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# Charity & Condescension



Victorian Literature and the Dilemmas of Philanthropy

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# Introduction

## *Charity and Condescension*

She stands before us: scattering tracts, ordering the children about, peering into cupboards, tripping over the furniture, crowing lines of scripture, blocking the exit. She marshals the forces of sound doctrine, domestic economy, and hygienic science against whatever comforts the poor might have been able to salvage amid their penury and squalor. She condescends.

It is this last offense we blame her for most. The lady visitor, along with her close associate the mincing curate, is a familiar figure of horror—a stock character in the Victorian charity gothic—and we are appalled by her unbearable condescension. This is not to say that there is any consensus on Victorian charity.

Generations of critics have debated whether Victorian philanthropy achieved its stated aims, whether those aims masked other political or social agendas, and whether the donors and recipients of charity were working in concert or at cross-purposes. Scholars ask how charity fit into the bigger picture, by which they alternately refer to the management of a new class of industrial urban poor, the creation of a liberal public sector, the emergence of the welfare state, the professionalization of social work, the public ambitions of middle-class women, or the distinctive cultural practices and survival strategies of working-class communities. Still, alongside the broader social questions, the image of the lady visitor retains its vividness and evokes a divided response. To some critics she represents everything that was wrong with Victorian charity; to others she is a phantom, a decoy, constructed to deny the reality of a different kind of figure: a charity worker who was genuinely responsive to the needs of her neighbors.<sup>1</sup> Our disagreements over the big picture sometimes cover a more visceral feeling about Victorian charity, a feeling that has much to do with this particular portrait of the condescending lady visitor. Some take it as axiomatic that Victorian philanthropists, despite their equivocal virtues, were fundamentally condescending.<sup>2</sup> Others would have it that Victorian philanthropists, despite their inevitable faults, were driven by a sense of the dignity of the less fortunate and that when we assume otherwise, it is we who condescend.<sup>3</sup>

Given the economic and political complexities of Victorian charity, it may seem pointless to ask whether or not philanthropists were condescending. Such a question seems to confuse cause and effect, examining personalities rather than the deeper structural realities that stand behind them. But I am going to argue that it is a good question. More than we realize, it is a question the Victorians asked themselves. The charge of condescension has been freely leveled against Victorian missionaries, essayists, mistresses, husbands, clergymen, and social workers; nevertheless, we inherit our distaste for condescension from them, a distaste that appears especially acute when we notice that, just decades before, condescension had been considered a great social virtue. Condescension became a problem in the Victorian period, not because the Victorians were more or less condescending than those who came before but because the meaning of condescension was changing.

The meaning of condescension itself is what changed, not the meaning of the word, which signifies today what it always has: lowering oneself to the level of one's inferiors. Yet the aroma around condescension is utterly different from what it once was. Condescension is for us a sign of arrogance, of pettiness, of a narcissistic insensibility to the real feelings of others—so that when Joseph

Addison praises Ulysses for the “condescension which never dwells but in truly great minds,” or when Fanny Burney’s Lord Orville pays tribute to the sweet condescension of his beloved, we feel we are in the presence of something archaic.<sup>4</sup> Whenever we come across the word in works by Samuel Richardson, Fanny Burney, or Maria Edgeworth, we have to make a quick adjustment; we remind ourselves that we are looking at a world where condescending gestures and tones of voice solved problems rather than causing them.

No history of condescension has been written, but we can imagine the outlines of such a history. Condescension originally denoted an act whereby an authority figure temporarily abdicated the privileges of his or her position for the benefit of a dependent. In this way, condescension was traditionally used as an argument for paternalism, a model of government in which the legitimacy of empowered groups rested on the ability and disposition of those groups to provide for the less fortunate. When over the course of the nineteenth century paternalist views were eroded and marginalized by the growth of liberalism, condescension came to seem dissonant. It cut against the core liberal principle of contractual relation, which supposes a nominal equality between free social agents. In a society built on the contractual model, even relations of authority are ostensibly entered into voluntarily by two parties for their mutual benefit.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, it is important to the idea of the contract not only that both parties benefit but also that each party benefit through the active pursuit of his or her own interests. This is why condescension cannot operate constructively within a liberal framework—because, even though the condescension scene confers a benefit upon the subordinate, the subordinate has not acquired that benefit through his or her own agency or insistence.

The liberal emphasis on self-determination was felt in a number of traditionally paternalistic contexts where condescension would once have served: in labor (with the emergence of the Labour Movement), marriage (with the Married Women’s Property Acts and the doctrine of separate spheres), electoral politics (with the expansions of the franchise), and education (with the cheap press, the Working Men’s Institutes, and the growth of popular education), among others. An extreme example of the displacement of paternalism by liberal self-determination was the Workhouse Test, a scheme that, by requiring the poor to decide for themselves whether they were desperate enough to reach out for relief on the most uncongenial terms, reconfigured the very scene of public provision as a solitary affair in which the sufferer must have it out with his or her own conscience.

Condescension loses its power to reconcile within a liberal framework. It requires a setting in which authority is not the outcome of a negotiation but the intractable expression of intrinsic differences between people. When one condescends in an environment governed by contracts, it must seem as though one attempts to naturalize a social difference that ought to have been treated as provisional and voluntary. Condescension therefore became, in the nineteenth century, a sign of an outmoded ideology; it represented the grasping determination of a ruling elite to maintain status distinctions and to stifle reform. This loss of faith in condescending behavior was accompanied by a major shift in the normal connotations of the word. To condescend was no longer to renounce but to make a show of renunciation; it was no longer to help others but to demean them for one's own gain. Victorian writers paraded condescension's failures. From literary works to the treatises and memoirs of philanthropic innovators, the condescension scene became an emblem of the limitations of charity, a ritual in which fantasies of help degenerated into visions of social collapse.

The assault against the social utility of condescension was partly accomplished through a transformation in the literary uses of the condescension scene. While the literature of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—crystallized in writers such as Sir Walter Scott, Jane Austen, and Maria Edgeworth—displays the ability of condescension to negotiate and validate social authority, the great Victorian novelists saw condescension as an obstacle to conciliation. Victorian scenes of condescension are frequently catastrophic, creating new narrative problems and calling for new solutions. Victorian fiction is full of condescension scenes; among the most famous are Edward Rochester's marriage proposal to Jane Eyre, Mrs. Jellyby's efforts for the natives of Borrioboola-gha (*Bleak House*), Miss Havisham's invitations to Pip (*Great Expectations*), and Edward Casaubon's patronage of Will Ladislaw (*Middlemarch*). All of these episodes backfire. Rochester's marrying days are behind him; Mrs. Jellyby's domestic problems disqualify her from any charity more distant; Miss Havisham's uses for Pip are narcissistic and fleeting; and Casaubon's payments to Will are a self-imposed blackmail, motivated by the haunting consciousness of a family wrong. The best-intentioned acts of condescension are thwarted: in *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dr. Manette, though a hero of the Bastille, can do nothing for his son-in-law; in *Middlemarch*, when Mr. Brooke tries to comfort the farmer Dagley, he is reviled; and in *Framley Parsonage*, Fanny and Lucy Robarts are rejected and humiliated while on a charitable mission to the Crawley family. The blame in these cases is shared between

the high and the low, the powerful and the disaffected. While the causes are multiple, the problem is the same: condescension is consistently invoked as a plausible means of reconciling people, and it is consistently rejected as a poor solution. Victorian fiction stages countless scenes where acts of goodwill fail, due sometimes to the insensibility of those who have and sometimes to the viciousness of those who want.

In the nineteenth century, the most severe attacks against philanthropic condescension often came from philanthropists themselves, many of whom write about visitors not unlike Dickens's Mrs. Pardiggle.<sup>6</sup> The literature of philanthropy is fully alive to the dangers of condescension and cautions visitors against doing anything that could seem intrusive or presumptuous.<sup>7</sup> This worry almost amounts to an obsession. Louisa Twining, one of the greatest promoters of charitable visitation, puts it bluntly: "To our own feelings nothing can be more repugnant than the practice urged by many good people of intruding upon the poor at all hours and seasons for the purpose of the reading the Bible to them in the midst of their daily toil and household work, when we ourselves should consider such an intrusion as unwarrantable, and the proposition to receive it both out of time and place. If the feelings of the poor are not respected, but, on the contrary, a patronizing, condescending tone adopted, we have no hesitation in saying that such visits do more harm than good."<sup>8</sup>

Twining was not unusual in seeing style or manner as even more important than substance; while modern historians of Victorian philanthropy have tended to emphasize the "content" of charitable aid (and its balancing of spiritual and economic imperatives),<sup>9</sup> many Victorian writers shared Twining's belief that the visitor's manners were paramount, perhaps more important even than her compassion or sense of purpose. The advice books focus on the visitor's physical bearing and basic protocol. One advises the visitor, "Enter their cottages in your daily walk,—not as a dictator, not as a mere giver of alms,—not as a spy upon their household arrangements: go as their equal. Carry with you no sense of superiority, but that which a more elevated tone of piety and a more enlightened intellect may claim" (an admittedly equivocal prescription). The author continues in some detail: "A call upon a family in humble life should always be made at seasonable hours; it should be preceded by a tap at the door, and the visitor should instantly withdraw with an apology, if he discovers them to be at meals, or otherwise busily engaged."<sup>10</sup> Charles Kingsley makes the point more forcefully: "You must regulate your conduct to them, and in their houses, even to the most minute particulars, by the very same rules which apply to persons of your own class."<sup>11</sup> Not only

should the visitor refrain from taking liberties, but she should refuse even to allow her host to treat her with distinction: “Piety, earnestness, affectionateness, eloquence,—all may be nullified and stultified by simply keeping a poor woman standing in her own cottage while you sit, or entering her house, even at her own request, while she is at meals. She may decline to sit; she may beg you to come in: all the more reason for refusing to obey her, because it shows that that very inward gulf between you and her still exists in her mind, which it is the object of your visit to bridge over” (63). This is a strange image—the visitor who, out of respect for the poor woman, refuses that woman’s courtesy—but Kingsley clearly thinks such radical measures are necessary as a way of deprogramming both the rich and the poor woman, disrupting the cycle of condescension and gratitude.<sup>12</sup>

To drive home their warning against condescension, these philanthropic authorities paint an unflattering portrait of the visitor as exactly the type of person who would condescend: a sheltered young lady seeking a kind of moral satisfaction. “We know,” explains Twining, “that the office of district visitor is often undertaken by those who, in the midst of a life of weary and unsatisfying gaiety, long for something real (even though it be a painful reality) on which to expend their energies and a portion of their time.”<sup>13</sup> Twining finds such feelings sympathetic but rarely conducive to productive charity work. Kingsley goes further, delving into the lady visitor’s unconscious motives:

It seems so much easier to women to do something for the poor, than for their own ladies’ maids, and housemaids, and cooks. And why? Because they can treat the poor as *things*: but they *must* treat their servants as persons. . . . [A woman] is afraid of beginning a good work with [her servants], because, if she does, she will be forced to carry it out; and it cannot be cold, dry, perfunctory, official; it must be hearty, living, loving, personal. She must make them her friends; and perhaps she is afraid of doing that, for fear they should take liberties . . . and so she is tempted, when she wishes to do good, to fall back on the poor people in the cottages outside, who, as she fancies, know nothing about her, and will never find out whether or not she acts up to the rules which she lays down. (53–54)

Kingsley portrays the charity worker as a woman not just neglecting her household but specifically dodging her servants. Servants, actual dependents, are dangerous; they have legitimate claims on their mistress’s resources, and they may have her “a little in their power.”<sup>14</sup> Safer is perfunctory charity, which

can be taken up and left off as is convenient. Kingsley's criticism often assumes the worst of the visitor. He is quick to demean her, as if in retribution for the way that she is likely to have demeaned the visited poor: "A lady can go into a poor cottage, lay down the law to the inhabitants, reprove them for sins to which she has never been tempted; tell them how to set things right, which, if she had the doing of them, I fear she would do even more confusedly and slovenly than they" (53); "Why not encourage [the poor woman], praise her, cheer her on her weary way by loving words, and keep your reproofs for yourself—even your advice; for she does get on her way, after all, where *you* could not travel a step forward" (62). Kingsley, Twining, and other observers (including, a decade later, the leadership of the Charity Organisation Society) lay the success or failure of philanthropy at the feet of the visitor. Perhaps paradoxically, writers such as these, even as they remind would-be volunteers that the poor are self-determining moral agents, tend to think that the "failure" of a charitable visit is most often due to a mistake on the visitor's part. As early as 1836, one writer asserts that "if to the poor of a different order [i.e., not given to vice] the attentions of a superior are ever unwelcome, it must be the fault of the visitor himself."<sup>15</sup>

Were the visitors worried about their own condescension? If we were to judge only by their accounts, it would not seem so; despite what essayists and directing clergymen advised, the visitors tend not to turn much scrutiny upon themselves. Rather, they focus on the internal struggle of the visited. For any reader looking for signs of philanthropic self-assurance, there is plenty here to be found. Fishers of men, the visitors reel the sinners in, and they suggest that their own task is mainly to get an early start and keep a steady hand. In a typical story of a cottager's education and conversion, the visitor's role can be quite muted: "A young female in a deep decline . . . was not only ignorant of, but reckless of, that future state upon the very brink of which her poor benighted soul was hovering. And very heavily and very slowly she received those blessed truths on the belief of which depended the eternal welfare of her immortal spirit. She languished in much bodily suffering for a few months and through the grace of God became by degrees sensible of her state as a miserable sinner and of the all sufficiency of her Saviour's redeeming love."<sup>16</sup> This account, with others like it, shows little self-consciousness; neither boastful nor self-doubting, it simply is not concerned with the visitor's own merits or shortcomings. The crisis belongs to the young woman in decline, and the triumph is hers as well—hers and God's. The visitor essentially watches a drama that is not her own. She may help set the stage, and she may look on with prayer

and encouragement, but the story is not about her. This is not to say that a visitor never expresses doubts, but when she does, she does not worry about the rightness of her calling or the appropriateness of her methods; she worries that her message will fall on deaf ears: "I know not whether my fellow brother and sister visitors experience, as I do, much faintness of heart and weariness of spirit, while passing over and over again from house to house—from family to family—imparting the glad tidings of great joy which we bear in hand and in heart—received with so much apathy and so little concern."<sup>17</sup>

Notwithstanding the confidence of their accounts, it seems that, in reality, some visitors felt uncertain as to the propriety of their visits. The visitors' accounts, as sincere and self-revealing as many of them are, still bear the marks of an official discourse; confidence was the lingua franca of the business, and the lack of discouragement was itself a measure of success. But the boundary-crossing that visiting entailed was an equivocal act, and many books and articles attempt to encourage the visitor in the face of her own uneasiness and dependency. One, for instance, acknowledges the popular conception that "the poor dislike such interference in their concerns" but cites testimonies from several cities showing that it is not so.<sup>18</sup> J. L. Davies, in a lecture printed alongside Kingsley's half-harangue (quoted above), tries to buoy the would-be visitor: "The most delicate, that is, the most womanly, women shrink from forcing themselves upon the acquaintance of others just because they are poorer. They are afraid that this reluctance of theirs may have its counterpart in the disgust with which an intrusive visit would be met by those who have not lost all sensitiveness and self-respect."<sup>19</sup> Davies reassures such women that their reluctance is an effect of their own sense of guilt and inadequacy, not a response to any actual disgust on the part of the visited poor. "It is a matter of fact, for which we have cause to thank God," Davies promises, "that any lady, behaving like a lady, and coming to the poor in an avowed religious character, is sure to be well received" (124). Davies's lecture works both against and in tandem with Kingsley's: while Kingsley chastises lady visitors for their inevitable propensity to condescend, Davies urges them not to be paralyzed by the fear of condescension.

Together, the two lectures encapsulate the philanthropist's dilemma. Charity was in its glory. The need was great, the opportunities were boundless, and every pulpit and newspaper broadcasted a call to storm the barricades between rich and poor. At the same time, all agreed—philanthropists more than anyone—that attempts to do good could well cause harm and that condescension, once a method of breaking down walls, had since become responsible for

building them up. It is the contest between these two forces—the confidence but also the anxiety that charity’s effects could no longer be reliably squared with its intentions—that was the real “Time-Spirit” of Victorian charity.<sup>20</sup> And by this light we are left with a new image: a Mrs. Pardiggle who hears the brickmaker’s protests and wonders, with Esther Summerson, what precisely is to be done.

All of this would suggest that when we argue about whether philanthropists were condescending, we are actually participating in the Victorian Time-Spirit rather than flouting it. It is no coincidence that the value of condescension was shifting exactly during the decades when the institutions of English philanthropy and poor relief were struggling to rewrite their charter. The movement to discard the old methods of poor relief was, at every point, plagued by an uncertainty as to alternatives. To many, the welfare state was the great evil to be avoided; on the other hand, the seeming callousness of the campaign against pauperism (and against public charity) struck some Victorians as forfeiting the compassion that characterized other aspects of social reform. Throughout the debates over philanthropy and relief, what was at issue was always what could be preserved from the old forms of middle-class provision (before the 1834 Poor Law amendment) and what must be abolished. In these debates the question of condescension took on a great many inflections. For some, the relation that charity established between rich and poor must had to be maintained even if relief itself were abandoned, while for others, it was exactly this relation that needed to be altered. Condescension had long been seen as the anchor of English charity, and in some ways as its very object. The Victorians’ concerns about condescension, then, represented a much greater concern about how, in a liberal society, charity could be secured, its value guaranteed.

### *Condescension in Literature*

In its traditional sense, the word *condescension* designated an act of exceptional generosity, an act that fell beyond the scope of expectation and almost automatically provoked responses of gratitude and even wonder. It was a talisman of the encounter between the noble and the common, or indeed, between the divine and the human. Twice, for instance, John Milton’s Adam thanks the angel Raphael for condescending to reveal to him the divine plan of history. In the eighteenth century, condescension lost some of its aura of exceptionalism and came to mark a more ordinary but still commendable generosity of spirit. In

eighteenth-century prose, it is therefore common to find the word *condescension* qualified by adjectives such as *generous*, *good*, *kind*, *humble*, and particularly *affable*. This last word shows that condescension had become an index not only of ethical practice but also of personality. To condescend demonstrated an easy-going flexibility of temperament, a willingness to compromise. In *Clarissa*, Mrs. Howe chides Anna for being unwilling to forgo her pride and condescend however slightly to Hickman (“You know not what it is to condescend”); elsewhere, Anna agrees that Clarissa’s condescension, whereby she has consented to exchange letters secretly with Lovelace, “has no doubt hitherto prevented great mischiefs.”<sup>21</sup> Eighteenth-century condescension thus connoted a whole range of practices spanning from extreme renunciation to polite deference.

Like the other canonical virtues, condescension was often exposed by eighteenth-century writers as a mask for vice. “False” condescension was therefore—and frequently—seen as a tool for dissimulation and hypocrisy, in a manner that affirmed, rather than denied, the value of “true” condescension. But while the idea of a pernicious condescension was quite common in the eighteenth century, in the nineteenth century true and false condescension became hard to distinguish. The condescension act came to be thought of as double by nature, comprising generosity and self-interest at the same time. Austen’s *Emma* expresses it precisely this way: “Emma did not repent her condescension in going to the Coles. She must have delighted the Coles—worthy people, who deserved to be made happy!—and left a name behind her that would not soon die away.”<sup>22</sup> As Emma sees it, the establishment of her reputation does not compromise the condescension act; it validates it. For Emma, condescension is a sign of good character, and it is only fitting that charity should reap its benefits in renown. When Mr. Elton, for instance, meets Emma and Harriet on a charitable errand, Emma decides that the mutual satisfaction attached to the act of charity may well bring about a declaration of love between the others. Yet the novel itself, less sanguine about the uses of reputation and pride, suggests that the complacency brought about by Emma’s charity has its defects. The doubleness of condescension is elaborated even more explicitly in *Guy Mannering*: “The Baronet received his visitor with that condescending parade which was meant at once to assert his own vast superiority, and to show the generosity and courtesy with which he could waive it, and descend to the level of ordinary conversation with ordinary men.”<sup>23</sup> Scott goes a step further than Austen: whereas Emma sees her reputation to be a fortuitous effect of her condescension, the baronet makes reputation his deliberate rationale.

In the Victorian period, the belief in a constructive condescension largely fell away, and the word itself (with exceptions) was given over to its negative connotations. Condescension came primarily to signify self-promotion at another's cost; to condescend was to assert one's own superiority in a way that degraded others. Like Emma Woodhouse, Martin Chuzzlewit finds his own condescension "inexpressibly delicious to him" (231). Mr. Dombey cannot imagine that anyone would not wish to be distinguished by his condescension (594). Frequently the self-promotion of condescension is accidental, emphasizing even further the insensibility of the superior. Thus, in *Scenes of Clerical Life*, the well-intentioned "Miss Assher's smiling condescensions were torture to Caterina";<sup>24</sup> thus, too, in Dickens's *Little Dorrit*, does the disaffected Miss Wade remark of her conciliatory schoolmates, "They were always forgiving me, in their vanity and condescension. Little images of grown people!" (663). Just as the condescension that exalts the self is reviled, its absence is often praised. "There are many girls," observes the narrator of *Can You Forgive Her?* "who could submit themselves at a moment to the kindness of such a woman as Lady Glencora . . . for of all such women in the world, Lady Glencora was the least inclined to patronize or be condescending in her kindnesses."<sup>25</sup> Shirley Keeldar gladly observes that "[Sir Philip Nunnely] did not *condescend* to their society—he seemed *glad* of it."<sup>26</sup> In these cases, the exaltation of the superior has become incompatible with the dignity of the subordinate, and a condescension that achieves the former must necessarily default on the latter.

Another equally negative—and equally common—Victorian connotation of the word takes exactly the opposite view: condescension is seen not as promoting but as degrading the one who condescends. In such cases, the object of condescension is thought to be unworthy; consequently, to condescend is to be compromised. Scott can serve here as our locus classicus: "[T]he high rank of the marshals of the lists would have been held degraded, had they condescended to superintend the sports of the yeomanry."<sup>27</sup> Some decades later, Trollope uses the word almost exclusively to imply degradation. For instance, in *The Warden*, Mr. Harding will not condescend to tell a lie. In *Orley Farm*, Sir Peregrine implores Lady Mason not to condescend to notice Mr. Dockwrath's legal action against her, roughly equating condescension with subscription to blackmail. And in *Can You Forgive Her?* George Vavasor, making a typical Trollopian calculation, concludes that "whether or no he cared to marry his cousin . . . it was necessary for his honour that he should have that for which he condescended to ask."<sup>28</sup> In these examples, condescension is a threat not to the

subordinate but to the superior, who, by lowering him- or herself to the level of the common, risks losing dignity or authority.

The failure of Victorian condensation, then, takes multiple shapes, and while many of the examples above show condensation to be a locus of bitter contention, it can also take on the nostalgia, pathos, and ridiculousness of a faded ideal. Thus it is in the last number of *Bleak House*, in which Dickens describes the efforts of Volumnia Dedlock, “a young lady (of sixty)” (390), to recover her former glory on the rare occasion of a public ball:

Then, indeed, does she captivate all hearts by her condensation, by her girlish vivacity, and by her skipping about as in the days when the hideous old general with the mouth too full of teeth, had not cut one of them at two guineas each. Then does she twirl and twine, a pastoral nymph of good family, through the mazes of the dance. Then do the swains appear with tea, with lemonade, with sandwiches, with homage. Then is she kind and cruel, stately and unassuming, various, beautifully wilful. Then is there a singular kind of parallel between her and the little glass chandeliers of another age, embellishing that assembly-room; which, with their meagre stems, their spare little drops, their disappointing knobs where no drops are, their bare little stalks from which knobs and drops have both departed, and their little feeble prismatic twinkling, all seem Volumnias. (875)

Here condensation is celebrated as in the pre-Victorian days, but the celebration is itself a relic, a kind of carnival reenactment of a scene that might have made sense in Volumnia’s childhood, a scene that can no longer do what Volumnia needs it to do. In her desire to captivate and conquer, in the ritualized mystification of the dance, and in the aristocratic voraciousness that ingests homage with its lemonade and sandwiches, Volumnia is the figure for a vitiated condensation. The doubleness (self-interest and generosity) of an earlier condensation persists in Volumnia’s kindness and cruelty, her stately and unassuming manner—as if a show of vivacity might palliate the encroaching demands of a world beneath her.

In some cases, even during and after the tectonic shift we have been examining, the word *condensation* retains its earlier hopefulness. The novels of Elizabeth Gaskell are interesting in this regard; charting the nuances of status and authority in industrial towns and country villages, Gaskell’s writings provide an index to the malleability of condensation at midcentury. In many of her works, the word is caught between inflections, at times seeming ironic

or fruitless in the modern sense, at other times seeming more traditionally to suggest a behavior that is laudable or benign. It is surprisingly benign in *Mary Barton*, a novel otherwise charged with class resentment. The word occurs only twice: once in a comical vein and once in a nostalgic one, as Mary recalls Jem's condescension when, in their childhood, he pretended to be interested in her trifles.<sup>29</sup> Rather than invoke condescension as a figure for the class conflict that fills the novel, Gaskell chooses to reserve it as an idyllic sort of relation, one that might exist between an older and younger child of the same class. Curiously, in *Cranford*, the less inflamed setting of ordinary country life seems to activate the more aggressive edge of condescension. The term is applied mockingly to the behavior of the imperious Mrs. Jamieson and her servant Mr. Mulliner, and concernedly to Miss Matty at the point that she considers degrading herself (in the narrator's eyes) by entering into trade.<sup>30</sup> In *North and South*, the word remains a site of discomfort. Mrs. Thornton suggests with displeasure that Margaret might condescend "to be curious as to the manufactures of Milton"; later, Mr. Bell suggests that Thornton and the other Milton men "condescend to send up your to-day's difficulty to Oxford." In both cases, the request for condescension is actually a reprimand: Margaret is being put in her place for her ignorance of the Milton works, and Thornton is teased for his careless dismissal of what happens at Oxford.<sup>31</sup>

In Gaskell's last work, *Wives and Daughters*, condescension is frequently mentioned, but without the anxiety seen in *Cranford* and *North and South*; the author seems to have come to terms with this mode of relation. It generally suggests the lightest hint of irony, as when Lady Cumnor is praised for responding to the "obeisance" of the townspeople with condescending thoughtfulness; though there is something a little crass about Lady Cumnor's sense of importance, her kindness within the town is genuine and well-received.<sup>32</sup> Her daughter Lady Harriet is condescending as well, so much so that when Molly hears that her family has had a "condescending" visitor in her absence, she instantly knows that the visitor was Lady Harriet (205). But here, too, Gaskell applies a light touch. While the novel does not precisely condone Lady Harriet's attitudes, it forgives her for them, and Molly gently corrects her condescension when, for instance, she asks Lady Harriet not to refer to the Browning sisters as Pecksy and Flapsy (199). At its worst, then, the condescension in *Wives and Daughters* is careless and correctable; at its best, it represents a yearning for community, for contact. Still, while Gaskell and later writers (well into the twentieth century) were able to use the word *condescension* to invoke utopian yearnings, they did so conspicuously. In other words,

these later appeals to the ideal of condescension must be felt as revivals, or perhaps as salvage operations.

The shift in the word's connotations tracks an equally significant shift in the representation of the condescension act. A couple of literary scenes, written at different points in the century, can illustrate the evolution of the condescension act from a constructive measure to a harmful or futile one. The first, taken from Scott's *The Antiquary* (1816), justifiably brought tears to the eyes of Virginia Woolf's Mr. Ramsay. Steenie Mucklebackit, a fisherman's son, has drowned, and the grieving family is visited by Oldbuck, the laird of Monkbarns. The scene is not concerned with the drowning itself so much as with the problem of consolation. The mourners cannot be comforted. The fisherman is entirely possessed by his grief, and he can neither look at his son's coffin nor look away from it. The narrator explains that the fisherman's "family had not yet dared to address to him a word, either of sympathy or consolation."<sup>33</sup> Similarly, we read that the mother's friends are "endeavouring to stun the grief which they could not console" (286). The grandmother has fallen into a state of incomprehension and defies approach. When the clergyman enters the hut, his consolations are initially ignored and then come to meet a worse fate from the grandmother: "She drew up her head and body, shook her head in a manner that showed at least impatience, if not scorn, of his counsel, and waved her hand slightly, but with a gesture so expressive as to indicate to all who witnessed it a marked and disdainful rejection of the ghostly consolation proffered to her" (289).

The family's paralysis can be broken down only by an extreme act of condescension on the part of Oldbuck. The coffin is about to be interred, and the onlookers remind the family of the custom that the father should support the head of the coffin, a duty that he is reluctant to assume. At this point, the narrator explains, "Oldbuck interfered between the distressed father and his well-meaning tormentors, and informed them that he himself, as landlord and master to the deceased, 'would carry his head to the grave'" (290). The results of this proposal follow:

In spite of the sorrowful occasion, the hearts of the relatives swelled within them at so marked a distinction on the part of the laird; and old Alison Breck, who was present among other fish-women, swore almost aloud, 'His honour Monkbarns should never want sax warp of oysters in the season (of which fish he was understood to be fond), if she should gang to sea and dredge for them hersell, in the foulest wind that ever blew.' And such is the

temper of the Scottish common people that, by this instance of compliance with their customs, and respect for their persons, Mr. Oldbuck gained more popularity than by all the sums which he had yearly distributed in the parish for purposes of private or general charity. (290)

Even at the moment of intensest grief, the father can be swelled by the laird's distinction. We see that condescension is far from a mere public exchange of formalities; it is a probing act of recognition that can unlock the most private sorrow. Even so, Oldbuck's most personal consolations cycle back to him in the form of a sort of universal fealty. Here again is the doubleness we saw earlier, as the laird's largesse so instantly profits him.

There are other hints as well of the difficulty condescension would face in the coming decades. In the previous quotation, for instance, we see that Oldbuck gains popularity for his compliance with custom; as the scene develops, the necessity of compliance becomes pronounced, and Oldbuck's popularity is shown to be tenuous. For instance, although he objects to the mourners' decision to wear crape on their caps, he must keep still: "Monkbarns would probably have remonstrated against this superfluous expense, had he been consulted; but, in doing so, he would have given more offence than he gained popularity by condescending to perform the office of chief mourner" (290). A departure from popular custom would expose Oldbuck's superiority as callous and removed. More disturbing than this is an earlier moment when, at the laird's entrance, the distracted grandmother offers an ominous toast: "Wishing a' your healths, sirs, and often may we hae such merry meetings!" (287). The woman's grief has caused her to forget her grandson's death, and her statement receives a response of "shuddering horror" from all who are present. But her very mistake correctly exposes the fact that the condescension of superiors necessarily trades on the distress of subordinates. In a sense, the success of condescension is only as great as the distress that makes it possible. The grandmother's celebratory pledge is really, then, another form of the gratitude of the whole family toward the laird, a gratitude that entails a momentary abandonment of the drowned boy. By the same token, the boy's specter—and in general, the consciousness of distress—provides an undertow that pulls against the success of condescension.

By May 1852, which saw the publication of the third number of *Bleak House*, everything had changed. In Dickens's episode of the brickmaker's cottage, the condescension of the rich is not a mixed blessing but a failing cause. The keynote of this failure is struck by Mrs. Pardiggle, whose "forcible

composure” seems to Esther “calculated . . . to increase [the brickmaker’s] antagonism” (107). Perhaps Pardiggle’s most telling characteristic is her complacency, her sense that the protests of the cottagers affirm her purpose: “I enjoy hard work; and the harder you make mine, the better I like it” (107).<sup>34</sup> Pardiggle’s self-congratulation belies a condescension meant to reward the philanthropist, and this time the reward is not incidental to the interests of the needy but explicitly in conflict with them. Dickens voices a critique that was common at the time and would become even more so in the 1860s and ’70s, an attack against the philanthropic establishment for seeking its own glory above all. Pardiggle’s self-absorption leads her to hear all the brickmaker’s objections as routine gestures, and the force of his claims eludes her.

The force of Pardiggle’s claims, by contrast, does not elude the brickmaker; out of them he creates a personal drama of assault and justification to rival those of Miss Flite and Richard Carstone in the shadow of the Lord Chancellor. The brickmaker perceives Pardiggle’s condescension to be an assertion of her dominance, and he struggles to control the situation by preempting her interrogation: “Now you’re a-going to poll-pry and question according to custom—I know what you’re a-going to be up to. Well! You haven’t got no occasion to be up to it. I’ll save you the trouble” (107). Yet by way of denying her the “occasion,” the brickmaker subjects himself to a battery of charges, charges that are only partially undermined through his reappropriation. Against some of these charges the brickmaker disdains to defend himself: “How have I been conducting of myself? Why, I’ve been drunk for three days; and I’d a been drunk four, if I’d a had the money. . . . And how did my wife get that black eye? Why, I giv’ it her; and if she says I didn’t, she’s a Lie!” (107). But mixed in with his disdain is an eagerness to mount a defense: “Have I read the little book wot you left? No, I an’t read the little book wot you left. There an’t nobody here as knows how to read it; and if there wos, it wouldn’t be suitable to me. It’s a book fit for a babby, and I’m not a babby. If you was to leave me a doll, I shouldn’t nuss it” (107). By making his case, the brickmaker inadvertently empowers Mrs. Pardiggle, betraying a persistent, though attenuated, faith in the condescension gesture. The philanthropist’s intrusion is both an outrage and an opportunity; like the aggrieved Chancery suitor Gridley, the brickmaker compulsively petitions his oppressor for a reprieve. The condescension of the rich thus means as much to the poor of *Bleak House* as it does to the poor of *The Antiquary*, and yet it means something quite different. Whereas Lord Oldbuck’s solicitude for the fisherman’s family and, particularly, his attention to local custom mark him as part of the organic life of the community, Mrs.

Pardiggle's visits confirm the poor in their demoralized suspicion of a ruling class that offers a great deal but has nothing to give.

Dickens's episode seems at first, therefore, to have given up on condescension and to contend that the problems of the poor can only be understood and addressed by the poor themselves. Esther and Ada, who accompany Mrs. Pardiggle, both feel "painfully sensible that between us and these people there was an iron barrier, which could not be removed by our new friend. By whom, or how, it could be removed, we did not know; but we knew that" (108). Their inability to help becomes emphatically clear when, as Ada touches the face of the poor couple's newborn infant, the child dies. This incident revises the scene from *The Antiquary*, in which Oldbuck supports the head of the dead child to the grave; Ada has become an angel of death. But while Esther and Ada's capacity to help is undermined, they still carry authority in the cottage, a class authority that the novel goes on to validate. The two return to the brickmaker in the evening, with the intention of comforting the mother of the dead child. The mother is asleep, but the sister of the dead infant "was standing laughing and talking, with some other young women . . . but she seemed ashamed, and turned away as we went by" (110). Meanwhile, the woman attending to the mother is "a-watching for my master. . . . If he was to catch me away from home, he'd pretty near murder me" (110). Ada and Esther are duly impressed by the woman's devotion: "May Heaven reward you!" we said to her. 'You are a good woman'" (110). The two girls still have no help to offer, but they activate both the shame and the honor of the poor in a way that signifies their unflinching concern. It is as if Esther and Ada have become the compassionate but firm judges that the brickmaker fruitlessly sought in Mrs. Pardiggle. In this manner the episode still bears the traces of a constructive condescension, showing the power of this model and the difficulty that a mid-century writer would encounter in his or her attempts to change course.

### *The Logic of Condescension*

Condescension, as described in this historical outline, is not really an idea or a structure of feeling but a transactional protocol, a social and literary convention. In particular, it is a convention associated with charity and giving. This gives us a clue as to why condescension has not been investigated before. There is a long tradition of talking about charity as a necessarily spontaneous and unregulated expression of feeling. This tradition was challenged, around the middle of the nineteenth century, by a movement to replace spontaneous charity with

a highly organized institutional philanthropy. In the ensuing debates, which of course persist to this day, the subjective impulse was clearly distinguished from the institutional form, and scenes of giving were held to demonstrate either one or the other. Little thought has been given to the structural patterns in which the subjective impulse takes shape, the conventions through which particular acts of charity are realized. Condensation is just such a convention. The pages that follow investigate nineteenth-century condensation as a conventional form, a form that, even as it participated in the broader movements of social and literary history, had its own particular logic.

Theories of convention tend to run in two channels. The first holds convention to be a product (and agent) of materialist determination; because convention has a social mandate, every aspect of a convention can be correlated to its ideological function.<sup>35</sup> Alternatively, conventions can be seen as ritualized performances that, over time, become autonomous from the practical needs that generated them.<sup>36</sup> We can reconcile these views by way of Stuart Hall's discussion of ideology, following Antonio Gramsci. For Hall, an ideological conception is not the spontaneous articulation of a class interest or a political force, but the battleground on which opposed classes and forces contend. If so, then it is precisely because a convention has developed its own rationale—because its grammar has been fixed—that it can become an effective site of contestation. A convention can function in the service of variable social agendas only because it has, in the popular imagination, turned its back upon its moment of origin. In other words, it is because conventions are not reducible to particular structures of feeling that they can be a vehicle for articulating these structures. Therefore, if we want to understand the variable aspects of a convention, the places where ideology becomes visible, we must first understand its autonomous symbolic language.<sup>37</sup>

*Condensation* is a word, like *belligerence*, *amnesty*, or *degeneration*, that can be used to characterize any number of social interactions. It is extraordinary that the valence of such a word can change across so many contexts at once—that condensation can come to seem a problem as it operates between teachers and students, pastors and parishioners, wives and husbands, employers and laborers, nurses and patients, the indigent and relief-workers. The word's thematic capaciousness suggests that it may be no more than a nexus of multiple ideas sedimented together, with no unifying logic, no semantic code. And yet the failure of condensation, so sudden and so definitive, seems to call for a structural exposition.<sup>38</sup> Georg Simmel sets the strongest sociological precedent for studying social forms in this way: "We do find that the same form of interaction

obtains among individuals in societal groups that are the most unlike imaginable in purpose and significance. Superiority, subordination, competition, division of labor, formation of parties, representation, inner solidarity coupled with exclusiveness toward the outside, and innumerable similar features are found in the state as well as in a religious community, in a band of conspirators as in an economic association, in an art school as in a family.”<sup>39</sup> Following Simmel, I believe it is possible to develop a structural model that applies to every condescension act but can also be used to illuminate the workings of condescension at the most local level. This allows us both to identify the logic that governs condescension as a signifying system and to examine what is at stake in condescension from an experiential or perceptual point of view.

When social historians have sought an abstract language for the ideology of Victorian philanthropy, they have sometimes referred to Marcel Mauss’s description of the gift—and although Mauss’s analysis of gift giving emerged from his observation of noncapitalist societies (and did not precisely include almsgiving), there is an important resonance between the gift as Mauss describes it and the ideal forms of charity that the Victorians pursued.<sup>40</sup> Victorian charity, like Mauss’s gift, was in constant retreat from the material. Particularly in the wake of the New Poor Law, Victorians tried to imagine forms of charity that would forgo the economic, that would involve no donations. Most often, when material goods were given, it was in the context of a mission that was primarily spiritual; thus, Ellen Ranyard’s Bible and Domestic Mission distributed blankets and Bibles on the same system, and General Booth’s Salvation Army manifesto argued that one must save bodies to save souls. But apart from delivering material or even spiritual assistance, the declared objective of most charitable institutions (from the church-directed district visitors to the secular Charity Organisation Society) was to enable a new kind of relationship between rich and poor. Philanthropists argued that any help they offered, spiritual or temporal, could have value only in the context of a personal, reciprocal relationship between themselves and those in need; as a result, Victorian charity became more and more explicitly focused on its interpersonal content. In this light, charity looks a lot like Mauss’s gift, which resists commodification and enshrines the event of its own giving. Condescension makes visible exactly this relational component that Mauss claims to be the essence of the gift and Victorian philanthropists claimed to be the essence of charity. When we celebrate or denounce the condescension of philanthropists, we are bracketing questions of material transaction and foregrounding the way rich and poor relate to each other. The condescension

act has no aim other than the explicitly social one of bringing about a particular relationship between its agents.

For this reason, a structural model of condescension would have much in common with the model of gift exchange proposed by Mauss, and we might even posit that the social force of condescension derives from the way in which it evokes the inalienability of the gift within a modern economy of alienable commodities. Mauss values archaic gift exchange over modern economic exchange, in that economics attempts to isolate itself from the moral aspects of social life, while gift exchange is centrally concerned with these moral aspects.<sup>41</sup> Jacques Godbout, a disciple and critic of Mauss, radicalizes Mauss's distinction between the gift and economic exchange: "The gift is the embodiment of that system of relationships that is strictly social, in that these relations cannot be reduced to factors of power or economic interest."<sup>42</sup> For Mauss, the relational aspect of gift exchange derives from the idea that gifts (unlike economic commodities) are inalienable: they retain the identity of their original owners. Mauss expresses it thus: "It follows clearly from what we have seen that in this system of ideas one gives away what is in reality a part of one's nature and substance, while to receive something is to receive a part of someone's spiritual essence."<sup>43</sup> Mauss structuralizes this personal quality by claiming that every gift bears with it a *hau*, or spirit of origins, that marks the presence of the giver. The gift has no intrinsic or generic value but derives its value entirely from the *hau*. Mauss's investment in the *hau* can be read as a disinvestment from the given object, and Mauss correspondingly takes great pains to show that reciprocal exchange (gift giving) never produces a material gain or loss.

Like gift exchange, condescension is performed solely for the purpose of refining a social relationship. Claude Lévi-Strauss demonstrates the relational essence of gift exchange in a passage that could well be applied to the condescension act, as he analyzes the exchange of wine between two strangers seated together at a restaurant table. Here gift exchange serves the purpose of establishing one's relationship to a stranger. If one stranger accepts the wine offering of the other, the relationship has become cordial; if he instead refuses the wine offering, the relationship has become hostile. In either case, the offering has ended the "relationship of indifference."<sup>44</sup> Likewise, the condescension act, whether it engenders reconciliation or conflict, is a strategy for bringing to light relationships of social authority that have not been fully explored or articulated, validating or challenging these relationships where they are already visible, and creating these relationships (whether hostile or friendly) where they do not exist.

Because condescension is a relation, it must be studied in two perspectives, that of the one who condescends and that of the one condescended to.<sup>45</sup> Peter Mandler, in his introduction to *The Uses of Charity*, complains that studies of Victorian philanthropy have routinely adopted the middle-class perspective, and he describes the need for a study of charity from below.<sup>46</sup> We might adapt Mauss's terms to this task by proposing that if the gift-given is inalienable from the giver, so is the gift-received inalienable from the receiver. The project of a social analysis of condescension is therefore to understand both how the condescension-subject (the "superior") gives of herself, and how the condescension-object (the "subordinate") receives of (or as) herself.<sup>47</sup> Neither subordinate nor superior has an advantage with respect to this process of identity formation. As in Hegel's master-slave dialectic, each agent depends on the recognition of the other.<sup>48</sup> In the condescension act, then, identity is formed on the crucible of relation. As an agent in such an interaction, my whole purpose is to create and control my relational identity, to produce a particular who-I-am-to-you. This act of creation is the entire content of condescension.

How is the transaction of identity accomplished, and how can it be said to fail? We can answer this question by further specifying the kind of exchange that condescension involves. Consider this passage from Maria Edgeworth's *Patronage*: "[W]ith his whole heart and soul he thanked his majesty for this gracious condescension—this testimony of approbation—these proofs of sensibility to his attachment, which paid—overpaid him, in a moment, for the labours of a life."<sup>49</sup> Here condescension is presented as the supreme reward, ample compensation for a lifetime of labor. And yet the monarch's condescension is not mere payment but overpayment; it is not just a reward but a gift besides. As we know from Mauss and Malinowski, gifts confer a debt, demanding the receiver's further participation in a cycle of obligation.<sup>50</sup> When Edgeworth's Lord Oldborough corrects himself—he is not paid but overpaid—he acknowledges that his past duties to the crown have not been enough and that the king's condescension is sufficient to purchase the labors of the future along with the ones of the past. To be overpaid is in this case rather less than to be paid. Edgeworth's phrase "paid—overpaid" reveals a rift within the condescension act, which unites a sense of excessive generosity with an uneasy confusion as to what kind of payment is being offered anyway, and what is being purchased with it.

As we have seen, for Mauss the value of a gift resides in the *hau*, the spirit of origins that designates the giver. When an inalienable gift is accepted, when

it is even apprehended to be a gift, it thereby purchases the recipient's recognition. In other words, whenever I receive a gift of any kind, the immediate return I make is to recognize the giver. Ralph Waldo Emerson (in an essay that puzzled but intrigued Mauss) understands recognition to be the essence of gift-receiving:

Rings and other jewels are not gifts, but apologies for gifts. The only gift is a portion of thyself. Thou must bleed for me. Therefore the poet brings his poem; the shepherd, his lamb; the farmer, corn; the miner, a gem; the sailor, coral and shells; the painter, his picture; the girl, a handkerchief of her own sewing. This is right and pleasing, for it restores society in so far to its primary basis, when a man's biography is conveyed in his gift, and every man's wealth is an index of his merit. But it is a cold, lifeless business when you go to the shops to buy me something . . . as a kind of symbolical sin-offering, or payment of black-mail.<sup>51</sup>

Despite his dire statement of the case—"Thou must bleed for me"—Emerson's list of acceptable gifts includes items that are not necessarily sacrifices but are simply characteristic of the person offering. This confusion over what counts as a portion of oneself suggests that there is room for variation in the carrier of the *hau*; it seems sufficient that the given object should bear the mark of the giver. Such marks, signs of the giver's identity, secure and acknowledge the fact that every gift makes a purchase of recognition.

In the case of condescension, recognition is not only the thing purchased but also the thing given. Of course, I may give something else at the same time that I condescend: a salutation, a donation of money, or even a plea for help. But what marks my act out as condescension is that it involves my recognizing someone who is normally beneath my notice. Consider the following passage from *Martin Chuzzlewit*, in which Mark Tapley denounces the newly unmasked hypocrite Pecksniff. "Pecksniff! Why, I wouldn't see the man myself; I wouldn't hear him; I wouldn't choose to know he was in company. I'd scrape my shoes on the scraper of the door, and call that Pecksniff, if you liked; but I wouldn't condescend no further" (663). Tapley's refusal to "condescend," as he describes it, amounts to a refusal to see, hear, and know—in fact a refusal to recognize.

We see, then, that condescension involves an exchange of recognition in both directions. To be sure, the whole transaction is set in motion by the superior, but it is ratified by the subordinate, and we can try to understand the

phenomenon from both perspectives. When I condescend, I temporarily abdicate my privilege of self-definition. I grant recognition to another and make a plea for recognition in return. Condescension is a momentary rechanneling of recognition outward, an expansion of the circuit of recognition, but always with the presumption that it will lead back to the one who condescends. For the subordinate, condescension is a momentary emergence into the realm of visibility but also an emergence into a particular role constituted by the recognition of the superior. In other words, condescension is a kind of mirror, an encounter through which both subordinate and superior see themselves as constituted by the recognition of the other.<sup>52</sup>

Of course such recognition is subject to distortion, and this distortion is precisely what produces the failure of condescension. This failure most commonly takes place when one party uses condescension to claim a superiority that the other party may not acknowledge. In such cases, the one who condescends cannot be sure that he or she will be properly recognized as superior and must therefore link the appeal for recognition with an attack against the other person as someone who is indeed subordinate. Thus, my recognition of you as my subordinate is in fact a tactic for subordinating you, a projection disguised as recognition. This is the condescension we know and hate, an act that appeals to the other for approval even while subjecting the other to disdain. Of the Victorian novelists, Dickens was the most keenly sensitive to the psychology of a condescension designed to subordinate. For instance, in *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Pecksniff pawns off his condescension on Tom Pinch as a gift, but we understand it to be a characteristic power play: "He made the promise with so much condescension and patronage, that Tom felt he had asked a great deal (this had not occurred to his mind before), and thanked him earnestly" (90). Along the same lines, Miggs the maid (in *Barnaby Rudge*) describes the demonically manipulative Mr. Chester as "[s]o upright and noble, that he seems to despise the very ground he walks on! and yet so mild and condescending, that he seems to say 'but I will take notice on it too'" (211). The ironic resources of an exploitative condescension were certainly a comic gold mine for Dickens, but the irony had its tragic uses too, as in this passage from *David Copperfield*: "We were all extremely glad to see Traddles so put down, and exalted Steerforth to the skies: especially when he told us, as he condescended to do, that what he had done had been done expressly for us, and for our cause, and that he had conferred a great boon upon us by unselfishly doing it" (101). Here there is no insult but something more threatening still; Steerforth's recognition of the younger students is a simultaneous

allocation of privilege and guilt, a tactic of charismatic exposure that brands David even into his adulthood.

Our discussion of recognition (and its distortions) has enabled us to see the mechanism whereby condensation succeeds or fails. But we have yet to consider the qualitative experience of condensation, the motives out of which the act arises and which it fosters in turn. This phenomenological qualification of the condensation structure follows a course proposed by Marshall Sahlins, in his influential revision of Mauss's work. After discussing the possibility of a "purely formal typology of reciprocities," Sahlins explains that such a typology would be incomplete: "It ought to be recognized from the beginning that the distinction of one type of reciprocity from another is more than formal. A feature such as the expectation of returns says something about the spirit of exchange, about its disinterestedness or its interestedness, the impersonality, the compassion. Any seeming formal classification conveys these meanings: it is as much a moral as a mechanical scheme."<sup>53</sup> Sahlins goes on to describe various types of reciprocity that share the same formal structure (donation → receipt → return) but are marked by a different set of attitudes and consequently seem, from the performer's perspective, entirely distinct. For instance, donation might be understood as "sharing" or "payment" or "losing," depending on the context of the transaction.

One might mistakenly yoke condensation to a particular social attitude—deference, for instance. By this account, condensation is a tool with which authority figures produce deference among their subordinates, a mechanism of social control. Yet we cannot claim that this is always, or even typically, the case. For one thing, condensation is by no means acknowledged to be the best method for generating deference: sometimes the schoolmaster must be strict rather than generous to ensure the pupil's obedience; the employer must be unyielding to ensure the worker's respect or docility. What appears to be calculated condensation may instead be an unintended compromise on the part of the authority figure, a genuine capitulation of power rather than a power play. Conversely, what appears a deferent response on the part of a subordinate might mask resentment—or indeed it might indicate gratitude and an affirmation of authority. In this way, condensation comprises such diverse practices as sacrifice and degradation, deference and blackmail. In itself, condensation is not necessarily conciliatory, nor is it necessarily antagonistic. Yet these two qualities do represent the moral spectrum of condensation, and we will consider them in turn.

Traditional condensation is based on the premise that a ritualized recognition of existing authority relationships can work toward their moral

justification. In some ways this is hard to grasp; we tend to think that power, when it is working, hides itself from view. But traditional condescension requires a situation where there is no confusion about the facts of authority. It is only possible between subjects whose authority relationships are clearly established—servant and mistress, son and father, tenant and landlord, hopeful lover and unrequiting beloved. In such situations, the authority figure has every reason to expect the obedience of the subordinate. Condescension therefore lays no new obligation on the subordinate; instead, it makes comprehensible, and even desirable, an obligation that is already felt. One such instance takes place at an earlier moment in *Patronage*, in which the young barrister Alfred Percy praises the chief justice under whom he serves: “Before the chief justice was so high as he is now, without a rival in his profession, he was ever the most generous man to his competitors. I am sure he is now the most kind and condescending to his inferiors. In company he is never intent upon himself, seems never anxious about his own dignity or his own fame. He is sufficiently sure of both to be quite at ease.—He excites my ambition, and exalts its nature and value” (271). Because the chief justice is not anxious—because his dignity and fame are secure—his condescension is compatible with real generosity, genuine humility. In condescending, he refuses to take his inferiors for granted but suggests instead that their labor is something to be earned. In this case, condescension to inferiors is given as the moral equivalent of generosity to rivals; it is a way to recognize the worth of the other in the face of a structural antagonism.

Even later in the century, condescension is sometimes able to retain its traditional, conciliatory quality. This is possible, for instance, when one party wants to be under obligation to the other. In Kingsley’s *Yeast*, Lancelot Smith is glad to have been graced with the “sunshine” of Argemone’s condescension, because he wants to serve her.<sup>54</sup> Lancelot’s devotional use of the word carries a religious intonation, captured directly by Kingsley in the same novel, with a reference to God as “the Spirit of order, obedience, loyalty, brotherhood, mercy, condescension” (261). In *Romola*, Nello is accused of playing the sycophant to Lorenzo, in order “that he may be affable and condescending to you.”<sup>55</sup> And in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Boldwood appeals to Bathsheba Everdene’s “kindness and condescension” partly to convince her (and himself) that if they marry, he will be able to subordinate his desires to her will.<sup>56</sup> In cases such as these, the problematic opposition between giver and receiver is nullified by the petitioner’s willingness to put himself under an obligation.

Victorian condescension more commonly displays an adversarial quality, where the interests of superior and subordinate are felt to be opposed and the

condescension act becomes a contest of wills. Emerson explains how easily gift giving can provoke an adversarial response: “For, the expectation of gratitude is mean, and is continually punished by the total insensibility of the obliged person. . . . It is a very onerous business, this of being served, and the debtor naturally wishes to give you a slap” (“Gifts,” 537). Mauss too is fully cognizant of this condition of gift exchange; his theory, in fact, is meant to account for all societies of total prestation (in which all wealth is shared in the form of gifts), even where prestation takes a particularly agonistic form. In such cases, the exchange is called “potlatch,” a straightforward competition—still in the form of gift exchange—for the benefit of one’s own clan.<sup>57</sup> Condescension is often just this sort of competitive exchange, with both the one who condescends and the one condescended to seeking to turn the encounter to advantage.

We have already looked at a number of these adversarial cases, cases in which the superior condescends to control and manipulate the subordinate. In such cases, the acceptance of the condescending gesture is felt to be a capitulation to authority, and the subordinate may thus reject the gesture out of hand, or indeed demand more, as in the following exchange from *Lady Audley’s Secret*: “‘Tell my lady how thankful you are, Luke,’ she said. ‘But I’m not so over and above thankful,’ answered her lover savagely. ‘Fifty pound ain’t much to start a public. You’ll make it a hundred, my lady.’”<sup>58</sup> Here Luke Marks lays bare the adversarial nature of Lady Audley’s proposal, denying her the appearance of generosity and characterizing her offer as a capitulation to blackmail. Henry Jekyll is similarly compromised when he remarks, “There comes an end to all things; the most capacious measure is filled at last; and this brief condescension to my evil finally destroyed the balance of my soul.”<sup>59</sup> His condescension betokens his own defeat and his enemy’s ascendancy. In the battle for authority, it is occasionally the subordinate who condescends, as at the moment in *Frankenstein* when the creature returns to punish his creator: “Slave, I before reasoned with you, but you have proved yourself unworthy of my condescension. Remember that I have power; you believe yourself miserable, but I can make you so wretched that the light of day will be hateful to you. You are my creator, but I am your master;—obey!”<sup>60</sup> Condescension is here at its adversarial peak. It is the vehicle whereby the creature reveals his dominance, and the word itself fires a semantic revolution after which the father and creator is no longer to be supplicated but simply tolerated.

Issues of concord and discord are perhaps the most obtrusive aspects of the phenomenology of condescension, but they are not the only ones. Also central is the traversal of space. Whereas gift exchange involves, at least

superficially, the transfer of an object, condescension is entirely concerned with attitudes and relations; consequently, the spatial relation between the agents is foregrounded. Several spatial factors should be considered: Is the condescension-subject (literally and metaphorically) descending to the level of the object or raising the object to a higher level? Does condescension bridge a gap between subject and object, or does it in fact hold the gap open and even make it useful? Does condescension occur at the place of the subject or the place of the object? Here we can observe a key difference between invitation and invasion. When Mauss discusses the tribal potlatch, for instance, he argues that the chief invites others into his tent to save them from the ignorance of his own name or importance. In other words, the gift he gives them is the recognition of himself. Charitable visits, by contrast, take place in the homes of the needy. Does this fact constitute a recognition of the subordinate that invitation does not, or at least a more complete kind of recognition? In the case of Eliot's Janet Dempster ("Janet's Repentance"), it is Janet's homelessness—her eviction—that makes her a proper (or approachable) object; neither invitation nor visiting is a viable avenue of interaction. And what about condescension that involves no space at all, such as that which takes place in a written correspondence? Do begging-letters, for instance, attempt to evade a physical approach that would somehow preclude or preempt condescension?

Equally important is the element of time, which is frequently discussed both pragmatically and abstractly in relation to the gift. As is discussed in later chapters, the spontaneity of the gift was an active idea in the public discourse of Victorian charity; it has also been central to theory. Godbout refers to spontaneity as "that element . . . that is found in all varieties of gift."<sup>61</sup> The gift transaction (and condescension as well) must be over in an instant; any residue becomes debt and turns the gift into an economic exchange. Paradoxically, in classical theories of the gift, there is always a return, and a long delay between the original and the return donation is what, in fact, makes it a gift exchange instead of an economic one. Jacques Derrida develops this idea: the gift is only a gift until it is returned, at which point it becomes an economic transaction. The progress of time, says Derrida, makes the gift impossible, bringing a return and causing it to cycle back into economics. The gift thus freezes time, momentarily breaking out of the economic cycle. Thus, the important fact about the thing given—its very structure—is the delay it causes.<sup>62</sup> Yet because the gift always meets with a return in less than an instant (it is returned even as it is recognized or thought), the delay allowed by the gift takes no time at all, and it is really only the sense of a delay, the already-forfeited possibility of

an escape from the economic, that is given. This abstract approach is directly relevant to the analysis of condensation acts, partly because they are threatened by their extension or even their remembrance in time (which creates the suspicion that the act is calculating, looking for a return), but additionally because they also, as they approximate instantaneity, can seem like they have transacted nothing of substance, if anything at all.

### *The Argument*

In recent years, philanthropy has become a vibrant sector of Victorian studies. Organized charity is applauded by those who see it as having contributed to cross-class sympathy, a redistribution of wealth, public vocations for women, and the foundations of modern social work. Conversely, charity is deplored by those who see it as a tool for middle-class hegemony, political complacency, and social stratification. Critics have used these various ideological paradigms as a way of contextualizing and complicating the seemingly simple, manifest aims of Victorian philanthropists: to spread the gospel, feed the hungry, teach thrift and economy, and prevent the deserving poor from slipping into pauperism. What is not always recognized are the deep divisions within the philanthropic imagination itself, and the ways in which the texture of charity changed from one generation to the next. Condensation is a case in point: when critics discuss the tendency of volunteer workers to condescend, they present condensation as if it were an obvious and perennial impediment to philanthropy, whereas in fact the very condensation that alienated the Victorian poor had been seen, just decades earlier, as the best sign of charity's success. *Charity and Condensation*, then, attempts to expand our perception of charity's ideological purposes by examining the deep structural tensions within philanthropy's image of itself.

This book is inspired by the work of other literary critics who have explored the cultural and ideological resonance of Victorian philanthropy. Many scholars have used charity as a lens through which to gain insight into the desires and achievements of middle-class women and to investigate the complex negotiations of gender and sexuality that permeated the Victorian public sphere, once thought to be exclusively masculine. Judith Walkowitz's *City of Dreadful Delight* set all of these issues in motion, revealing the powerful late-century emergence of a discourse of urban spectatorship and showing how W. T. Stead's 1885 exposé of child prostitution drew mainstream readers into a charged dialogue about women, sex, and urban life. Deborah Epstein Nord's

*Walking the Victorian Streets* brings many of Walkowitz's themes to bear specifically on philanthropy, as she considers the transgressive aspects of slum visiting, in which the middle-class woman was transformed from spectacle to spectator. Dorice Elliott's *The Angel Out of the House* sees philanthropy as both sanctioning and trying to circumscribe women's "ambitious desires," desires centered on fulfillment through vocation. In *Giving Women*, Jill Rappoport considers the social networks that Victorian women created through alternative economies of gift exchange. And Seth Koven's *Slumming* considers the ways in which the social experimentation involved in slumming tracks with the emergence of modern sexual identities. *Charity and Condescension* draws on these studies, revisiting some of the philanthropic scenes that feminist and gender critics have brought into focus and considering how charity's "gender trouble" relates to the structures of authority and deference endemic to condescension.<sup>63</sup>

Other cultural studies work has looked at charity in relation to the state, citizenship, and nation building; especially notable is Lauren Goodlad's 2003 *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State*. Goodlad focuses on the tensions inherent within liberal ideology, arguing that the perpetual struggle between the bureaucratic poor laws and the self-organizing initiatives of philanthropy was an effect of the liberal state's determination to govern indirectly.<sup>64</sup> I believe that the failure of condescension and, more broadly, the instability of the charity narrative very much reflect the tensions Goodlad discusses, in that they register the attempts of the philanthropic establishment to maintain its traditional conciliatory influence while denying any claim of authority. *Charity and Condescension* also engages with critical work on the politics of sympathy and sentimentality, literary tropes that were essential to the traditional condescension scene. In "Dismal Pleasure," Miriam Bailin offers a profound analysis of sentimental pathos, asserting that the conventions of sentimentality are a response to the anxieties surrounding social mobility and stratification. Audrey Jaffe's *Scenes of Sympathy* subtly examines the complex symbolic negotiations by which the sympathetic spectacle allows identification (positive and negative) across class lines and activates fantasies of social climbing and fears of falling. Mary Lenard, Ellen Argyros, and Daniel Bivona and Roger Henkle all consider the ways in which sympathy relates to narrative authority. Amit Rai locates sympathy in the service of colonialism, while Brigid Lowe sees it as an engine of political subversion. What unites these studies is that they explore the particular mechanisms through which relations of power are constructed; they forgo aerial views and attempt to capture the workings of authority at the

ground level. Such a perspective is only possible when we bracket the structural equations that would reveal all acting subjects to be the interpellated agents of a class ideology, and reconstruct the ways in which particular social exchanges ask their subjects to manipulate an array of familiar roles, conventional gestures, and legible attitudes.<sup>65</sup>

My argument diverges from the existing work on charity and Victorian literature in two ways. The first has to do with the relationship of charity to broader ideological structures such as class and gender: it is my hypothesis that the charity narrative, while very much entangled with other cultural narratives, has its own set of trajectories and conventions—its own horizon of meaning—and that these structures (condescension, conscription, settlement, restitution, and so forth) can be recognized and described separately from the social purposes that they serve. Such descriptions ultimately benefit even the most sociologically inflected literary criticism, in that the semantic contours of a text condition the ways in which it becomes available to ideology. My argument also differs from some others in its emphasis of narrative over discourse. While I often look to discursive structures (the connotations of the word *condescension*, arguments about the timing of charity, the Salvationist concern over backsliding, and so forth) as a way of providing context for my literary readings, I see both the problem of condescension and the imagined resolutions to that problem as fundamentally narrative transactions. This is equally true of all the narratives I examine, from the tightly structured novels of Dickens and Eliot, to Tennyson's evolutionary narrative of King Arthur's conquest of Britain, to Octavia Hill's episodic record of her own conquest of the slums. In positing that writers look to narrative as a solution to the deep strains within ideology, I aspire to the method of studies such as Fredric Jameson's *Political Unconscious*, Nancy Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, Rosemarie Bodenheimer's *The Politics of Story in Victorian Fiction*, and Audrey Jaffe's *Scenes of Sympathy*. At the same time, although I make frequent reference to philanthropic discourse, my work stops well short of the detailed discursive analysis that is the emphasis of some of the best literary studies of Victorian charity, including Mary Poovey's *Making a Social Body*, Dorice Elliott's *The Angel Out of the House*, and Lauren Goodlad's *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State*.<sup>66</sup>

*Charity and Condescension* draws on the work of social historians, who have, over the past two decades, created increasingly complex accounts of the role played by institutional charity in the functioning of the state and in the lives of the poor. The traditional Marxist analysis of charity is best exemplified

by Gareth Stedman Jones, who argued in 1971 that Victorian philanthropy existed to increase the status and authority of liberal middle-class professionals and to create a deference community among the urban poor, reproducing the hierarchies of subordination that are characteristic of traditional English society. Many social historians have worked to revise this view, both by taking seriously the explicit motives of philanthropists and by showing the complexity of the relationship between philanthropic agencies and the liberal state.<sup>67</sup> Others have attempted to see charity from a working-class perspective, on the premise that just as charity served complex social and economic purposes for the rich, so too did it serve complex purposes for the poor, purposes that were not necessarily condoned or understood by middle-class philanthropists.<sup>68</sup> Among these historical perspectives, literary critics have generally found the social control thesis most congenial, often taking charity's disciplinary functions as a backdrop against which one can spot more destabilizing or subversive phenomena.<sup>69</sup> My own argument accepts, and even relies on, the idea that charity contained multitudes: it was an attempt at social control but also a sign of commitment to the physical and spiritual health of the poor, a site of working-class deference but also of working-class resistance. This dialectic did not merely surround philanthropy; it also animated it, creating much of the narrative instability that I locate in the condescension scene. In addition to the more polemical studies, *Charity and Condescension* draws substantially from the monumental work of social historians to recover the people and institutions of Victorian charity: Octavia Hill and the housing debates, the vast enterprise of home visiting and missions to the slums, and the Salvation Army.<sup>70</sup>

This book is not a history of charity. It is a study of the way in which a certain kind of scene, fundamental to the traditional plots of British literature, shed its conciliatory meanings and took up disruptive ones. But the transformation of the literary condescension scene only makes sense in light of related transformations in the social world; indeed, these were so marked as to make the failure of condescension in literature seem natural. The movement against condescension took place in many regions, not only in the realm of charity. We might as easily trace the failure of condescension in the discourse of marriage, with the emergence of a doctrine of separate spheres, questions of coverture and property, and debates over the meaning of Christian subordination. Or we could look at attempts to remove condescension from education, with, for instance, the community schools at New Lanark, the Working Men's Institutes, the pupil teacher system, and the educational systems of reformers such as Johann Pestalozzi and Maria Montessori. Condescension came under fire in the

struggles of women and working men to get the vote; conversely, it maintained its force and even gained traction in the missionary and racial discourses of empire. But while charity is only one of many arenas in which condescension comes into the spotlight, it seems to me the most crucial. In charity, condescension was most likely to be embraced or rejected for its own sake—considered not just for what it did but for what it *was*. In other words, the issue is not simply that condescension was seen to endanger the relationships engendered by charity; rather, it had itself provided the content of those relationships, and the failure of condescension created not merely a logistical challenge for philanthropists but a need to reexamine the purpose and meaning of charity. For this reason, throughout the book, I use charity as a touchstone for the fortunes of condescension in nineteenth-century literature. One chapter is specifically devoted to philanthropic experiments that would rewrite the visiting scene; other chapters invoke other developments in Victorian charity, insofar as they shed light on the literary uses of the condescension scene.

Condescension, and in particular the condescension of the powerful to the helpless, is only one of several philanthropic “scripts.” Charity took many different shapes in Victorian England, and by emphasizing this one, I run the risk of implying that Victorian philanthropy was entirely, or even mainly, a matter of the prosperous classes offering their social inferiors aid or advice that could never be reciprocated. Scholars have repeatedly debunked this description as a myth, and one that occludes much real philanthropic work. Frank Prochaska has been foremost in insisting on the enormous role played by working-class philanthropy, “the charity of the poor to the poor,” both spontaneous and organized.<sup>71</sup> And as Colin Jones observes, “The time-honoured assumption that donors are from within the elite and their recipients situated at the base of the social pyramid consigns the middling sort, who could be at once recipients and donors, to a charitable limbo.”<sup>72</sup> I readily acknowledge that the idea of a philanthropy that flows exclusively from rich to poor is a myth, one of many competing myths—many narrative paradigms—that Victorians summoned when they thought about charity.<sup>73</sup> It is, though, the myth that most often undergirds the condescension scene. As a consequence, when I look at the dilemma that condescension presented for Victorian philanthropy, I refer to a specific sort of charity narrative, one in which a person with some tangible social advantage helps a person with some tangible social disadvantage.

Just as the discourse of charity provides a rich context for the changes I trace in Victorian narrative fiction, so too does fiction offer a useful template for thinking about the phenomenology of charity. The Victorian philanthropy

debates were largely procedural: a good deal of the disagreement among philanthropists dealt with practical matters such as how one might properly “time” the charitable visit, how a middle-class visitor should comport herself in the homes of the poor, what other kinds of places were most conducive to charitable interactions, and what sorts of people would make the best agents of charity. The procedural thrust of these questions can send them shuttling beneath our radar, but they touch on larger questions about the nature and purpose of charity. And significantly, matters of procedure tie in very directly to matters of narration, such that the way the literary work deals with questions of setting and pace reflects the ways the charity writer discusses procedure. The protocols of charity have much to do with the protocols of fiction.

In the pages that follow, I attempt to show how some of the most nuanced Victorian treatments of charity were predicated on the unraveling of the condescension scene. In place of condescension, writers looked to alternative forms of association—all the while exploring the costs of these more modern protocols and registering a sense of loss at the failure of a social script that had been so deeply entrenched in traditional English life.

The loss is most bitterly evident in the works of Dickens, who began as a champion of “personal charity” but, I argue, eventually came to see all acts of patronage as abusive. Critics have traditionally read Dickens as a general advocate of the philanthropic spirit, of the spontaneous outpourings of benevolence that preserve the bonds of humanity against the heartless machinery of the state. And indeed, in his early novels, Dickens ardently subscribes to the notion of personal charity, a Victorian embodiment of the traditional condescension act that centered on personal relationships between the powerful and the powerless. Yet at the height of his career, Dickens lost considerable faith in the aspects of charity he advocated throughout his early works. The ideal of personal charity is extremely complicated in the novels of his middle period, in which personal encounters between rich and poor remain essential but their character changes: instead of manifesting a kind of mutual goodwill across the social spectrum, these encounters expose prior histories of abuse and neglect and, through such exposures, provide an avenue for restitution and recovery. In Dickens’s later novels—particularly *Little Dorrit*—personal charity is seen no longer as a vehicle to restitution but as a kind of mystification that forestalls restitution by obscuring any proper recognition of social justice. A charity based on personal relation utterly loses its power to reconcile; intimacy itself is unmasked as a tool whereby the poor can be manipulated. Like Beatrice Webb and other late-century critics of philanthropy,

Dickens ultimately saw condescension as bereft of any productive possibilities, contending that even the exertions of the most earnest benefactors were finally performed in the interest of their own security.

The works of George Eliot exhibit a more divided view, as I explore in the second chapter. Her first novel, *Adam Bede*, represents the dangers of a desultory, disorganized charity built on spontaneous acts of condescension. George Eliot's uneasiness with scenes of condescension echoes a pragmatic contemporary concern: that the moment of charity, as a disruption of the ordinary social and economic relationships between rich and poor, would necessarily be ephemeral and ineffectual. Yet in *Adam Bede*, even as Eliot endorses a systematic approach, she reinscribes the extraordinary potential of the interruptive moment. She thus engages with distinctly modern questions about forms and procedures, specifically, with the relationship between charity and proper timing. The problem of timing haunts *Adam Bede* at every level—from the straightforward matter of making and keeping appointments, to the strategic management of arrivals and departures, to the career-making moments of inheritance and marriage. Characters must decide when to grasp fulfillment and when to recede into expectation, and miscalculations in these matters can steer a benevolent impulse into destructive channels—a fear that would soon be recapitulated by the Charity Organisation Society in its campaign against indiscriminate charity. And yet, while Eliot agrees that the success of charity is a matter of timing, she continues to value the interruptive power of condescension, the sense in which the exceptionality of the condescension scene creates an arena of freedom within the mechanical clockwork of official welfare. For Eliot, charity thus becomes a negotiation between transience (its necessary condition) and fixity (its only guarantee), a negotiation that sheds light on the struggle, throughout Eliot's work, between modern idiosyncrasy and the fixed forms of convention.

Such questions are foundational to the intriguing philanthropic experiments of Octavia Hill and Samuel Barnett, whose different methods of slum settlement attempted to undo the condescension that they felt plagued other sorts of charity work. The third chapter considers Hill's and Barnett's initiatives as correctives to home visiting, whose necessary superficiality, in the view of Kingsley and others, had become a way of concealing rather than revealing the personality of the visitor. Whereas the aim of home visiting was to tear down the barriers between rich and poor, many writers argued that it produced an opposite result, encouraging the visitor to insulate herself with protocol or to immerse herself within her administrative role, and prompting

the poor to perform a ritual of docility and gratitude. One alternative to visiting was settlement, a practice in which middle- and upper-class volunteers took on a permanent presence in the poorest neighborhoods. Periodic visits would be replaced by a perpetual intimacy, and in the shared spaces of residence halls and tenements, the identities of rich and poor would be forced out into the open. Paradoxically, and against the logic of the condescension scene, the social worker would become more approachable, more available to others, precisely by asserting his or her own opinions, tastes, and desires. For Barnett, this amounted to creating a simulacrum of Oxford in the streets of Whitechapel; for Hill, it amounted to entangling herself in the daily provocations of building management. Hill and Barnett ultimately imagined ways of life in which the relations between rich and poor would flourish by ceasing to be special; the only conspicuous element of their operations would be how utterly routine they were.

The final chapter looks at what was perhaps the most ambitious Victorian treatment of volunteer work and community, Alfred Lord Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. Tennyson attempts to replace condescension with conscription, a process in which the disaffected and disenfranchised are themselves enlisted as agents in the struggle for the social welfare. Most notable in this regard was the Salvation Army, which recruited its soldiers in the working-class streets and neighborhoods. These workers would trade in the currency of the slums, serving as a link between the philanthropic establishment and the unwelcoming poor. To be effective, many Salvationists planted themselves on the thin line between rescue and perdition; unlike the pious working-class visitor, they were rowdy, uncouth, and convincingly capable of falling back into sin at any time. Tennyson's *Idylls* reflects this fraught notion of conscription, the idea that the commissioned agent himself is necessarily caught between public duty and independent impulse. As King Arthur's civil and military corps, the knights are public men, men whose interior lives must be wholly synchronized with their public commission. When these two things come into conflict, the knight must bury his errant self if he is to remain a knight. But conscription cuts both ways: while it holds out the promise that any renegade subject might in an instant grab hold of a kind of public intimacy that includes both the king's knights and the sovereign himself, it also presents the constant possibility that even the king's most loyal agents will lapse into rebellion. For this reason, much of the *Idylls* concerns Arthur's efforts not to win control of the kingdom but to win back the hearts of his own knights. By depicting a political culture in which even the best knights resist or revise the work that they

are called upon to do, Tennyson illustrates the degree to which new modes of governance that attempt to forgo condensation thrust the public servant into a particularly ill-defined and embattled position. In the voluntaristic milieu of the liberal Arthurian state, condensation is divested of its power both to sting and to secure.