a different understanding of biopower, and allows me to formulate a biopolitical approach to Victorian literature that does not repeat the kind of totalizing claims adopted by D.A. Miller and Nancy Armstrong, and criticized by those calling for a post-Foucauldian term.

In this view, I situate the Victorian novels within the field of problematization whose emergence Foucault located around the end of the 18th century, and that took life and the population as its primary objects of epistemological and political concern. Originally stemming from an Enlightenment culture of individualism, the novel genre, as we will see in the next two chapters, struggled to give account of this new figure of the population, functioning, as we will

see, as an experimental, imaginative testing ground for those political, scientific, economic, and philosophical ideas, theories, and practices that together departed from the same problem of population. Indeed, by the time Charles Dickens and George Eliot started writing, the figure of the population was being rapidly theorized and materialized. Technologies for measuring the variables inherent to the population, such as census and statistics were institutionalized during Victorian times. Surveys led to important policy documents such as Edwin Chadwick's *Sanitary Report* (1842) that on the basis of statistical tables and eyewitness reports formulated influential policy guidelines aimed at regulating public health issues and building sufficient sanitation. Urban planning became a major governmental tool for managing the relation between the population and its habitat, primarily seeking to secure the best bodily condition possible for the population.

These were among the biopolitical governmental technologies that took the population as a problem of management. They cannot, however, be sufficiently grasped without taking into account the developments in the fields of economic, political, and scientific theory. One notable figure is the economic theorist Robert Malthus, whose *An Essay on the Principle Population* (1797) was the first of many to follow within economics to take population in its entirety as an object of analysis and control. Pointing at the negative effects of too large a population, he proposed a set of population checks, such as birth control and abortion, that would prevent the population from overstretching the limit of their resources. Pivotal of course to all these developments was the emergence of biological science, which radically altered the terms for understanding life and shifted the way one viewed the human's position in the natural world. Concepts of stable form made way for concepts of dynamic processes in which living human beings were fully immersed. These ideas are perhaps best exemplified by the findings of Charles Darwin whose evolutionary theory offered a profound view on how living beings develop over time in interaction with their environment. Victorian novelists, as we will see in the next chapters, found in these developments ample material to respond to and explore its implications for the novel form. Starting off from the idea of a field of problematization then, we see a whole set of different practices and theories that take the living population as its object of knowledge or control, and together, I would like to argue, they actively contribute to the carving out of this new figure in reality.

Chapter 2

The Novel and the Vital: the Power of Contagion in Dickens's *Bleak House*

> What connexion can there be, between the place in Lincolnshire, the house in town, the Mercury in Power, and the whereabout of Jo the outlaw with the broom, who had that distant ray of light upon him when he swept the churchyard-step? What Connexion can there have been between many people in the innumerable histories of this world, who, from opposite sides of great gulfs, have, nevertheless, been very curiously brought together!

> Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*

Perhaps no other writer than Charles Dickens is more famous for his detailed descriptions of the labyrinthine jumble of courts and alleys, estates and slums, that make up the city of London, and those vast numbers of people walking its muddy streets, breathing in its thick air. Not only through his novels, but also in his work as a journalist and commentator, Dickens shows an interest in all social layers of urban life with a specific focus on those living at the margins of urban society. Paying close attention to the relationship between the city's inhabitants, regardless of their social class, his novels resonate with what the Marxist critic Georg Lukács described as realism's core business of upholding "the organic, indissoluble connection between man as a private individual and man as a social being, a member of a community" (8). Indeed, as the above quote from *Bleak House* suggests, the possibilities of interconnection are posed as a central question in the novel, which is demonstrated by the dazzling number of characters and spaces that Dickens brings into a networked play—from aristocrats to crossing sweepers, through bricklayers, dancing masters, lawyers, and suitors. Thus conceiving of this large number of characters and sites in terms of a connected whole in his novels—which according to the critic G.K. Chesterton are "as crowded and populous as towns" (80), Dickens's novels actively participate in the imagination of Victorian society on a new mass scale. Indeed, given the sheer extent of Dicken's reach, critics such as J. Hillis Miller have correctly argued that in writing *Bleak House*, he "constructed a model in little of English society in his time" (1057). The novel serves

almost as a blueprint of Victorian society, Miller notes, transferring England into the realm of fictional language, while trying to interpret and identify some of the causes of its perilous state.

The apparent socio-political potential of his novels has not gone unnoticed. In his short piece "The English Middle Class" that was published in 1854, the same year as *Bleak House*, Karl Marx, for example, praised Dickens as one of those writers "whose graphic and eloquent pages have issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together" (106). He is one of many critics that have celebrated Dickens's ability to include the excluded, making everyone count by granting them some form of subjectivity or individuality—political and legal, as a citizen-subject, or literary, as a character. The latter pertains to a larger point I have made in the introductory chapter regarding the supposedly inextricable link between the novel and individuality that much criticism of Victorian fiction takes for granted. Within this line of thinking, critics concerned with the politics of Victorian fiction such as Pam Morris and Lauren Goodlad, have concluded that a novel such as *Bleak House* expresses a certain liberal ideal, heralding the privileged categories of the private individual and the domestic sphere as an antidote to the perils of state power. Both explicitly argue against D.A. Miller's Foucauldian reading of the Victorian novel as an instance of modern disciplinary power that I have expounded on in the introductory chapter. In his reading of *Bleak House,* Miller argues that the distinction between carceral space, as represented in *Bleak House* by the Court of Chancery, and its supposed liberal antithesis, the middle class home, is stressed yet undermined (100). Through its representation of state bureaucracy and the police, the novel produces a fundamental uncertainty about the boundaries and extent of power, which "facilitate[s] the disposition, functioning and promotion" of an all-encompassing disciplinarity, where in addition to state policing the family "remain[s] free by becoming its own house of correction" (Miller 81). Taking on a post-Foucauldian approach, Morris, in contrast, reads *Bleak House* as a critique of new "form[s] of power as a sinister panopticon knowledge" (118), and Goodlad, also taking specific aim at Miller, argues that *Bleak House* promotes a non-authoritative version of pastoral care that emphasized a "commitment to personalized community bonds" (116). So while both Morris and Goodlad acknowledge the novel's concern with modern power, they oppose the idea that the novel through its detective form is already implicit in the totalizing modes of disciplinary power and its techniques of individuation.

What Emily Steinlight has rightly noted, is that although these readings may differ, they display "an underlying consensus that the Victorian novel is necessarily, for better or for worse, a liberal project […] and committed to the value of individualism (whether fiction produces the individual as an effect of power or defends its inherent autonomy)" (233). To put it differently, in

these readings the novel's representation of Victorian society, and its critical investigation of the power structures in place, is measured according to its effect on the individual and the domestic sphere. Although I would certainly not argue that these approaches overstate the importance of the individual and the domestic sphere in Dickens's novel, stressing the effect of power on this micro-level may close us off from seeing the way *Bleak House* participates in thinking about the problem of the population and the various governmental strategies that emerged for knowing, managing, and containing this new mass figure. One of the ways in which these problems are translated into the novel is through its apparent questioning of its own ability to represent or contain the entire population. As Terry Eagleton has aptly noted, *Bleak House* is a "wonderfully overpopulated work" (vii), and indeed, Dickens makes us feel the density of the population within the limited space of those human environments he describes: the countless solicitors and suitors in the House of Chancery, the numerous children in the Jellyby home, and of course those multitudes barely surviving in the streets, in the workhouses, and the slums of Tom-all-Alone's. Hence, Steinlight correctly notes: "for all its strident populism, the novel generates larger numbers than its own domestic and political economies can accommodate" (228). To provide for these masses, not much is to be expected from the government, whose aristocratic members Dickens satirically depicts as "Lord Boodle, Joodle, Koodle, Loodle, and Moodle" (194). Also, philanthropy, local pastorship, and familial relationship prove to be failing models of sympathy and intervention. There is, for example, Mrs Pardiggle, who so forcibly seeks to educate a working class family that it seems to Esther Summerson, the novel's heroine, "as if she were an exorable moral Policeman carrying them all off to a station house" (131). Or Mrs Jellyby, who fails to take care of her children – "little unfortunates" in Esther's eyes – as she is too caught up in her "telescopic philanthropy" in Africa. As we are beginning to see then, both the novel itself and the socio-political structures in place struggle to know and govern this new figure of the population. In this chapter I will further expand on the way in which this struggle plays out in the novel.

To be able to sufficiently grasp the problem of the population in *Bleak House*, I suggest we turn to the vital sphere, which, as we have established in the previous chapter, undergirds much of the Victorian biopolitical practices and discourses (biological, literary, social, political, philosophical, etc.) that form its field of problematization.[20] As we have seen, this new figure of the population was not taken as the sum of legal or political subjects, but as an embodied, living mass, whose natural processes such as birth, morbidity, and disease, became central to the Victorian public imaginary and its governmental rationalities. Largely supported by emerging

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[20] When I use the term "the vital sphere" in this chapter, I do not refer to specific scientific discussions going on at the time about the definition of life. I will, however, discuss some of these theories in the next chapter.

medical, biological, and philosophical discourses, society came increasingly to be understood in terms of its *bodiness*—as a "social body" whose condition became a primary object of knowledge and whose health had to be both maximized and secured by government. In this chapter I will read Dickens's *Bleak House* as a literary experiment in thinking about the population, showing the ways in which the population understood in this new way plays an instrumental narrative role. The emphasis is on experiment here, because I believe the novel provides an ideal space where the tensions and frictions of the Victorian governmental project can be played out, where its strategies can be tested, revealing its social, political, and literary implications along the way. This also means that some of the categories that we traditionally associate with the nineteenth century novel, such as the individual and the home, become destabilized and sometimes even undermined in the novel. By taking the vital into account then, and by placing Dickens's novel in dialogue with some of the biopolitical discourses and practices of the time, we will be able to see new ways in which *Bleak House* might be a blueprint of Victorian society, exploring alternative principles of interconnection.

Interconnection and Metaphor

> London. Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth … Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle, with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snow-flakes – gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun. Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses, scarcely better; splashed to their very blinkers. Foot passengers, jostling one another's umbrellas, in a general infection of ill-temper, and losing their foot-hold at street-corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke (if the day ever broke), adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud, sticking at those points tenaciously to the pavement, and accumulating at compound interest. (3)

In these famous opening lines of *Bleak House*, the novel's narrator sketches a visually striking but somber image of the London cityscape. His gaze moves quickly from the hall that houses the Court of Chancery, to the dark and dreary skies heavy with soot and smoke that falls down and blends in with the mud on the streets, troubling the passage of an infinite stream of city dwellers,

whose waste only adds up to the thick layer of dirt already sticking to the slippery pavements. And as the narrator continues in the next passage, all is covered in a vision-obstructing fog that is literally "everywhere" (3). Critics have not failed to note the metaphorical force of this passage, reading its images of mud and fog as representative of larger systemic societal ills. Certainly, Dickens does not leave much room for doubt as to what powerful institution he seeks to take aim at: "the raw afternoon is rawest, and the dense fog is densest, and the muddy streets are muddiest, near that leaden-headed old obstruction, appropriate ornament for the threshold of a leaden-headed old corporation: Temple Bar […] [a]nd at the very heart of the fog, sits the Lord High Chancellor in his High Court of Chancery" (4). Dickens sketches the corrupting and far-reaching power of the court, which has "its decaying houses and its blighted lands in every shire; which has its worn-out lunatic in every madhouse, and its dead in every churchyard" (5). It is the setting for the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case, a lawsuit concerning the inheritance of the deceased Jarndyce that has been dragging on for decades now without any significant development—a "perennially hopeless" case, the narrator notes, a "joke" even, that has "stretched forth its unwholesome hand to spoil and corrupt" an uncountable number of people (6-7). Indeed, many of the novel's characters are corrupted as a result of their partaking in this case, which figures at the heart of the narrative. The Court of Chancery is depicted as a money-devouring institution that thrives on "trickery, evasion, [and] procrastination" (7) to supply only for its own members. By the time the reader enters it, much of the funds have already been exhausted. As a deliberately perpetuated chaos then, the case, in which "every difficulty […] every masterly fiction, every form of procedure known in that court is represented over and over again" (24), acts much like a fog: it blurs the view of each of the parties involved, shattering all hopes for a fair ending.

Perhaps the most influential example of such a metaphorical reading is Hillis Miller's. For him, the lack of transparency in the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case is emblematic of the novel as a whole. Its narrators, the omniscient third-person narrator and the young Esther Summerson, writing in first-person, are both engaged in a search—for providing an adequate diagnosis of the ills of Victorian urban society in case of the narrator, and for the truth of her lineage in Esther's case—slowly revealing secrets as the novel progresses. But in their narration, Hillis Miller notes, they "hide as much as they reveal," and so the "reader is invited in various ways to read the signs, to decipher the mystery" (1060). In this way, the reader resembles those numerous document-reading figures that populate the Court of Chancery. (S)he is "confronted with a document which he must piece together, scrutinize, interrogate at every turn—in short, interpret—in order to understand" (1061). Presented with a set of seemingly unconnected places in the beginning of the novel—the Court of Chancery, the Chesney Wold estate, the slums of Tom-all-alone's, the

orphanage where Esther lived as a child, and Bleak House, the home of her benefactor John Jarndyce of which Esther becomes house-keeper—the reader is forced to look for possible interconnections. To successfully undertake this interpretative act means understanding the novel according to "correspondences within the text between one character and another, one scene and another, one figurative expression and another" (1061-62). And once the reader "has been alerted to look for such relationships he discovers that the novel is a complex fabric of recurrences," Hillis Miller notes (1062). An example of such a relationship is the number of neglected children populating the novel, and an equal number of bad parents. As we look for cross-references, Hillis Miller contends, we can see that the Lord Chancellor also belongs to this latter category, "since his court was charged in part to administer equity to widows and orphans, those especially unable to take care of themselves" (1062). Standing in the place of the parents, the court largely fails to provide for those orphans like Ada and Richard, the "Wards of Chancery." Through referential reading then, the reader is able to give (a moral) meaning to the diverse range of plots and characters of the novel, and to understand the societal ills at hand.

Although I think this particular way of reading the novel is highly effective in shedding light on its complex signifying networks, it misses another principle of interconnection in the novel, operating not on a metaphorical but on a literal level instead, resonating strongly with the biopolitical discourse of Dickens's day and age. For this, we have to return to the opening lines of the novel quoted above. As much as the mud and fog symbolize the dubious practices of the court, they also refer to a *literal* economy of filth that was manifest in the metropolitan area, functioning as a source of contagious disease. These natural processes gained increasing prominence within Victorian knowledge production and governmental practice, and greatly influenced the way Victorians understood and imagined urban and national society as a whole. As we will momentarily see, they also play a key role in the way Dickens envisioned the urban population in *Bleak House*. But before taking a closer look at the novel, I will first lay out some of the general assumptions of the time.

Governing the Liberal City

As I have pointed out before, Victorian society was more and more understood in terms of its corporeality. Supported by developments in the medical and biological sciences, it was conceived of as a "social body" or an organic whole (Joyce 65; Gilbert 9).[21] Accompanying this particular social imaginary was an increasingly privileged role for modern medicine and "public health" for understanding the workings of the city. As Joyce notes, "the 'sanitary economy' of the town was

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[21] I will expand on the idea of social organicism in the next chapter on George Eliot's *Middlemarch*.

like that of the body. Both were characterized by a dynamic equilibrium between living organisms and their physical environment." He continues that "[t]he constant circulation of fluids and the continuous replenishment of vital functions were to be secured in the case of both the body and the city by the introduction of fresh particles and by the elimination of waste ones" (65). So what we have here is the idea that the city should be a space of vitality, and government is a practice of "vitalizing" the city: "The care of the city and the care of the body became as one, just as the health of the city and the health of the body were one" (Joyce 65). However, as we already begin to see, conceiving of the city as a free place of flows, movement, and circulation, and defining its "health" in these vital terms also meant the establishment and growing importance of those elements regarded its opposite: disease and death. Contemporary Victorian medical theories generally agreed as to the idea that the organism was naturally healthy, and this was used in support of a liberal *laissez-faire* politics. But as Poovey argues, the image of the social body could also be employed to defend some government sponsored sanitary intervention, because, especially in densely populated poor neighborhoods, nature was "impeded by bad air, poor sanitation, and inadequate supplies of fresh water" (40). Hence, in this new Victorian worldview, which relied heavily on contemporary scientific definitions of the physiological and pathological, some elements and areas of the city were marked unhealthy, and these socially less desirable aspects of the city's supposedly immanent vitality became a primary target for liberal biopolitical government.[22]

Through the institution of the national census, statistics, and sanitary and medical mapping, knowledge of the population became available on an unprecedented scale. Local societies and national institutions started collecting "vital statistics" to be able to capture the intrinsic nature of the governed.[23] Furthermore, as Joyce argues, between 1835 and 1855, when Dickens finished a total of fourteen novels, a revolution in the history of non-topographical cartography took place. Social mapping, that brought into detailed view the density and distributions of populations, provided an unparalleled sight into the city and its inhabitants. Surveyors looked into places of social interaction, like churches, theatres, town hall, work houses, banks, and markets, that were marked "public," but the gaze of the map generally did not penetrate the home, sanctioning "the domestic, feminized character of the home" (Joyce 52-53). In addition, much attention was given to the city centre dwellings of the poor that represented the greatest source of anxiety about the city, as these were understood to breed both immorality and ill-health. What is important to understand about these new techniques of representation is that they were not just inventions

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[22] See for example Foucault, *The Birth of The Clinic*; Georges Canguilhem, *On the Normal and the Pathological*; or Athena Vrettos, *Somatic Fictions*.

[23] For a Foucault-inspired history of statistics and its interrelated problems, see Ian Hacking: "How Should We Do the History of Statistics."

resulting from a certain sociopolitical rationality that around 1800 began to take into account the life of the population and imagined society as an organic whole. Instead, these techniques were constitutive of this process of unification, providing the means for locating sites of intervention, whose improved circulatory mechanisms would then help the population to become more healthy, modern, rational, and transparent.

Among the most influential and elaborative inquiries into the health of the population of London conducted at the time was Edwin Chadwick's *Report on the Sanitary Conditions of the Labouring Population* (1842).[24] A groundbreaking research into longevity and mortality among the working class, it sought to expose the hidden causes that contributed to the spread of epidemic disease, while also proposing ways by which the sanitary condition in cities could be improved.[25] He stated:

> It is now a matter of everyday notoriety that there are around us in this city innumerable causes of disease and death, over which at large, if not an absolute, control has been granted to us. To remove these causes, and thus to reduce to a *minimum* the risks incident to life, is the object of sanitary reform. (Qtd. in Ingham 813)

Furthermore noting that his study "shows how strongly circumstances that are governable govern the habits of the population, and in some instances appear almost to breed the species of the population" (Qtd. in Ingham 822) we can see how Chadwick justifies acts of government by naturalizing them. He discussed air, sewers, dung heaps, water, and the built environment as possible causes for ill-health, and he suggested that improving their circulatory infrastructure would increase the health of the urban society. Importantly, Chadwick did not just propose rules to preserve individual health or health at specific locales as general regulations preserving the collective health of the community. As Thomas Osborne argues, Chadwick proposed "the provision of an infrastructure that would provide the individual and the collectivity with security in the face of threats to vitality" (110) This is crucial here, since many of the interventions that Chadwick and his successors came up with towards clearing the city from the detritus that should

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[24] It was preceded by another important investigation of the urban space and its inhabitants: James Philips Kay's 1832 treatment of cotton operatives in Manchester, *The Moral and Physical Conditions of the Working Classes … In Manchester*. This was the first study that combined eyewitness reports and statistical tables, and inspired some of the most important investigatory organizations of the time, such as the Manchester Statistical Society (founded in 1833) and the London Statistical Society (1834) of which Chadwick was a frequent contributor.

[25] It needs to be noted here that he social, political, and economic cannot be separated here, as Chadwick's plan for improving the sanitary conditions was inextricably bound up with government's objective of increasing the working poor's productivity.

be external to it—including also places of death such as cemeteries—were strategies of indirect government.[26] They induced cleanliness and good morals not through discipline but "simply" through the material presence of drains and sewers, that moreover functioned to uphold the division between public and private, establishing the sanitary integrity of the private home, "yet without recourse to direct intervention" (Osborne 114). What is more is that in this model, the environment does no longer designate an exterior; instead, as Osborne argues, "the hydraulic city has become a regulated milieu along with the body and the economy," with each of them conceived naturalistically.

So, much like the representational techniques that supported them, these biopolitical security mechanisms did much to constitute the population as an organic whole and helped envision the Victorian "social body" not only in moral but also in physical and geographical terms. They offered a different notion of the human collectivity beyond the home or neighborhood, to encompass the entire population of London – something we can find, in literary form, in Dickens's *Bleak House*, as I will show in a moment. As Gilbert notes, this also meant that elements previously considered "discrete and unrelated monads, could now be understood as vitally connected and participating in the same structure" (114). Therefore, the understanding of the vital sphere as undergirding Victorian knowledges and practices of the social and the political (and of course, the medical), opened up a whole new set of possible interconnections between people, things, and matter in general, which, as we have seen, also included epidemics, pollution, contagion—those negative elements that Chadwick terms "depressed vitality" (Qtd. in Ingham 813). Dickens, a sanitary activist himself, was well aware of the medical and biological discourses of his time. Having read the works of Chadwick and his contemporary sanitary reformer and physician Thomas Southwood Smith, Dickens believed that sanitary reform was essential to good government.[27] In a speech to the Metropolitan Sanitary Association on May 10, 1851, around the time that Dickens was preparing *Bleak House*, he expressed his concerns:

> And I can honestly declare tonight, that all the use I have since made of
> my eyes […] that all the information I have since been able to acquire
> through any of my senses, has strengthened me in the conviction that
> Searching Sanitary Reform must precede all other social remedies; and

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[26] It needs mentioning that these instances of indirect government were also accompanied by disciplinary measurements, but they were conducted, as Foucault has argued, to serve the benefit of the whole. Furthermore, despite the many proposals that Chadwick and other social investigators did to the government, very few were actually executed, let alone in its entirety. Their plans were generally considered to be too extensive by the public and the British government because they were too interventionist.

[27] The first critics to take up the subject of sanitary reform in Dickens's work were J.K. Fielding and A.W. Brice in their 1970 article "*Bleak House* and the Graveyard."

that even Education and Religion can do nothing where they are most needed, until the way is paved for their ministrations by Cleanliness and Decency. (*Speeches* 128)

Particularly in the periodical *Household Words*, which was initiated and edited by Dickens and included a section "Social, Sanitary, and Municipal Progress," he used his observational skills to "cause good service" to sanitary reform (*Letters* 18-19).[28] What his speech to the Metropolitan Sanitary Association furthermore shows, is that Dickens was familiar with the prevailing theories of disease, such as the miasmic theory, which held that noxious airs containing particles from decomposed matter were cause of illness. In his speech he states: "the air from Gin Lane will be carried by an easterly wind into Mayfair, or that the furious pestilence raging in St. Giles no mortal list of lady patronesses can keep out of Almack's" (*Speeches* 127). Taking this into account, we suddenly become aware of the very materiality of the fog and mud that the novel introduces in its opening lines. The dirt and the polluted air form a vital presence, suggesting forms of interconnection beyond the figurative. And indeed, as we will see in the remains of this chapter, metaphorical and symbolic continuity between characters and places co-exist with a vital, biological continuity, and it is here, I believe, that Dickens's societal critique fully reveals itself.

Contagious Disease and Character

In his essay "Fiction, Fair, and Foul" the art critic John Ruskin notes that "the Divinity of Decomposition, has established itself" in the literature of his time. Instead of dreaming of "pastoral felicity" in reaction to the monotonous life in the "smoking mass of decay" that is the city, the "thoroughly trained Londoner can enjoy no other excitement than that to which he has been accustomed, but asks for *that* in continually more ardent or more virulent concentration […] the horrors, of Death" (n. pag.). Followed by his lament is a list of all the nine deaths in *Bleak House*, which he takes as a primary example of entertaining readers in their desires for ever more filth, disease, and death. "In the single novel of *Bleak House*," Ruskin notes, "there are nine deaths […] carefully wrought out or led up to [...] with as much enjoyment as can be contrived in the anticipation, and as much pathology as can be concentrated in the description" (n. pag.). "And all this," he continues, "not in a tragic, adventurous, or military story, but merely as the further enlivenment of a narrative intended to be amusing; and as a properly representative average of the statistics of civilian mortality in the centre of London" (n. pag.). Thus according to Ruskin,

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[28] See Cunningham, "Dickens as a Reformer" for an overview of Dickens's reformist ideas and practices.

Dickens exercises the "pathologic labour of modern fiction," taking pleasure in the moral and physical decay of the city and its population.

Notwithstanding Ruskin's judgment, *Bleak House* indeed shows a particular concern for the morbid phenomena of city life. The novel's concern with filth and the spreading of disease largely takes place around the impoverished existence of the figure of Jo, who is practically inseparable from the masses through which he travels and the physical environment that he belongs to. As a cross-sweeper, Jo is metonymically connected to the mud he brushes off the streets, and is himself part of what the narrator characterizes as "that kindred mystery [...] which is made of nobody knows what, and collects about us nobody knows whence or how: we only knowing in general that when there is too much of it, we find it necessary to shovel it away" (163). So on a symbolic level, Jo is equated to the dirt and excrement he is himself clearing away in order to enable pedestrians to walk their way through the London streets. Jo's "home" are the streets of Tom-all-Alone's, of which the narrator gives a most heart-wrenching account:

> As, on the ruined human wretch, vermin parasites appear, so these ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence that crawls in and out of gaps in walls and boards; and coils itself to sleep, in maggot numbers, where the rain drips in; and comes and goes, fetching and carrying fever, and sowing more evil in its every footprint than Lord Coodle, and Sir Thomas Doodle, and the Duke of Foodle, and all the fine gentlemen in office, down to Zoodle, shall set right in five hundred years—though born expressly to do it. (266)

Depicting Tom-All-Alone's as a disease-ridden space, while blurring all distinctions between the bodies of the masses and their filthy environment in his description, the narrator echoes much of the anxieties about the habitation of the poor that circulated in Victorian society.[29] At the same time, the narrator is quick to link the poor's "foul existence" to those members of Parliament, whose task it was and is to improve their living condition. Indeed, as the narrator continues with piercing sarcasm: "This desirable property is in Chancery, of course. It would be an insult to the discernment of any man with half an eye, to tell him so" (266). By including Tom-All-Alone's within the space of Chancery, the narrator implies a causal relationship between the Court's

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[29] In *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* Stallybrass and White state that both in the reforming text and the novel the nineteenth-century city was "produced as the locus of fear, disgust and fascination," particularly for the bodies of the lower class Other, who populate many of Dickens's novels (125-26).

corrupting ways and dire state of the slum, exemplifying those homes and areas fallen into decay as "the property of Costs" in a Chancery Suit (118).

Much like the sediment that touches and contaminates everything and everyone in the city, Jo's brisk presence leaves traces everywhere of which the novel's world cannot be cleared (Steinlight 235). Indeed, constantly ordered to "move on" due to his potentially contaminating effect, Jo resurfaces everywhere through the novel's geography and meets everyone, sees everything, yet when inquired about what he has encountered, his answer throughout is that he knows "nothink." Jo first enters the novel when he is asked by Lady Dedlock to lead her to the church yard where an unknown man named "Nemo" is buried. As we will soon learn, Nemo, translated as "no-one," is Lady Dedlock's former lover, captain Hawdon, with whom she conceived a child that was taken away from her by birth. When reading some of the documents of the Jarndyce and Jarndyce suit, she recognizes the handwriting of Hawdon. She teases out the identity of the scribener from the suspicious lawyer Tulkinghorn, but finds out he has recently passed away. Jo leading lady Dedlock to the captain's grave, sets in motion a whole series of events that determine the course of the novel. Keen on revealing Lady Dedlock's secret, Mr. Tulkinghorn does everything in his power to piece together the fragments of her hidden story, involving many others in his quest.

Lacking any personal agency or autonomy, having no permanent address, no last name, no family, no legally acknowledged occupation or legitimate social function, and only the most aleatory associations, Jo is less a liberal subject than a "walking synecdoche" for the seemingly boundless crowd (Steinlight 236). Indeed, even the narrator has trouble to discern him, while he joins "the other lower animals" as they "get on in the unintelligible mess as they can" (268). Briskly circulating through the novel's urban space then, he can scarcely be located, even within his own dwellings in the slums of Tom-all-Alone's. For instance, when Mr Snagsby and inspector Bucket—the good-hearted law-stationer who feels pity for Jo, and the detective hired by Mr Tulkinghorn to investigate Lady Deadlock's past—ask after him in the slums, they realize that the Jo they are seeking could be anyone: "Carrots, or the Colonel, or Gallows, or Young Chisel, or Terrier Tip, or Lanky, or the Brick" (375). Hard to define or locate, as the impersonal narrator accurately notes, Jo is foremost a "Tough Subject" (375). His position ultimately raises questions about the status of "character" in Dickens's novels—that category so fundamental to the novel as a genre and the discourses of individuality and literary subjectivity alike. Critics have often noted that Dickens's characters lack a rich interior life. George Eliot, for example, considered him to be a "great novelist who is gifted with the utmost power of rendering the external traits of our town population," but nevertheless misses a sense of their "psychological character – their conceptions

of life, and their emotions" (Qtd. in Tambling 5). E.M. Forster has also pointed to the flatness of Dickens's characters, but he has noted there is also a "wonderful feeling of human depth" to them, and a "vitality" that "causes his characters to vibrate a little" (68-69). Although Dickens uses types and caricatures, Forster believes he achieves "effects that are not mechanical and a vision of humanity that is not shallow" (69). In his more recent book *The One vs. the Many,* Alex Woloch has focused on the narrative implications of asymmetry between "major" and "minor" characters, pointing to the powerful presence of minor characters in his work, and the influence they have on the narrative's protagonists (35). What these critics fail to mention, however, is that a novel such as *Bleak House* does much to disturb the distinction between the one and the many (Steinlight 237).

If we look at the masses in Dickens's novel, those who are virtually inseparable from their environment, and often remain nameless, while they are being merged with, or substituted for others, we see that they virtually fail to be characters at all. What is important to note here is that Jo, in contrast to the other characters, does not partake in the act of reading and writing, which according to Hillis Miller is so essential to the novel's characters (1064). The narrator marvels at this condition: "To see people read, and to see people write, and to see the postmen deliver letters, and not to have the least idea of all that language—to be, to every scrap of it, stone blind and dumb!" (267). Just like those masses crowding the streets of Tom-All-Alone's, Jo does not enter the symbolic order, and as such frustrates those that do seek to play the interpretative game the novel inspires on different levels, including that of the narrator, the characters, and, of course, the reader. Like the narrator, noting that "[h]is whole material and immaterial life is wonderfully strange" (267), we cannot but wonder about his mysterious presence. And yet, as the figure of Jo shows us, transforming everything he touches, the masses of which he is part are central to the workings of the novel. Although he definitely belongs to what Lauren Goodlad names the mass of "unfed, unwashed, untreated, unschooled and […] dangerous bodies" (100) there is something about him beyond the instantiation of a social truth. While offering the reader merely a surface, and resisting interiorization, the impact of the figure of Jo does indeed not stem from his social status or his individual intentions; it is his mere bodily presence that proves to be effective in the novel, especially as a bearer of disease, which I will discuss in a moment. The narrator's description of Jo – "Jo lives - that is to say, Jo has not yet died" – pertains to the larger mass of which he is part. Organized by a principle of impersonality, they materialize in the text in a purely physical way, as merely living or dying, and as such, transcend any distinctions between "flat" and "round," subject and object (Steinlight 237). It is through his physical presence as a bearer of contagious disease that Jo performs his transformative function in the novel, particularly through

its effect on the story's heroine, Esther Summerson. In this way, Jo substantiates the "general *infection* of ill-temper" that the narrator ascribes to the London masses in the opening lines of the novel, having inscribed the possibility of contagion already on page one.

Writing in the autobiographical mode, Esther's first-person narrative forms a crucial counterpoint to the impersonal perspective of the novel's omniscient narrator. Kept in the dark about her origins, she is raised by an aunt who continuously hints at some secret shame. Upon the death of this aunt, Esther is sent to school by the generous John Jarndyce, a descendant of the original suitor in the Jarndyce and Jarndyce case, and years later she is summoned to London to act as a companion to Ada Clare and her cousin Richard Carstone, both wards of the Court. Once settled in Bleak House, her new home, Esther soon proves herself to be a model of domestic femininity: managing the household, serving as a confidant to John Jarndyce, and performing as a surrogate mother for Ada and Richard. As Christine van Boheemen-Saaf points out, Esther is an example of "deportment […]—obsessively creating order out of disorder and stalling the disintegration of society at large […] by her unrelenting diligence and the protection of her household keys" (55). Indeed, referring to a child's rhyme about a little woman who "sweep[s] the cobwebs out of the sky," her guardian marvels at her domestic competence, saying: "You will sweep them so neatly out of *our* sky, in the course of your housekeeping, Esther, that one of these days, we shall have to abandon the Growlery, and nail up the door" (119).[30] Associating her with clarity and light (as already suggested by her name), she is clearly opposed to the fog and mud that surround the Court.

But despite her singular capacity to bridge "without collapsing public and private interests, subjective and objective perspectives, individual and aggregate realities," that Pam Morris credits her character with, Esther ultimately proves unable to keep those contaminating influences outside of her neatly ordered domestic world (131). When Jo enters the churchyard to show Nemo's pauper grave to Lady Dedlock, he contracts smallpox from Nemo's decomposing body, and while being continuously ordered to "move on" by Tulkinghorn's, he finally ends up in St. Albans near Bleak House, where he is found by Jenny, a brickmaker's wife familiar to Esther.[31] Paying a visit to Jenny, Esther and her maid Charley find Jo in a delirious fever and decide, against Skimpole's warnings, to take him in to nurse him. A disease that transmits from body to body, Charley quickly catches it, and not long after, Esther realizes that "the contagion of her illness was upon me" (523). Her infection transforms her both spiritually and physically, and it

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[30] The Growlery refers to John Jarndyce's study, where he retreats when he is "out of humour."

[31] There has been some discussion as to the exact nature of Jo's infectious disease. Having looked at the symptoms described in the novel and contemporary medical discourse, Gurney and Schwarzbach have "diagnosed" it as small-pox, a thesis now widely accepted among critics.

proves to be a ground upon which new connections reveal themselves. After her illness, during which she "seemed to have crossed a dark lake, and to have left all [her] experiences, mingled together by the great distance, on the healthy shore" (587) Esther finds out that her face has "very much changed" (606). Strikingly, her bodily disfigurement re-establishes the familial tie to her father, from whom she indirectly got the disease. The event of her illness furthermore leads to Lady Dedlock's visit where she reveals her true identity as Esther's mother. This in turn sets in motion a series of events, leading to Tulkinghorn's discovery of Esther's scandalous birth, and ultimately to her mother's death, whose body she finds at the gates of the graveyard where her lover is buried.

What I would like to emphasize here, in addition to the series of novel interconnections between characters and places that Esther's illness instantiates, is the significance of Jo's infection of Esther for grasping the real, material level of disease that Dickens brings into play. Despite Esther's dedication to the principles of hospitality, individual responsibility, and care, her actions do not cause much good: she eventually fails to save the boy but also infects Charley and herself with the disease (Steinlight 241). From this we might conclude that in this way the plot punishes Esther for her sympathy and care. But this, I believe, is to miss the point that the narrative conveys, namely, that contagious disease operates outside any moral code or a principle of personal intentionality. And as such, I would argue that this particular moment of contagion reveals something beyond the symbolic, morally charged use of disease in the following much-quoted passage:

> [Tom] has his revenge. Even the winds are his messengers, and they serve him in these hours of darkness. There is not a drop of Tom's corrupted blood but propagates infection and contagion somewhere. […] There is not an atom of Tom's slime, not a cubic inch of any pestilential gas in which he lives, not one obscenity or degradation about him, but shall work its retribution, through every order of society, up to the proudest of the proud, and to the highest of the high. (751-52)

Here, contagious disease figures as symbol of retribution of Tom—the personification of Tom-All-Alone's—inflicted on the corrupting influence of Court and Parliament to which its wretched state is unmistakably linked. Significantly, however, Tom's revenge does not take place in the novel. The actual event of contagion does not affect the "proudest of the proud" or "the highest of the highest," but the innocent Charley and Esther instead. Jo, as we have established, is a non-character, lacking any agency or personhood; and so he is, unlike Tom, not the personification or representative of Tom-all-Alone's—he is simply *of* it. His body merely serves as a *vehicle* of

disease, not a symbol, and likewise his infection of Esther and Charley must not be viewed as an intentional attack on them as representatives of this or that class. Instead, driven by a power that does not recognize these distinctions, the event of contagion exposes the material reality of disease as a vital continuity that can cut through *all* bodies, regardless of class, gender, or profession. Not a principle of intentionality, but a principle of contingency seems at work here, as Dickens stages a transpersonal field of power, intimating a vision of the population as a corporeal, material whole, interconnected by a shared biological fate.[32] Ultimately, this abundant and indifferent vitality renders permeable the boundaries of the home as it enters Bleak House, and equally proves categories of individuality to be unstable, as Esther's body proves open to contagion.[33]

A Remarkable Ending

In the very instance of intimating a social solidarity located in the publicity of the body through his staging of contamination, *Bleak House* also shows the failure of those socio-political institutions in their attempt to properly contain and govern this population. That includes both private and public institutions, from Mrs. Jellyby's "telescopic philantrophy" to the workhouses and hospitals that refuse to take on Jo. Furthermore, the aristocracy, associated with the exploitative practices of the Court and Parliament, cannot imagine a future without itself. Indeed, when Sir Leicester Dedlock hears that Mr. Rouncewell and his son have opposed the Dedlock interest in the elections: "then upon my honour, upon my life, upon my reputation and principles, the floodgates of society are burst open, and the water have—a—obliterated the landmarks of the framework of the cohesion by which things are held together" (688). This framework of the cohesion is of course the world of aristocratic privilege to which he belongs, and he repeats the oceanic metaphors that the narrator often uses to describe the urban crowd in order to sketch the consequences of a dissolution of the hierarchies that determine the social fabric. What the novel tells us instead, is that the floodgates had been open all the time.

It brings to mind a passage in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* when Foucault writes that "it is not that life has been totally integrated into techniques that govern and administer it; it constantly escapes them" (143). Indeed, *Bleak House* mediates a sociopolitical world whose

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[32] For a more general reading of interconnections in *Bleak House*, see Caroline Levine's excellent article "Narrative Networks: *Bleak House* and the Affordances of Form," in which she uses modern day network theory to show how the large novel allows Dickens to build multiple layers of interconnected networks, disrupting, as I also argue, notions of individuality and domesticity. Another article, "*Our Mutual Friend* and Network Form" by Anna Gibson, which was published only recently, takes on a similar perspective to *Our Mutual Friend*. She extends Levine's argument by considering the idea of the network in light of Victorian biological science (Charles Darwin, George Henry Lewes), something which I will also do in my reading of Eliot's *Middlemarch*.

[33] For an excellent discussion of theories of the permeability of the body in Victorian science and culture, see *Somatic Fictions* by Athena Vrettos.

material containment strategies largely fail, and the novel does not pose itself as its all-inclusive counterpart, but instead mimics this failure. It presents us with a metropolitan space where the potentially transgressive forces of the living mass remain intact and an organic equilibrium seems nowhere near. Even the supposed solution that Esther's marriage with physician Allen Woodcourt might offer at first sight, proves to be insufficient. In a remarkable twist, Dickens removes the newlywed pair from the city to the country, where John Jarndyce builds them a new Bleak House, a cottage in the country, as if to shield them off completely from the urban associations of Jarndyce's Bleak House. After the hard-hitting realism of the city's urban scenes, this pastoral vision of the kind that Ruskin would certainly appreciate, can hardly be taken seriously as a solution. Indeed, as Nancy Armstrong has rightly noted, there is a significant discrepancy between this rural Bleak House and *Bleak House* the novel, as the former reinstitutes the idea of a stable home which the novel itself has so vehemently sought to destabilize (183). Esther's writing and the novel end here. In the very last scene Woodcourt asks her if she sometimes looks at herself in the mirror and after she confirms he tells her that she is prettier than she has ever been. For the reader it is a reminder of Esther's scar that, despite the ideal domestic closure of her narrative, continues to affiliate her to the population of London.

Chapter 3: "A Study of Provincial Life": Population-thinking and Organicism in George Eliot's Middlemarch

> In natural science, I have understood, there is nothing petty to the mind that has a large vision of relations, as to which every single object suggests a vast sum of conditions. It is surely the same with the observation of human life.
>
> George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*

In chapter 17 of *Middlemarch* George Eliot stages an encounter between two characters that subtly captures some of the epistemological developments that took place around 1800. Tertius Lydgate, Middlemarch's new medical doctor, pays a visit to Revd Camden Farebrother's vicarage, where the latter proudly presents to him his fine collection of specimens of the flora and fauna of the area, safely kept in small study drawers. Much to the reverend's surprise, however, Lydgate does not seem to have much interest for his selection of insects, but instead gets hold of a glass jar bearing "a lovely anencephalous monster," an anomalous creature without a brain. When Farebrother asks him why he doesn't care much about these things, Lydgate responds quite bluntly: "I have never had time to give myself much to natural history. I was early bitten with an interest in structure, and it is what lies most directly in my profession" (143). In this seemingly insignificant passage Eliot presents two differing notions of science that would have appeared familiar to the Victorian reader. On the one hand, we have Farebrother, who adheres to the study of natural history, the kind of classificatory or taxonomical practice we associate with the Swedish botanist Linnaeus; and on the other, there is the young medical practitioner and scientist Lydgate, whose primary objects of knowledge are not the individual specimens of the churchman's entomological collection, but the hidden structures that exist beneath the surface of these living beings, which the natural historian sought to describe and classify with his bare eyes. This scene, then, offers a juxtaposition between an older and a more modern conception of natural science—one that, as we will see, goes on to inform much of the novel's narrative strategies.

A few chapters earlier, the reader has already been informed as to what Lydgate's emphasis on structure precisely entails when the narrator reveals the specifics of his scientific education. Instead of taking the usual route of obtaining a "highly rarified medical instruction" at Cambridge and Oxford, we learn that Lydgate studied in London, Edinburgh, and then, more significantly, in

Paris, where a new, more experimental form of physiological science was being practiced that stood in strong contrast with the "unscrupulous ignorance" that Lydgate finds in England's medical education (121). A central figure in this scientific revolution around the turn of the century is the French physiologist and anatomist Xavier Bichat, whose influence on the Parisian scientific environment is passed on to the young doctor during his stay. The narrator remarks about Bichat:

> That great Frenchman first carried out the conception that living bodies, fundamentally considered, are not associations of organs which can be understood by studying them first apart, and then as it were federally; but must be regarded as consisting of certain primary webs or tissues, out of which the various organs – brain, heart, lungs, and so on – are compacted, as the various accommodations of a house are built up in various proportions of wood, iron, stone, brick, zinc, and the rest, each material having its peculiar composition and proportions. (123)

So instead of keeping with the idea of the organism as an association of essentially static organs that can be studied separately, Bichat directed his attention to the "hidden facts of structure" (123), to the tissues that keep these seemingly separate parts together. "This conception wrought out by Bichat," the narrator continues, "with his detailed study of the different tissues, acted necessarily on medical questions as the turning of gas-light would act on a dim, oil-lit street" (123). In the analogy provided by Eliot here, these new physiological discoveries are not just compared to another scientific development, namely, that of the transition from oil to gas lighting—the imagery that is employed also intimates a vision of scientific progression as a change of light that opens up to new perspectives, showing "new connections and hitherto hidden facts of structure" (123). This new perspective is what drives Lydgate upon his return to England, where, even some thirty years after Bichat's death, "most medical practice was still strutting or shambling along the old paths" (123).

The significance of Bichat's work extends beyond the confines of medical science. As Maria Muhle points out in her study on Foucault's concept of biopolitics, Bichat's work initiated a new conception of life that emerged "in the passage between natural history and biology, that is, in the epistemic break which occurs around 1800" ("Genealogy of Biopolitics" 80). I will go into this in more detail momentarily, but what this epistemic break entails according to Foucault and Muhle is that the notion of "organization" now became fundamental to the study of the living: life came

to be defined as organic (the living, of which the tissues were the primary fact for Bichat), and as such could be set off against the inorganic, the opposition that ultimately marks the beginning of biology as a natural science concerned with life and living organisms (80). Indeed, this is what Foucault argued in *The Order of Things* and later re-emphasizes when writing about biopolitics in *Security, Territory, Population*: up to the end of the eighteenth century, he contends, "life does not exist: only living beings" (*OT* 175). He describes the occupation of the naturalist accordingly: "[he] is the man concerned with the structure of the visible world and its denomination according to characters. Not with life" (176). It is hard not to see the gentlemanly, old-fashioned natural history that Revd Farebrother practices, reflected in this description, the kind of scientific endeavor Lydgate so readily dismisses. Lydgate's own Bichat-inspired interest in the structures of the living, however, places him right on the other side of the epistemic transition that Foucault signaled, in which life itself became the object of scientific, medical, and by extension, political, philosophical, and literary concern.

The confidence with which George Eliot includes scientific discourse in her fiction bears witness to the high degree in which she was engaged in the scientific theorizing of her time and previous epistemological developments. Being one of the first novelists to include specialized scientific language into fiction, thereby habituating fiction readers to such language (Rectenwald n. pag.), it is hardly surprising that many contemporaries struggled to appreciate this particular aspect of her work. Henry James, for example, complained in a review that "the author wishes to say too many things, and to say them too well; to recommend herself to a scientific audience," wishing for a little bit more "simplicity" (n. pag.). And in a similar fashion, the critic G.H. Hutton from *The Spectator* wrote quite sneeringly about the "parade of scientific and especially physiological knowledge" he found in *Middlemarch* (34). As many critics have later noted, Eliot's thinking was indeed highly influenced by contemporary scientists such as Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, and her husband G.H. Lewes, and as a consequence, her worldview was certainly very scientific. For these scientists and Eliot alike, newly discovered principles of physiological life offered fresh grounds upon which to think society anew. As a matter of fact, departing from the kind of organicism that was initiated by Bichat and his contemporaries in the late 18th century, these Victorian thinkers employed, as we will see, theories of natural science to establish a social vision in which the population was to be viewed as an organic whole—the social organism, organized by both physiological and sociological principles of organic life. It is in this context of organic theory that critics such as Sally Shuttleworth have read Eliot's work, and *Middlemarch* in particular, as the explicitly scientific example in her oeuvre. What is crucial to Shuttleworth's argument is that rather than merely figuring at the surface of her novels, as a

theme, Eliot's engagement with scientific theory strongly informed her fictional practice, and her novelistic developments can be "correlated with her developing understanding of the social and scientific aspects of organic theory" (1). Thus, her use of scientific discourse in her fiction, in other words, pertains to Eliot's belief in a shared interest of both novelist and scientist: the "observation of human life" as the opening quote from *The Mill on the Floss* suggests.

The subtitle of *Middlemarch*, "A Study of Provincial Life," indeed points to such implicit correlation, as it strongly alludes to scientific study (Hillis Miller 66). In this chapter I will explore the ways in which this "study" is carried out by Eliot in the context of the emerging figure of the population that, as we have seen, became increasingly problematic during Victorian times. As a large novel, with an equally large number of characters, *Middlemarch* poses the question of how its town population should and can be organized in the novel, and as we will see, Eliot indeed draws from a great variety of contemporary scientific theories in her attempt to do so. Following Muhle and Foucault, I will view Victorian organic theory as an important epistemological manifestation of the problematic of life and population, and through looking at the way Eliot uses social and scientific theories of organic life to structure her novels, will we get an insight into the ways in which Eliot engages with this very problematic. The first part of this chapter will be dedicated to setting up the scientific context and its reflection in Eliot's novelistic practice. There is, however, a risk to such an endeavor. As Nancy L. Paxton has argued in her book on George Eliot and Herbert Spencer, much of contemporary criticism on the role of science in Eliot works in relation has been centered on her influences (3-4).[34] In these views, Eliot's novels primarily serve as a guide in thinking through the scientific controversies of her day. Such limited perspective, I believe, prevents us from seeing how much of a thinker Eliot is herself, and, more importantly, it moves away from the specificity of her medium, the novel. As such, the second part of this chapter will be dedicated to exploring the ways in which Eliot self-consciously turns these scientific concerns into literary concerns, ultimately shifting the parameters of her own realism.

Organic Theory and the Social Organism

Old provincial society had its share of this subtle movement: had not only its striking downfalls, its brilliant young professional dandies who ended by living up an entry with a drab and six children for their establishment, but also those less marked

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[34] See, for example, K.M. Newton, "George Eliot, George Henry Lewes, and Darwinism;" K.K. Collins, "G.H. Lewes Revisited: George Eliot and the Moral Sense;" and Michael York Mason, "Middlemarch and Science: Problems of Life and Mind." See also: Mark Wormald, "Microscopy and Semiotic in Middlemarch" and Robert A. Greenberg, "Plexuses and Ganglia: Scientific Allusions in Middlemarch." In her book, Paxton herself moves beyond these approaches, showing how Eliot challenges both Spencer and Darwin, particularly in their assumptions on sex and gender.

vicissitudes which are constantly shifting the boundaries of social intercourse, and begetting new consciousness of interdependence. Some slipped a little downward, some got higher footing: people denied aspirates, gained wealth, and fastidious gentlemen stood for boroughs; some were caught in political currents, some in ecclesiastical, and perhaps found themselves surprisingly grouped in consequence; while a few personages or families that stood with rock firmness amid all this fluctuation, were slowly presenting new aspects in spite of solidity, and altering with the double change of self and beholder. (78)

This passage perfectly captures the kind of totalizing vision of provincial Midlands society that is exemplary of *Middlemarch*. The novel's omniscient narrator takes on a panoramic viewpoint, reminiscent of the one we encountered in *Bleak House*, and sketches a very lively image of rural English society at the period just before the first Reform Bill of 1832. It presents a model of society as a complex entity where social, economic, and political processes make up a subtly moving whole in which each individual is irreversibly caught up, causing shifts in its relationships to every other element in the system. While also stressing its physicality here, primarily through metaphors of flowing water, Eliot's societal model is one of social interdependence and gradual change. Although at first sight it might not strike us as a very remarkably passage, it in fact forms a useful starting point for beginning to understand Eliot's view of society and the way it resonates with significant epistemological developments that were taking place during the 19th century. As I will momentarily show, ideas of social interdependence and gradual change were fairly new to Eliot and her contemporaries and were intimately related to ongoing scientific discussions about the concept of life that radically altered notions of the individual and society.

Until the end of the 18th century models of explanation in the natural and social sciences had been largely based on principles of mechanical laws of association. As Walter Buckley argues, "[m]an was regarded as a physical object, a kind of elaborate machine, whose actions and psychic processes could be analyzed in terms of the principles of mechanics" (8). From this mechanical perspective, he continues, "society was seen as an 'astronomical system' whose elements were human beings bound together by mutual attraction or differentiated by repulsion; groups of societies or states were systems of balanced opposition" (8). In essence, such associationist view encompassed, as Georges Canguilhem points out, a translation of Newtonian mechanics into the study of nature and society, which can be seen in the French naturalist and physiologist Comte

Buffon and philosopher David Hume.[35] Buffon, for example, viewed the organism as an association of parts that could be understood according to Newtonian mechanical laws of attraction. He believed that the organism was the sum of elementary living units (molecules, atoms); its unity only exists as an effect, an artificial product of the mechanical assemblage of its constituent parts. Hume applied the principle of the mechanical law of attraction to propose a form of psychological atomism that was symmetrical to Buffon's biological atomism, in which the association of simple ideas with one another produce the "appearance of a unity of mental life" (Canguilhem 37, 41).[36] The social vision that corresponded with such "associationism" saw, as Canguilhem points out, "the constitution of society subsequent to the separate existence of its participating individuals" (41). In other words, for these thinkers society as a whole was only explicable by the composition of its parts whose individual autonomy is preserved while they take on the form of an artificial social aggregate.

As Sally Shuttleworth points out, the physiological and social principles of organic life that were first formulated at the end of the 18th century challenged this understanding (3). We have seen that one of the primary figures of this movement, Bichat, is explicitly mentioned in *Middlemarch* as Lydgate's most important influence. For him, life was the collection of functions that resist death, and the principle of the living being he found to be the tissue, the primary fabric out of which the organism is cut, holding all the various organs together. This meant that the organism could no longer be known by studying its constitutive individual units; instead, it proposed looking at the organization itself, the relation between all the different elements. Essentially, Bichat's theory of organic life presupposes a different relationship between constituent parts as well as a different relation between part and whole. Whereas 18th-century associationist theories stressed the inherent autonomy of each individual element and the relative freedom of their association, organic theory instead emphasized their necessary interdependence: each individual part could not exist without the other. This also meant that the whole, rather than being an artificial sum of parts, took on a reality of its own, one that was definitely related to, but not identical to the reality of its individual parts, as Buffon had previously argued. Some went even further than that, proposing, like the German *Naturphilosoph* Lorenz Oken, that the lives of the units that compose an organism fuse with each other and "lose their individuality to the benefit of the life of the ensemble or the organism" (Marc Klein, qtd. in Canguilhem 41-42). In

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[35] Canguilhem writes that Newton "had demonstrated the unity of the forces that move heavenly bodies and those that act on bodies on the earth's surface. Through attraction, he explained the cohesion of elementary masses into more complex material systems. Without attraction, reality would be dust and not universe" (35-36).

[36] In *A Treatise of Human Nature* he states: "These are therefore the principles of union or cohesion among our simple ideas, and in the imagination supply the place of that inseparable connexion, by which they are united in our memory. Here is a kind of attraction, which in the mental world will be found to have as extraordinary effects as in the natural, and to shew itself in as many and as various forms" (…).

this sense, as Canguilhem notes, the organism is "a superior reality in which the elements as such are negated" (41). These early theories incited a great variety of responses and did in no way lead to any sort of general agreement concerning the problem of life. But despite all the interpretative differences among the French, British, and German scientists and philosophers who took on this problem, we can see the general emergence of the figure of the population as a living, physically conceived whole.

For European social and political theorists, these principles of organic life formed the foundation for the articulation of new models of social order.[37] A particularly influential figure in defining the social ramifications of new scientific theories was the French philosopher Auguste Comte, whose works were an important source of inspiration for George Eliot and her Victorian contemporaries, including G.H. Lewes and Herbert Spencer. In defining his physiological and social theories, Comte rejected Buffon's conception that the life of an organism is the sum of particular lives, as well as the 18th-century political philosopher's notion of society as an association of individuals (Canguilhem 44). Instead, he conceived of the organism in terms of a dynamic process "in which each part was defined by its membership in the whole" (Shuttleworth 8). Drawing on Bichat, he stressed the inseparability of organization and life, and furthermore defined life as a process of interaction between organism and medium, introducing as one of the first the external milieu as an inherent part of life processes. Eliot's husband G.H. Lewes adhered to Comte's definition of life, writing in 1853: "So far from organic bodies being independent of external circumstances […] they become more and more dependent on them as their organization becomes higher, so that *organism* and *medium* are the two correlative ideas of life" (qtd. in Postlethwaite 110). In "The Natural History of German Life," Eliot's sociological inquiry into German society, she echoes Lewes's words: "The external conditions which society has inherited from the past are but the manifestation of inherited internal conditions in the human beings who compose it; the internal conditions and the external are related to each other as the organism and its medium" (287). Here we find the sociological implications of the kind of organicism formulated by Comte. The individual human being, Comte proposed, could not be viewed apart from his membership in the social organism: between all individuals within a common "medium" there exists a vital connection or socio-biological continuum, making each an integral part of a larger whole. The human organism therefore always exists within another organism, the social medium or society (Levine 33). Hence, for Comte, individualist philosophy was based on an illusion that could be repudiated on the basis of organic theory, as it undermined the idea of the individual as a self-enclosed entity. The question of the individual was thus not

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[37] Shuttleworth considers this turn to organic theory in light of the general dismay about the outcomes of the French Revolution.

posed in terms of its autonomy but instead of its position within the larger organic whole and the extent to which the individual is determined by the social and physical world. Or, as his follower Lewes noted: "Nothing exists in itself and for itself, everything in others and for others: ex-ist-ens – a standing out relation" (Qtd. in Levine 33).

What we see then, is that in the late 18th century natural and social theories of association were challenged by new biological theories that situated life within organization. Whereas the scientific focal point had previously been the self-enclosed individual unit, each single element was now placed within a complex of relations, a set of interactions by which each single entity was necessarily transformed. As organic theories of life developed over the course of the 19th century, they did not only affect Victorian notions of individuality. While natural and social organization were no longer understood to be artificial, the population took on a vital reality of their own. Consequently, the life processes that governed the relations within this organization became a significant object of scientific inquiry during Victorian times. The most influential representative of this particular field of inquiry is of course Charles Darwin, whose works Eliot and her contemporaries intensely engaged with and commented on.[38] In his evolutionary theory Darwin proposed that what underlies the interdependence of multiple organisms, and, ultimately, of all biological life, is the process of "natural selection." Although I do not have sufficient space to discuss Darwin's theories in more detail, it is important to stress here that besides developing ideas of organic interdependence, Darwin also explicitly affirms the dynamism assumed by organic theories of life: through vital processes both individual organism and species develop in a medium or environment over time. Interdependence and movement cannot be considered apart from each other.

Going back to the passage from *Middlemarch* quoted at the beginning of this paragraph, we can see how these principles of interdependence and movement play out in the narrator's vision of Middlemarch society. The image presented here is not one of a society formed by the rational action of its inhabitants; instead, its focus is on certain general political, economical, and social processes or "currents" that seem to traverse each inhabitant's experience, regardless of social status, even affecting those who "stood with rock firmness amid all this fluctuation." This leads to an ongoing formation of new relations, as persons "found themselves surprisingly grouped in

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[38] After having started reading Darwin's *The Origin of Species* right after its publication in November 1859, Eliot wrote in her journal: "We began Darwin's work on The Origin of Species tonight. It seems not to be well written: though full of interesting matter, it is not impressive, from want of luminous and orderly presentation." In a letter two days later she wrote that it was "an elaborate exposition of the evidence in favour of the Development Theory, and so, makes an epoch" (*Letters* 214). Gillian Beer has noted that because of Eliot's familiarity with contemporary theories of development and evolution that paved the way for Darwin, most notably Lamarck's and Herbert Spencer's, she was initially unable to see the full extent of his evolutionary theory. It would, however, not take long before the fully assimilated the implications of Darwin's evolutionary ideas. See Beer: 146-148.

consequence" of these movements. This new discourse of process and relation in *Middlemarch*, I believe, finds its origin in those biological theories that I have described above. Indeed, as Sally Shuttleworth points out, Eliot and her contemporaries found their "articles of faith in the belief that growth and interdependence of society—the social organism—are governed by the operation of the same immutable laws that govern physiological life" (5). Life, now understood in terms of organization and dynamic process, naturally reveals a different social order, suggesting alternative views on what comprises a society. This, as I will momentarily discuss, ultimately affects George Eliot in her attempt to undertake a "Study of Provincial Life." For in stressing relation and process rather than autonomy and stability, these theories inherently propose a different way of seeing, of making society intelligible, and these methodological interests are raised to a point of both scientific *and* literary concern in *Middlemarch*. To see how this plays out in the novel, I suggest we take a closer look at *Middlemarch*'s narrator. Who is this narrator-scientist and how does s/he go about his or her literary-scientific study of the Middlemarch population?

Narrating the Social Medium

Large parts of *Middlemarch* consist of the discourse of the narrator, who, as Hillis Miller rightly points out, speaks "telepathically for the characters in indirect discourse" and then interprets that in superior fashion (*Reading for Our Time* 52). The rest of the novel mostly stages conversations between one or more characters, often accompanied by the narrator's comments. Whereas the narrator has full access to the minds and feelings of the characters—Hillis Miller aptly calls it "telepathic clairvoyance" (52)—the characters themselves, however, are often at a loss to understand what the other is thinking or feeling. Indeed, after having offered a long meditation Lydgate's feelings about his future wife Rosamond Vincy, the narrator notes, before giving an account of Rosamond's thoughts: "Poor Lydgate! Or shall I say, Poor Rosamond! Each lived in a world of which the other knew nothing" (138). Similarly, following a conversation between Fred Vincy, a rather purposeless young man, and his uncle Peter Featherstone, the latter confronting the former with his debts, the narrator remarks: "Fred fancied that he saw to the bottom of his uncle Featherstone's soul, though in reality half what he saw there was no more than the reflex of his own inclinations" (99). Perhaps the most tragic example of misunderstanding arrives in the form of Dorothea Brooke's marriage to Casaubon, the old reverend. Although she is a compassionate, intelligent, and loving woman, this does not prevent her from taking Casaubon for someone other than who he is, which ultimately leads her to "cry for help to bear this nightmare of a life in which every energy was arrested by dread" (309). Penetrating the minds of

the characters then, and shifting perspectives, allows the narrator to stress the characters' limitations in knowing what drives them. They clearly lack the kind of piercing insight that the narrator has and whose validity at first sight does not seem to be contested in the novel.

This totalizing view gives an impression of the narrator as a perfect observer and this sovereign perspective extends to the way s/he organizes Middlemarch society as a whole, presenting each character as part of a system of complex interactions in a particular time and space. This is where some of the scientific developments that I have described above, resonate. For Eliot, confirming to the social and biological principles of life, no one exists independently from others. Each lives in "the same embroiled medium, the same troublous fitfully-illuminated life" (240). To capture the nature of this medium and the way characters exist interdependently within it, the narrator, as Hillis Miller and others have noted, employs a few recurring metaphors. Underlining the very materiality of the "embroiled medium," the most striking metaphor is that of the web, which can be applied to the whole range of social relations, picturing society as a tightly woven fabric.[39] It often emerges casually to reinforce certain analyses that the narrator offers of the characters (Hillis Miller 57). For example, when Lydgate starts to feel the burden of his growing involvement with Middlemarch politics, he finds himself "feeling the hampering threadlike pressure of small social conditions, and their frustrating complexity" (150). The use of the metaphor is made more explicit by the narrator, when s/he compares his or her own narrative approach to that of Henry Fielding:

> We belated historians must not linger after his example, and if we did so,
> it is probable that our chat would be thin and eager, as if delivered from
> a camp-stool in a parrot-house. I at least have so much to do in
> unravelling certain human lots, and seeing how they were woven and
> interwoven, that all the light I can command must be concentrated on
> this particular web, and not dispersed over that tempting range of
> relevancies called the universe. (117)

It should be noted that the kind of novelistic approach offered here, resonates strongly with that of the scientific method employed by Tertius Lydgate, whose physiological research, as we have seen, is based on the assumption that the organs of the body are differentiations of "certain primary webs or tissues" (123). To be able to study Middlemarch society, one cannot, like

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[39] As Gillian Beer has pointed out, the predominant association of the word "web" was not the spider's web—as it is for us now—instead, woven fabric seems to have been the most prevalent reference. Furthermore, imagery of the web was to be found everywhere in Victorian writing, among philosophers, scientists, poets, and novelists alike (156).

Fielding, allow oneself the luxury of making "copious remarks and digressions" (117); instead, starting off from the idea of a woven fabric, the narrator or scientist has to actively dissect "this particular web" to see how it is woven and interwoven. Here, the web functions as a metaphor suitable to describe both social and organic life, indicating a parallel between Eliot's sociological study of provincial life and the biological investigations carried out by her contemporaries and in which she was diligently engaged. The socio-biological metaphor of the web is also used to describe the texture of smaller units within the social fabric. The narrator, for example, portrays Lydgate and Rosamond's courtship as the spinning of a mutual web:

> Young love-making—the gossamer web! Even the points it clings to—the things whence its subtle interlacings are swung—are scarcely perceptible; momentary touches of fingertips, meetings of rays from blue and dark orbs, unfinished phrases, lightest changes of cheek and lip, faintest tremors. The web itself is made of spontaneous beliefs and indefinable joys, yearnings of one life towards another, visions of completeness, indefinite trust. And Lydgate fell to spinning that web from his inward self with wonderful rapidity. As for Rosamond, […] she too was spinning industriously at the mutual web. (284-85)

So besides operating on the level of the whole, the metaphor of the web also serves to elucidate certain intersubjective fibers. Even psychological life is imagined as an interwoven pattern of threads when the narrator says of Lydgate that "momentary speculations as to all the possible grounds for Mrs Bulstrode's hints had managed to get woven like slight clinging hairs into the more substantial web of his thoughts" (249).

In addition to the image of the web, the narrator employs another material figure to emphasize that this complex social fabric is in no way static. As we have already seen, the image of the stream or current functions to convey its subtle movement in time. Like the image of the web, it is not only applied to depict interrelations on a collective level, but also works on the subjective, mental scale, for example, when Casaubon is said to have "that proud narrow sensitiveness which has not mass enough to spare for transformation into sympathy, and quivers thread-like in small currents of self-preoccupation or at best of an egoistic scrupulosity" (231). It is also used to describe something which "flows" into a character's life beyond the character's consciousness. When Lydgate first meets Rosamond, he "has no sense that any new current had set into his life" (136). What the narrator does in such instance, is emphasize the futurity of a

seemingly isolated event: they do not merely have a place within the structure of the social fabric in a given time and space, but also necessarily stand in a relation to a future in which the individual might be irreversibly transformed by the currents he or she was initially unaware of. Indeed, as the narrator notes in the novel's Finale, the web is not a even or stable structure: "For the fragment of a life, however typical, is not the sample of an even web: promises may not be kept, and an ardent outset may be followed by declension; latent powers may find their long-awaited opportunity; a past error may urge a grand retrieval" (683).

By using these metaphors the narrator is able to intimate these temporal and spatial connections within the social medium and consistently affirms its complexity. Indeed, as Hillis Miller points out, in *Middlemarch* "any 'unit' or single fact, in social or in mental life, is not single but multiple" (60). Beneath the surface of the visible social and natural world there always exists a plurality of interconnected threads which our unaided senses cannot perceive: "each fact is a kind of multitudinous node that exists only apparently as a single thing because we happen to have the microscope focused as we do" (60). The image is that of a variable lens whose shifting focus conveys a different set of relationships each time it either zooms in or out. In a passage where the narrator seeks to get a grasp of the matchmaking endeavors of Middlemarch's town gossip, Mrs. Cadwallader, the image of the microscope is used to reveal the plurality of worlds and existences beyond the sensible:

> Even with a microscope directed on a water-drop we find ourselves making interpretations which turn out to be rather coarse; for whereas under a weak lens you may seem to see a creature exhibiting an active voracity into which other smaller creatures actively play as if they were so many animated tax-pennies, a stronger lens reveals to you certain tiniest hairlets which make vortices for these victims while the swallower waits passively at his receipt of custom. (48)

"Active voracity", "smaller creatures" that "actively play" as if they were "animated tax-pennies": the narrator signals a complex interplay of vital processes that may together account for what it is that drives Mrs. Cadwallader. "In this way," the narrator continues, "metaphorically speaking, a strong lens applied to Mrs Cadwallader's match-making will show a play of minute causes producing what may be called thought and speech vortices to bring her the sort of food she needed" (48).

It must be clear by now that for Eliot the collection of characters that make up the Middlemarch population cannot be studied as if they were rational, self-contained individuals, an

idea that was common in Eliot's intellectual circles. They can only be viewed as nodes in a complex social network, driven by often invisible forces. In the novel, the metaphor of the web becomes a model for intimating these interconnections in society and in addition, those of the *milieu interieur*. But as we have seen, these interrelations are not evident: they are figured as organic, socio-biological processes that often lie beyond the consciousness of the characters, and it is the narrator-scientist who attempts to make them visible, to put their complex reality into language for the reader through these metaphors.[40] The narrator then seems to take on the form of an ideal observer who is able to perceive the intricate social organism from all perspectives at once, close-up and far away, to see both large-scale and small-scale networks. S/he uses the kind of method Lydgate adequately describes late in the novel, when it becomes tragically clear that, despite his keen scientific eye for relations, he has not been able to foresee the social entanglements he himself has been become part of: "a man's mind must be continually expanding and shrinking between the whole human horizon and the horizon of an object-glass" (526). This idea of the narrator trying to bring into language the multiplicity of forces, effects, and currents that escape the consciousness of the characters, adding to the complexity of the social medium, is crucial to understand what kind of narrator Eliot stages in *Middlemarch*. For these are, I believe, experiments that, as I will show in the following paragraph, convey a changing conception of what reality is and what the novelist's and scientist's position is in relation to that reality.

Scientific and Novelistic Imagination

Let us return for a moment to the disagreement between Lydgate and Rev Farebrother with which I opened this chapter. Farebrother, the typical natural historian, depended on his observational skills to label and classify the individual components of a static reality. The underlying assumption is that reality presents itself to us and therefore can be objectively recorded as such. New theories of organic life, adhered to by Lydgate, radically challenged this conception of reality. Following Bichat, Lydgate believes that there exist "hidden facts of structure" beyond the visible world. Instruments such as the microscope may help us to perceive these hidden structures, but, when the narrator reflects on Lydgate's methodology, the emphasis lies more on the role of the scientist's imagination:

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[40] In his excellent article on *Middlemarch*, Michael Tondre offers a take on these invisible forces from a physics perspective, discussing the way in which Eliot employs energy theory to intimate how certain feelings exist beyond their originator as wasted energy, nevertheless leaving their mark on the social medium.

the imagination that reveals subtle actions inaccessible by any sort of lens, but tracked in that outer darkness through long pathways of necessary sequence by the inward light which is the last refinement of Energy, capable of bathing even the ethereal atoms in its ideally illuminated space. (137)

In this complex of ideas the narrator hails the imagination as a source of illumination, an ideally lid space in which even the most tiny particles—the "ethereal atoms"—can become visible. Having "tossed away all cheap inventions where ignorance finds itself at ease," the narrator continues, "he was enamoured of that arduous invention which is the very eye of research, provisionally framing its object and correcting it to more and more exactness of relation," so that "though lapses from examination of a specific object into a suffusive sense of its connections with all the rest of our existence" (137). We can recognize in this description the kind of relational thinking that is typical of organic theory. On a more fundamental level, however, this passage reveals a certain scientific methodology that ascribes an active role to the imagination. To be able to place each single observation into the larger whole, the scientist needed to use his or her imagination to create the "ideally illuminated space" in which they will appear meaningful. Indeed, as Gillian Beer notes, this new significance of the imagination in Victorian science proved to be a powerful "antidote" to the kind of science that "refused to acknowledge possibilities beyond the present and apparent world"(142). It signifies a development in the theory of science and scientific method that no longer sees the scientist as merely recording a pre-given reality, as in natural history, but acknowledges the scientist's active role in constructing a schema in which his observations are viewed, leading up to a growing emphasis on experiment, hypothesis-making, and imaginative construction in Victorian scientific practice (Shuttleworth 1).

This idea, which ultimately draws as strong analogy between scientific and literary practice, strongly resonates in Eliot's own novelistic practice: like Lydgate, she seeks to "demonstrate the more intimate relations of living structure" (123). Whereas in earlier novels such as *Adam Bede* she had taken on the more traditional realist mode of empirical description—one that brings to mind the kind of practice embodied by the natural historian—new biological theories that stressed process and interdependence necessarily challenged this particular understanding of her literary realism. In *Adam Bede* Eliot states that it is the artist's task "to give no more than a faithful account of men and things as they have mirrored themselves in my mind" (175). In *Middlemarch* we see that the image of the mirror does no longer suffice to account for the complex social medium it tries to bring to life for the reader. It connotes a certain passive attitude that seems to be absent in *Middlemarch*'s narrator. "In watching effects," as the narrator remarks, "if only of an

electric battery, it is often necessary to change our place and examine a particular mixture or group at some distance from the point where the movement we are interested in was set up" (63). This is precisely what the narrator brings into practice: by moving in imagination from one point of perspective to another, s/he aims to shed light on those vital processes governing the social relations, registering the dynamic effects they have on an inter-subjective and larger societal level. While doing this, Eliot stresses the necessary limits of her own perspective and by extension, that of the novel's omniscient totality. As we have seen, instead of taking the universe as her object of knowledge, like Henry Fielding, the narrator chooses for "this particular web," thus self-consciously demarcating the scope of her imaginative endeavor. This does not take away the suggestion that beyond this particular web, more invisible networks exist. But directing her focus on this "embroiled medium" within this specific time and space, Eliot seems to say, is all that is within the biologist and novelist's reach. This is captured in a striking passage:

> Your pier-glass or extensive surface of polished steel made to be rubbed by a housemaid, will be minutely and multitudinously scratched in all directions; but place now against it a lighted candle as a centre of illumination, and lo! The scratches will seem to arrange themselves in a fine series of concentric circles round that little sun. it is demonstrable that the scratches are going everywhere impartially, and it is only your candle which produces the flattering illusion of a concentric arrangement, its light falling with an exclusive optical selection. (218-19)

An apparently chaotic reality, like the "embroiled medium" or the pier-glass, becomes "fitfully-illuminated" by the assumed perspective of the narrator. Henry James also recognized the problems for the artist: "Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily appear to do so" (Qtd. in Beer 145). At best, the novelist can attain a readable focus, containing what according to the imagery of the infinitely moving web in *Middlemarch* cannot be contained.

Conclusion
A "Biological Turn in Literary Studies"?

In his book *The One vs. The Many*, Alex Woloch makes an interesting attempt at theorizing character models in 19th-century fiction. He adequately notes that the 19th-century novel contains a greater quantity of characters than most previous literature—"a huge variety of individuals who get crowded together into a single story" (19). Indeed, he continues: "The omniscient totality of the nineteenth-century novel compels us to 'connect' these individuals—to comprehend forms of social relation which can encompass the diverse populations that people these novels" (19). This principle of connection, as we have also seen, certainly functions as one of the primary forces behind the narratives that I have discussed here. Both *Bleak House* and *Middlemarch* offer a view of society as a system of intricate networks, as the narrator takes us by the hand to show how both protagonists and minor characters are positioned in it. Instead of an overdose of detailed descriptions, Woloch argues that it is precisely this overload of characters that structurally destabilizes the realist novel. Such excesses are most visible in Dickens's urban novels, their various eccentric types and figures, the packed orphanages, the half-lid streets full of city dwellers from all ranks and classes that slightly light up in front of the narrator's eye, only to become unrecognizable again seconds later. For Woloch, "[i]t is the claim of individuals who are incompletely pulled into the narrative that lies behind the larger empirical precision of realist aesthetics" (19). The word "claim" is important here, since what generates the 19th-century novelistic project—with the development of 18th-century empiricism and 19th-century social realism—is the "the logic of social inclusiveness," the awareness that through its very form the novel has the "potential to *shift* the narrative focus away from an established center, toward minor characters" (19). As such, Woloch places the 19th-century developments in the novel, its all-encompassing scope in particular, within the context of a democratic tendency that fuelled its political horizon. The novel, in other words, rather majestically brings to the attention of the reader the claims of those yet to-be-enfranchised citizen-subjects, and so resembles, in a way, the structure of liberal democratic society.

Although Woloch's observations about the 19th-century realist novel's structural struggle with large amounts of characters seem particularly apt, the reading he offers of the changing notion of collectivity in the 19th century that supposedly generated the novel's formal concerns, is too narrowly political in my view. It ignores the notions of collectivity offered by a swath of disciplines—biology, sociology, psychology, philosophy, and political economy—that from 1800 onwards struggled with the problem of man as a population or species. This figure of the mass-body that emerges in the 19th century—with the increase of the urban populations, the

expansion of empire into the colonies, and the migration of whole demographic groups across regional and national boundaries—could not be understood as a single unified people, nor could it be (in contrast to Enlightenment individualist theory) subdivided into self-enclosed individuals. On the contrary, Foucault writes, it was a "new body, a multiple body, a body with so many heads that, while they might not be infinite in number, cannot necessarily be counted" (*SMBD* 239). It is what Charles Darwin meant by "the principle of variation," and it is certainly what Thomas Malthus had in mind with "the principle of population" with which he warned for the risks of unlimited sexual reproduction (an idea later famously rehearsed by Scrooge in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol:* "they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population" (14)). Indeed, it is a large, heterogeneous, mutable biological body, whose "unpredictable swings in size and shifts in character," Nancy Armstrong writes, "required […] new modes of description" and "new technologies directed at curbing its unpredictable surges and contradictions" (*Gender Must Be Defended* 534). In this thesis, I have categorized these new modes of description and technologies of control together within a biopolitical field of problematization, in which also literature operates, culturally negotiating the problem of the living population. Significantly, the figure of the population, understood in the Foucauldian sense, offers a view on collective reality that is different from the explicitly political view offered by Woloch. Whereas Woloch is right to notice the 19th-century realist novel's drive towards creating ever more expanding character systems, viewing these formal concerns solely within the context of political community and enfranchisement, prevents us from seeing how other models of collectivity might have influenced these structural interests of the Victorian novel.

What I have tried to show here, is that if we start off from the problem of the population as a figure of biological collectivity, we become aware of new ways in which the novel compels us to connect the characters and their environments. In *Bleak House* we have seen that, alongside a various number of co-existing and overlapping social, economic, and political networks, there exists a system of biological or physiological affiliation that connects characters within the space of the novel. This arrives in the form of contagious disease, which draws an intergenerational line between Esther Summerson and her unknown father, while at the same time linking her to the poor urban masses through the figure of Jo, or even more directly, to the filth of the London streets. In this way, contagion becomes part of a highly significant point of connection in the text where social dynamics and biological exposure co-determine each other. Whereas *Middlemarch* is not as literal as *Bleak House* in establishing the biological continuum in which all characters necessarily exist, (i.e. through infectious disease), the idea of vital but latent powers connecting and disconnecting certain characters within the social medium, is crucial for understanding the

novel's organization and the work of its narrator. Through continuous scientific references, the omniscient scientist-narrator carefully unravels the intricate web s/he imagines Middlemarch society to be, showing that relations between characters are as much defined by conscious social processes as unconscious organic processes. As an experimental scientist, s/he constantly shifts perspective to test what the effects of these processes are for different characters who emerge as variables of a societal whole that slowly evolves in time. Relations, as we have seen, are the key forces that drive these large character systems, and by considering them in light of certain theories and practices of population, I have tried to show how these relations were being more and more considered in biological terms. In this way, these large-scale novels make imaginable to their readers a different model for thinking about society, stressing the reality of latent, impersonal forces beyond the conscious self as they model population dynamics in their narrative space.

Having analyzed only two Victorian novels, I must admit that the scope of this study is relatively small in relation to the theoretical claims it puts forward. Although so far I have only been speaking of the Victorian novel alone, this particular field of inquiry can of course not be limited to the Victorian novel. Besides those large Victorian novels, it would be worth-while to take a closer look at the panoramic novels and physiologies of Honoré de Balzac, or study the intricate ways in which naturalist authors such as Émile Zola stage a dynamic interplay of biological, sociological, and environmental effects to account for their characters' being. Indeed, to be able to support the idea that the expanding character structures of large-scale Victorian novels can rightly be considered in the context of the emergence of the figure of the population, we need to analyze other novels that were published in the 19th century. Providentially, while I was writing this thesis, several critics have taken up this problem of the population and novel form. In early 2015, a conference was held at Duke University, titled "The Biological Turn in Literary Studies," which included a few talks that directly involved with the relation between novel form and biopolitics, mostly notably one by Robert Mitchell. In his talk, "Biopolitics, Population, and the Nineteenth-Century Novel," which is basically a rough outline, he suggests, like I have, that the expanding characters systems in the novel can be viewed within the context of the figure of the biological population. He makes the interesting point that free indirect discourse, rather than giving the narrator insight into the thoughts and feelings of characters, enabled the 19th-century novelist to look at a range of different kinds of forces that actually preexist and determine these thoughts, feelings and actions. In this sense, Mitchell argues, free indirect speech functions as a surface for registering the impact of certain invisible forces and drives. He gives the example of Zola's *La Bête Humaine* (1890), where free indirect discourse

captures the comportments of character that emerge from a biological dimension of human existence, measuring the effect of biological drives and instincts on social relations.

Not long ago, Anna Gibson, in similar fashion, but without any specific reference to Foucault, published an excellent article titled "*Our Mutual Friend* and Network Form," in which she discusses the way in which Dickens's production of the social life of a city and the aesthetic form of the novel is analogous to the mechanisms with which Victorian science imagined biological life. Attending to Dickens's use of the network form, and reading it against Victorian scientific uses of the concept of the network as a means to "imagine the multiple kinds of agency at work in a biological system" (69). *Our Mutual Friend*, Gibson argues, "experiments with a social life transformed by the networks of physiological theory; it modifies the scientific net-work in the creative form of fiction" (69). As in *Bleak House*, the social and the biological stand in dynamic relation to each other. The people that Dickens stages are not characterized by any form of psychological completion; instead, in his character psychologies interiority is replaced by interaction and individuated desire with physiological affect. What is interesting about Gibson's approach, is that she also takes into account the serial form in which Dickens's novels were published. This enabled him to incorporate diversity, shifts, and new combinations of different characters, transforming the novel form into an ongoing formation. Both Mitchell's and Gibson's analyses are highly suggestive takes on the way processes of life manifest themselves in the novel form, adding to the complexity of social life. In line with my own research, they point to the ways in which the novel creatively employs new ideas about the population and incorporates them into the novel through formal experimentation. Moreover, in affirming the intricate processes of population life, the novel, contrary to what some critics believe, does indeed attempt to think beyond the particular kind of self-enclosed individual that the earliest novels sought to naturalize.

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